



# Building the Best Begins at Home

Circle A Ranch heifers top 2005 NACC category.

Story & photos by **Steve Cabbage**

**M**ark Akin is not big on free agents.

We're not talking about Major League Baseball, but something just as competitive — the purebred Angus business. As manager of Circle A Angus Ranch, Iberia, Mo., Akin and professional baseball managers have a lot in common. Success is measured in terms of consistent improvement and whether you can win the big ones.

Akin can consider his job safe if such criteria are the basis of job performance in this business. Competing in the 2005 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC), Circle A Angus Ranch had two of the top four pens, including the champion heifer pen. The winning heifers had the highest *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-acceptance rate in the NACC at 75%, including USDA Prime, and 100% Yield Grade (YG) 3s or leaner. Not bad for first-year participants.

These are homegrown genetics typical of Circle A Angus Ranch, Akin says. Four of the five sires of the award-winning heifer pens originated at home.

"We made the decision to enter the carcass challenge because we felt it was our opportunity to showcase carcass merit with the genetics we've been able to develop," Akin says. "Those animals are the norm, not the exception, here at Circle A. There were no 'ringers' brought in just to boost us in the standings."

## Blazing a trail

Keeping all aspects of the operation under the Circle A roof is a rarity in today's diversified purebred genetics business, Akin says. Everything from the cow herd to replacements to sires come predominantly from internal resources. It's like a race car

driver building his own performance car in his garage — he knows the workings of every piece of that vehicle from the ground up. Circle A is not about to take its hands off the wheel after building on 15 years of success.

Starting in 1991 with 300 head on 635 acres of pastureland, Circle A Angus Ranch has grown. It now spans four locations in Missouri and Iowa, with 8,000 head of purebred commercial Angus cows and 600 registered females on 30,000 acres of ranchland. Most of the heifers are developed and artificially inseminated (AIed) in Iowa at a ranch located near the Missouri line.

Akin credits the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) program for helping achieve ranch goals.

"It set the performance bar for the industry and the quality bar in the minds of consumers," he says. "CAB blazed the trail for other programs, proving that a high-quality product could be built on what was then a commodity industry, thereby increasing demand for Angus genetics. The achieved goal was to give the consumer consistent excellence.

"The greatest thing about the CAB program is the fact the bar was set high from the beginning. That meant everyone had the same bull's-eye to aim for," Akin notes. "Through owner Dave Gust's commitment, we saw the long-term picture — there would be rewards for producing quality."

## Balancing act

Nationwide, only 8% of beef earns the CAB brand approval by meeting live criteria

►**Left:** Using Circle A's commercial Angus cow herd, the Angus Sire Alliance serves as the perfect test environment for the ranch's genetics.

►**Below:** "Our balancing act is to achieve the quality standards of CAB® without sacrificing key production traits," says Circle A manager Mark Akin.



and eight carcass specifications that ensure every bite is flavorful, tender and juicy. In terms of USDA grade, CAB includes Prime and the top 35% volume of Choice cattle. Marbling is the most limiting factor in acceptance, found lacking in 85% of Angus-type cattle not accepted for the brand.

"Our balancing act is to achieve the quality standards of CAB without sacrificing key production traits," Akin says. "We've been able to hold to that fine line because, from Day 1, we've been committed to good recordkeeping."

Indeed, records hold the key to success at Circle A Angus Ranch. More than 25,000 weaning weights; 6,000-plus carcass records; and specific expected progeny difference (EPD) calculations on the commercial herd compose its data-based management program.

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For further evidence of a commitment to records, one needs to only witness the high-profile participation with ABS Global in the Angus Sire Alliance. The group is the largest progeny test of its kind in the United States. It is now in its 10th year.

Using Circle A's commercial Angus cow herd, the Angus Sire Alliance serves as the perfect test environment for the ranch's genetics, Akin says. Steer calves

from these matings are fed, harvested and evaluated for carcass quality and profitability, an unparalleled test of real industry challenges.

Continually pushing for more quality traits, Circle A and ABS have developed tenderness EPDs to identify sires that produce more satisfying eating experiences. The new tenderness EPDs will soon be available on all Angus sires Circle A and ABS are testing.

### **Knowledge equals power**

"The philosophy at Circle A has been that knowledge equals power, which, when applied, produces a premium," Circle A owner Dave Gust says. "The goal has remained the same from the start — produce the best beef and service our customers to the fullest."

Achieving such advanced genetics featuring quality and performance is not as simple as filling out a lineup card and putting a team on the field.

"Producing a consistent quality product that grades high-Choice or better is only half the equation," Akin says. "The real trick is to

get traits like feed efficiency and high fertility rates to run parallel to the CAB quality goals. It's not as easy as it sounds."

Economics still drive the cattle business. That usually means making do with resources that the land and Mother Nature dole out. On its Missouri ranches, that means Circle A must achieve CAB quality with a primarily fescue-based diet. Pasture management and rotational grazing help get the job done.

Culling and selection proceed according to how each cow's offspring perform in this nonpampering environment. Maintaining these hardiness traits without sacrificing

quality has won Circle A customers who not only want CAB quality genetics, but genetics that will work in the real world. Carcass testing gives Akin the final answer on whether offspring of a particular sire or female are suited for the Circle A environment.

"The end result of all the testing, all the management efforts from herd health regimes to preg-testing to pasture management, is that we provide our customers with quality," Akin says.



► On its Missouri ranches, Circle A must achieve CAB quality with a cow herd that can function on a primarily fescue-based diet. Pasture management and rotational grazing help get the job done.