



## GG Genetics awarded 2009 CAB Small Feedlot of the Year.

by **Laura Nelson**

**A** couple of empty semi-trailer trucks and a signed, blank check arrived at a southwest Montana ranch late one fall. The rancher helped load some of his best calves, and then watched the trucks head back to GG Genetics feedyard in Ida Grove, Iowa. The check stayed in Montana; the value returned to Iowa.

That's the kind of businessman Mason Fleenor is.

"He'd just tell me to fill in the numbers on the check," recalls Ron Benson, one of the Iowan's early feedlot customers. "That's just how honest he is."

Fleenor sure doesn't skate around the truth when it comes to the kind of cattle he likes to feed, either. "They're all pretty purely Angus. I won't buy anything else — I don't even want them. I think we have one calf this year that's a black baldie, but that's it. I guess I'm kind of prejudiced," he laughs.

Not just any black cattle will do for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand's 2009 Small Feedlot of the Year.

"I think it has to be CAB or USDA Prime to have a good carcass. That's my opinion — that's what quality is," Fleenor says. "What good is a Yield Grade (YG) 1 Select?" he asks. "Do you want to eat it? I don't. So why in the heck raise it?"

Fleenor refuses to raise or feed anything short of the best at GG Genetics, where he

has combined a successful registered Angus bull business with a small feedyard. He fills the 500-head yard with home-raised cattle and calves from bull customers. It's stock-full of genetics he and wife Diane have been perfecting for two decades.

"You talk about intervention. The cattle feeding business hasn't been real profitable in the last 10 years," he points out. Much of the industry's problem has been the unknown potential of incoming genetics, but with a coordinated bull customer base, "we have that supply built in."

The Fleenors started in the feeding business in the 1980s. Once they realized the overall influence of genetics in the feeding process, they decided the bull business was next. Diane says, "The reason we got started on all the carcass stuff was because we processed our cattle and saw the individual data. If anybody got the data and looked at the dollar value of each carcass, they'd realize what to strive for."

She points out the difference on the closeout between a Select animal compared to Prime: "I mean, that's \$300 on a carcass. It's right there in the numbers."

You'd be hard-pressed to find a Select animal on a GG Genetics kill sheet, though. Last year, their 413 CAB-enrolled cattle averaged 81.1% Choice, 16.7% Prime and 74.6% CAB, including CAB Prime. The

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farm also holds the distinction of highest average added value in the 2003-2006 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC), where 20 lots made 61% CAB or Prime.

"One of the main reasons our cattle grade so good is that they're all out of our genetics," Mason says. "We don't buy commodity cattle. We want to know what we're getting when we buy cattle to feed." What they get is a return on the genetic package so painstakingly guided toward perfection. They've kept carcass data on every animal in the feedlot for more than a decade.

### Honesty — the best policy

True to that honest nature, Mason doesn't keep an animal unless it's backed by solid facts and figures. Although he owns full interest in all cattle fed, he still makes a point to share that information with the previous owners. Taking a further step, he tries to help ranchers make decisions in their cow herds that will complement the bulls he sells to produce the best calves.

► **Above:** Mason Fleenor refuses to raise or feed anything short of the best at GG Genetics, where he has combined a successful registered Angus bull business with a small feedyard.



Ranchers like Benson rely on Fleenor's data to start and end their production cycles.

"My calves are coming out of his bull genetics because I know he does really well with carcass values," he says. "After he's fed them and we've gotten the printout on the cattle and see how well they graded, we go from there to start eliminating cows whose calves didn't make the good carcass."

Unlike Benson, some producers didn't seem to get it. Diane recalls an example years ago when a couple of YG 4 cattle showed up in harvest data. Mason traced the data back to one cow whose offspring and daughter's offspring consistently grew too fat on a small ribeye. "We would tell him about this one cow," Diane says. "We showed him the kill data."

But, that's the pitfall in taking on full ownership in the cattle. "Say the discount for a YG 4 was about \$7 per hundred (cwt.), and take that times 800 pounds (lb.), and that's around 56 bucks a head in discounts. So from all her calves we had over the years, that cow probably cost me \$2,000. That one cow, on discounts — one cow!"

Finally, the Fleenors had to be frank. "We told him, we'll buy all your calves, but we don't want those two," Diane says. "You take their calves somewhere else." Because, well, you just can't argue with the hard, honest facts.

Never hypocrites, the Fleenors deliver the same integrity to bull customers. Benson says that's why he's stayed in business with the Iowa couple for so many years. "They're not afraid to tell you something when other people wouldn't. Breeders a lot of times, they don't tell you if there's a defect or one thing or the other wrong with a bull," Benson relates. "But Mason, he'll point that kind of stuff out so he doesn't get me set up buying the wrong kind of bull. He always backs his cattle up, and that's what I like about him."

The same stories ring true with most all GG Genetics customers. Montana rancher Alan Ostler said he was surprised when Mason offered to make up the difference on a bull that didn't meet all expectations and had to be re-sold at auction.

"They've always stood behind their product. That takes a lot in an industry with this type of market," Ostler says. "They put so much into those bulls — most people are just hoping to break even — but then you have people like Mason and Diane standing behind their cattle, with a guarantee like that. That's pretty unusual."

Then again, it's not every day you find a feedlot with nearly 100% Choice and Prime cattle, either. Those results start with exceptional genetics and satisfied, informed bull customers. Then it's up to Mason's feedlot management to bring home the real

value. They use minimal implants and feed a high-energy, high-roughage ration. Close proximity to three ethanol plants allows the judicious use of distillers' grains as well.

"We don't push our cattle like a lot of the feedlots do," Mason explains. "If you start with the right genetics, you don't have to." You do have to know when to sell them. "I don't try to fight the market; when the cattle are ready, I just sell them." Mason relies on a skilled eye and rigorous sorting to make up consistently uniform loads.

He also refers to the historic data to know when offspring of certain sires and dams will reach optimum grade. The Fleenors used to host a small livestock judging competition before sorting cattle for market. A family friend, professional cattle buyer and former collegiate livestock judge helped.

"Looking at them, she could beat me every time," Mason says. "But with the data I had and knowing the genetics, I could beat her." That's why the Fleenors run a business based on straightforward facts, putting little stock in aesthetics. "To me, the biggest issue with the cattle industry is looks," Mason says. "A lot of guys want to use bulls because they look good. But you've got to have a commitment to use the right genetics. If a bull doesn't meet the trait, forget about it. Just because he looks good — why use him? You get the hide off of 'em and looks don't matter much."

### Few complaints

What does matter, Diane says, is keeping a quality product in front of consumers. "You really have to think about the industry and

care about what you're producing," she says. That's been the leading influence in breeding decisions and goals for the feedyard. Genetics that work on the ranch meet with a focus on consistent marbling and carcass performance.

A good deal of today's Angus herd and feedlot results trace back to one bull and his offspring. "I've heard comments that folks don't like the looks of that bull"

Mason says, but that's not what matters to him. "I don't like the looks of what some other bulls produce, so I guess we're even. You eat yours, and I'll eat mine."

Between the bull business and feedlot, the Fleenors have secured their own supply of high-quality beef for dinner; but they wish more people in the industry would focus on the final product. "Everybody

says, well, if all the cattle in the market were Prime, then the market for quality would go away. I say if every calf was Prime, our consumption would increase so much it wouldn't matter, because overall cattle prices would rise," Mason says. "Our product would be so good, people would pay more for consistent quality. Nobody is going to complain about an extra 50¢ for a good steak. But you know they'll complain about getting a bad steak."

Complaints are few and far between when it comes to GG Genetics — from the bulls the Fleenors breed, to the calves they feed, to the steak they put on the table. Customers from every end of Mason and Diane's varied enterprises will tell you, that's the honest truth.

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