



New Plans, Same Direction

CAB award winner builds back with quality-focused genetics.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It was a beautiful fall day in Montana’s Judith Basin, but Doug Stevenson wasn’t enjoying the sunshine and mild temperatures.

Hectic weeks led up to the 2010 Basin Angus Ranch dispersion, and when sale time arrived, the “overwhelmed” feeling gave way to alternate waves of relief and melancholy.

“It was a sad day. It was a hard decision,” the breeder says, but he knew it was the right one.

“We had kind of built a monster. It was a high-stress environment and too all-consuming for too long a time,” Stevenson says.

During the three-day event in late October, he and his wife, Sharon, sold 2,000 head. A month later, the couple marketed commercial

females and that year’s bull crop. Shortly after that, the land went under contract to its new buyer.

Stevenson’s family, which includes daughters Brittany, Leisa and Nicole, remained in Hobson, Mont., so the eldest could finish high school. Their father planned a career in consulting.

Stevenson had devoted much of his life to building the Basin herd, carrying on a legacy started by his late father, Wayne. As the calendar turned over to 2011, he was left with just 100 fertilized embryos in an outside cooperator herd.

Days were spent delivering animals and wrapping up postsale paperwork. The family searched for a new home, close to an airport and other business interests.

In the back of Stevenson’s mind were those embryos.

Finally, a late-summer herd visit changed the family’s course again, when he checked

in on those embryo-transfer (ET) calves in a preconditioning pen.



The summer-green ranges near Columbus, Mont., may fool an untrained observer. Average precipitation is 12 inches, much of that in the form of winter snows, so it is still an ideal place to test things like “doability” and stamina.

“I realized I had what I’d been working my whole life for,” he says. “I knew we had some things that were going to be able to have a real impact in the breed.”

Consulting could take a backseat.

One of those 2011-born calves was Basin Payweight 1682, a bull still in the top 10% for weaning value (\$W) and top 15% for beef value (\$B). The heifer mates were also impressive.

“We had a new crop of Basin Lucys that hit all the marks we wanted to hit in terms of carcass quality and feed efficiency,” Stevenson says. “We were where we were trying to be in the industry for a number of years.”

Decision time

There was a feeling of excitement mixed with caution. He and Sharon had some serious conversations.

“I knew what I wanted to do with those cattle, but we had to make the decision to change our plans,” he says. “In a way, it’s unreal to me how lucky we’ve been. We were just really fortunate we ended up with some of those matings that we had in those outside herds, just being the right things that we changed.”

They had the genetics. Now the family had to find a place to raise them.

Stevenson spent a year and a half studying their current ranch near Columbus, Mont. — rattlesnakes were a deterrent, but finding the new calves a home was a greater motivator. Today, the land, which boasts views of the Absaroka and Beartooth ranges to the south and the Crazy Mountains to the west, is home to 250 registered cows. Another 250 occupy some of Basin’s original land near Hobson. Cooperator herds in Missouri, Texas

The family tradition

Young Nicole Stevenson didn’t like daycare. She preferred running errands in the Basin Angus Ranch office or restocking her candy store. She counted money, kept inventory and made a sweet deal any time new visitors came to headquarters.

As the years passed, Nicole joined older sisters Leisa and Brittany, who were often horseback, checking pairs in the summer and gathering calves for preconditioning.

Today, Brittany is a pharmacist in Billings, but she and husband Trevor Berg are actively involved in Basin Angus. Leisa is studying ag education at Montana State University. Nicole, a senior in high school, proofreads sale books and regularly discusses expected progeny differences (EPDs) and breeding options with her dad.

“A little bit of the decision to build back as much as we have now was based on that,” Doug Stevenson says, “knowing that there was somebody in the family back in Montana and interested.”

It’s a responsibility the next generation doesn’t take lightly.

“My dad thinks so much about every aspect of what he’s doing, all of his breeding decisions, all of his management decisions,” Brittany says. “He’s thinking about what we need to do for our herd — what we need to do for the industry — so it’s intimidating to follow him and try to carry on things, but I’ve had him to learn from, too, so I feel like I’m pretty fortunate in that regard.”

and Colorado provide diverse environments and calving seasons for growth.

Those summer-green ranges in Montana may fool an untrained observer. Average precipitation is 12 inches, much of that in the form of winter snows, so it is still an ideal place to test things like “doability” and stamina.

“Having cattle that fit range environments is probably the biggest key to our being able to maintain our bull market,” says Stevenson.

Don’t mistake that for sole focus, however. They’ve carcass tested for three decades, and use ultrasound and now DNA genomic testing on most of each year’s calves.

“Our long-term customers have a really good market for replacement animals. Their heifers are worth as much or more than their steers because they’ve used our genetics, and we always strive to make the cattle that make really good replacements for the commercial

industry,” he says. They’re easy-fleshing, maternal and sound.

Ask Stevenson’s wife if he’s patient and a laugh comes in reply. However, the nature of his climb to raising bulls that are consistently in the top 10% for both \$W and \$B would be characterized as steady.

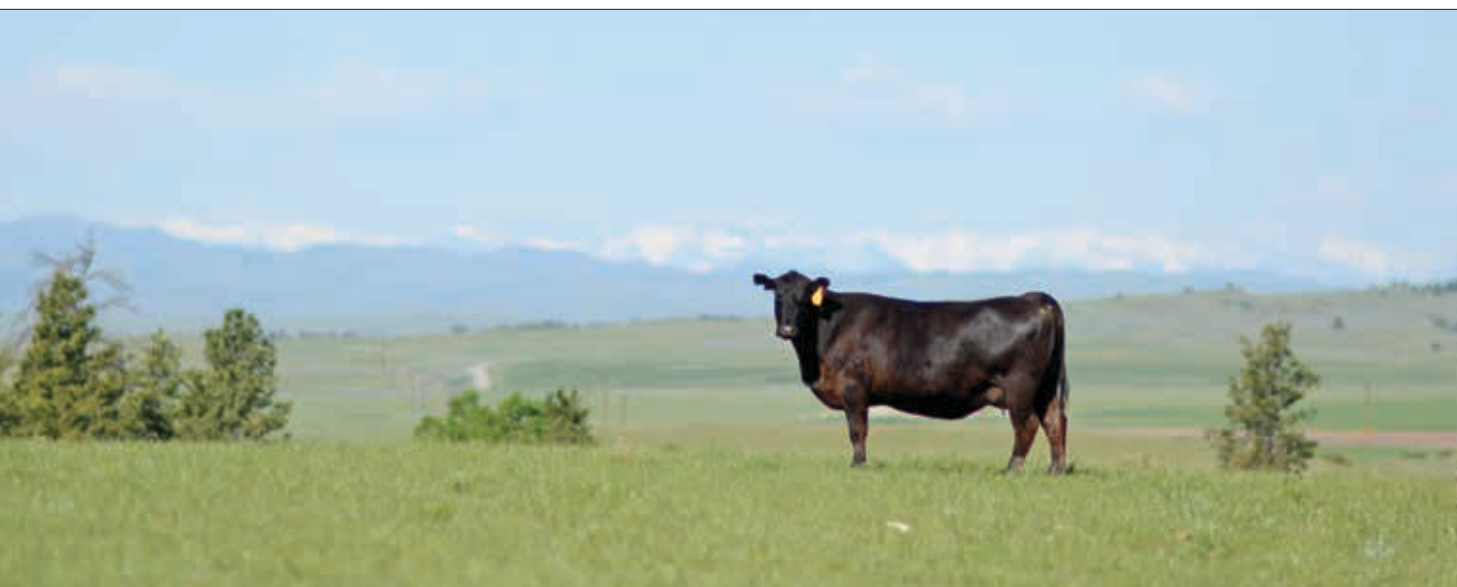
“We took a different approach,” Stevenson says. “Rather than going for extreme, we make sure the cattle do everything else right and then pick the best you can for the traits you’re trying to improve.”

Methodical.

That’s a title the Montana State University ag business major, University of Montana Law School graduate and still-practicing lawyer will own.

“It’s been a long-term approach that it’s taken,” he says. “We’ve been very fortunate to end up with some cattle that rank at levels

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that most people would call extremes on the carcass traits, but we didn't do it by chasing the extremes."

Don't mistake "being fortunate" for sheer luck. There's a plan behind every mating.

"I'm a data freak," Stevenson admits.

"That's a key to making progress."

There is one weekly appointment the rancher almost never misses: the Friday 7 a.m. expected progeny difference (EPD) update from the American Angus Association.

"I try to make sure I've got a good part of Friday to be able to study the data," he says. That has changed from the twice yearly re-rankings of the past. "Now we're not waiting on the data. We're studying it constantly to see what we can learn and to see how we can make improvements."

For all the office time, the pasture is often the best classroom.

"Calving season is one of my favorite times because of all those new babies. We've been planning for years what that new calf crop is going to be," he says. "So when you go out in the pasture and study the new babies, that's where it all comes together."

Seeing the proof in test herds helps verify the plan.

"We had customers that were figuring out they needed to differentiate their product and we had a desire to try and make a positive impact by breeding cattle that were superior carcass cattle, but really had all the good things that we need to have for good range cattle," Stevenson says. He credits those herds with helping him turn in thousands of carcass records over the years. "They rely on us, and we rely on them, and together we have really made progress."

This September, Basin Angus received the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand 2017 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award for those long-term relationships, and the drive to produce genetics that work for every segment of the beef business.

Customer experience

Customer Matt Blackford ranches in the Nebraska Sandhills near Brownlee. He returned to the family operation in 2014 and often looks to Stevenson for advice.

"Dad has built a herd that had done really well carcass-wise, and some really good females, the broad spectrum," the commercial cattleman says. "Doug's helped us make those decisions and know where to go next, so that I don't mess up what my dad built."

The same two feedyards routinely buy the calves and often share carcass data back. That emphasizes why Blackford appreciates the seedstock supplier's foresight on trends.

Breeders' favorites

A cattleman often knows his animals better than anyone else.

That idea fueled the creation of ORigen, a breeder-owned bull stud born 17 years ago. Doug Stevenson of Basin Angus Ranch was a founding member.

"We have impacted the way semen was marketed in the industry and given breeders more control in how their cattle are promoted," Stevenson says. It allows breeders to identify sires that they think are standouts from their own herds.

"Without ORigen, [Basin Payweight 1682] would probably not have gotten established in the market. It would have taken a long time to prove to everybody what he was," the rancher says.

Stevenson currently chairs the company's board of directors.

It's a ranch-style ambiance where breed-leading excellence meets business as usual: All the Basin bulls collected for ORigen also go out for natural service in the herd.



► "It's been a long-term approach that it's taken," says Doug Stevenson. "We've been very fortunate to end up with some cattle that rank at levels that most people would call extremes on the carcass traits, but we didn't do it by chasing the extremes."

"By the time you get that data back, you already have bulls turned out," he says, but relying on the breeder's advice helps him plan.

"Anybody who tells you they're not worried about what the next guy is going to do hasn't been at it for very many years, because, boy, the only way you're going to sell calves next year is how good they did this year," the rancher says.

To the west, Jordan Willis at Cokeville, Wyo., is back on his home ranch and continues a tradition his dad started decades ago: buying Basin bulls.

"We want the all-around kind of bulls that are good in every trait," he says, noting they sell steer calves at weaning and develop heifers for themselves and commercial buyers.

That's what led the Willis family to Basin. They stay because of the continual improvement and supply of uniform sires. The family buys 25 bulls a year — many half- or full-brothers — then sells all the March- and April-born calves in one draft on video auction.

"We can do that because of the uniformity," Willis says. "They know what we need for our ranch and to make us successful."

Stevenson couldn't script a better testimony. That's the heart of his program, and it's a continuation of the family legacy.

Family business

Wayne Stevenson has been gone 23 years, but his influence is everywhere.

“He instilled in me the idea that we raise cattle for, and sell to the people we sell to, because we’re friends with those people. We like our customers, and we want them to do well,” Stevenson says. “It’s not great marketing. It’s trying to make a great product and present it honestly and have long-term trust and commitment.”

As a preteen, Stevenson was selling private-treaty bulls, and before he left for college, the young producer tried his hand at breeding decisions.

“His dad was always a teacher,” Sharon says. “Anytime he did anything, he would explain why he was doing it.”

But instinct, the kind that kept Basin Payweight 1682 from just being another carcass in the cooler, can’t be taught. The fact that he’s sired 150 bulls in the “new” Basin herd? Well, perhaps there’s a bit of the mentor’s influence there, too.

“Divine intervention,” Sharon says. “It’s like his dad was smiling down on us.”



Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



► As Doug and Sharon Stevenson look to the future, it includes leaving a legacy for their three daughters to carry on. Oldest daughter Brittany Berg and her husband Trevor (pictured center) are already involved with day-to-day operations on the ranch.