

Faster Tools Offer Lift for

Embracing AI and GeneMax® Advantage brings faster progress.

Story & photos by Kara Lee, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Steve and Pat Thoeny each grew up in ranching families, so it was in their blood from the beginning. Still, they were the first generation on the ranch they manage today, and the early days weren't easy. There were years of partnering with the former owner on the place where they started, keeping back what heifers were left after paying bills, but that built a foundation solid enough to make it on their own.

The couple started feeding cattle in 1986. Seeing those results helped guide them toward artificial insemination (AI) as a strategy for herd improvement.

"We didn't start with a set of straight-black cows," Thoeny admits. "Ours was a bunch of anything and everything, so I started thinking, 'If we are going to get them all the same, if you want a set of uniform black cows, we should start AIing.'"

He and Pat set about identifying the best Angus genetics to keep in the herd near Rosebud, Mont.

"I think we kept every AI heifer calf we ever got," he says. "We figured they should have some genetics in them that we can keep and breed."

Moving to the grid

After several years of selling cattle on the live market through the Chappell (Neb.) Feedlot, yard manager Tom Williams ventured some advice on profitability, a bit of coaching toward quality-based marketing.

"He said we had good black cattle and that we should grid them to make more money," Thoeny recalls.

The first set of cattle marketed on carcass merit required no small leap of faith.

"If we would have gridded our calves and only had 30% Choice and the rest were Select, we would have had to either quit the grid or change the program," the rancher explains.

It's the quality cattle that earned the dividends. Looking back at some of their early lots of fed cattle, Thoeny notes that the number and identity of high-quality carcasses were important. However, the number and identity of low-quality carcasses immediately caught their attention. The color-coded data columns told an evident tale of red and black numbers associated with each animal.

"These cattle are all CAB®



► Steve and Pat Thoeny started using GeneMax® (GMX) Advantage™ as a dual-purpose indicator this year. They plan to use the information to increase carcass quality for the next generation as well, even before they are conceived. Heifers with higher scores for carcass quality will be bred to bulls with the same or greater potential.

(qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*® brand) and Choice, and they are all in the black," Thoeny points out, thumbing through a set of carcass data. "When you get in the Select column, they are all what you are giving up. Everybody that raises cows and calves ought to have to feed a load of their own steers, and then they would know."

He continues, "Are they worth a cent less than the neighbor's, or are they worth a dime more than the neighbor's? Most ranchers don't know."

Knowledge may be power, but in the case of feeding cattle, it also means profit.

The 2014 calf crop from the ranch showed tremendous profit potential, achieving nearly 45% CAB acceptance and 5.8% Prime.

Heifer selection

Finished cattle do not make up the only profit center. Raising and developing bred heifers to sell can make expected progeny difference (EPD) selection a careful balancing act. The need for calving ease with heifers is always a high priority, and efficiency comes to mind when feed or hay must be purchased from others.

Single-trait selection for any characteristic is out of the question, Thoeny says, so using AI sires becomes a great advantage. Proven, balanced and registered-Angus bulls let the ranchers meet their maternal and efficiency goals, and those genetics produce exceptional results in the feedlot. It's an essential piece of the puzzle that gives up nothing of the total picture.

The investment in AI breeding only improves the herd each year, and keeping the best ones is a high priority.

"We sell all of our coming 8-year-old cows," Thoeny says. It's not a common program for cows in the peak of production, but it means selling them at replacement prices rather than



► Steve and Pat Thoeny (pictured with their grandson) started feeding cattle in 1986. Seeing those results helped guide them toward AI as a strategy for herd improvement.

cull prices, making room for more of the younger replacements.

“Theoretically, the yearlings and the 2-year-olds should be better than the cows we are selling,” he says, noting that the tactic encourages faster genetic progression.

To add speed and accuracy in that journey, they started using GeneMax® (GMX) Advantage™ as a dual-purpose indicator this year. The DNA marker-based test features reports that will help identify bottom outliers in multiple traits — those that shouldn’t be considered for replacements.

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Humble beginnings need not stand in the way of building up a ranch with cattle that excel on the range and on the rail.



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The commercial-Angus herd on the Thoeny Ranch is the result of the owners’ calculated risk, hard work and a persistent drive to do the best they can at the only job they ever wanted.

Progress comes more quickly to those who embrace the best tools.



Editor’s Note: Kara Lee is production brand manager for Certified Angus Beef LLC.