

# Experience Pays

Ninety-six-year-old  
Hugh Septer  
is feeding cattle  
a new way.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**



**H**ugh Septer has 85 years of experience in the beef industry, and he is still learning new things.

The 96-year-old from Ida Grove, Iowa, got his start by showing cattle in his hometown 4-H club at Cumberland, Iowa. For nearly six decades, Septer held jobs ranging from farm manager to agriculture lender, always maintaining ties to the beef industry.

"There was a four-year period while I was in the service and while I was in college that I didn't have any," he says. "But most of the rest of the time, I had some cattle." Septer retired

from the Ida County State Bank in Ida Grove in 1986 and has been a full-time cattleman ever since.

Each summer Septer fills his pasture with 600- to 700-pound (lb.) Angus calves. He backgrounds them, feeding each calf 1½ lb. of grain per 100 lb. of body weight with 5-gallon buckets. Then he sends them on to nearby Raasch Beef Inc. for finishing.

"Recently I've gotten interested in feeding cattle that will grade on a grid," says Septer, who has used that marketing method for the past three years. "I think that's the way to go. If you can get a premium, it helps your bottom line."

## Picky buyer

Septer adds, "The cattle that work on a grid are usually nice cattle — they're fun to look at."

Not just any nice-looking cattle will work for the goals Septer has in mind.

"You don't go to the sale barn and just buy black cattle," he says. "You find somebody who looks at the genetics a little bit and go to the cow herd that has the genetics that will work."

Septer turned to Roger Bowers of Dillon, Mont., who helps sell Angus bulls for Ida Grove neighbor Mason Fleenor. Septer knows the quality is built in when calves are sired by Fleenor's GG Genetics bulls. The

► Septer shares the feedlot performance information and group carcass data with commercial producer and calf supplier Jim Hale, who says, "That helps because you know what your product's doing after it leaves the ranch. You know if you're on the right track."

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purebred producer is a two-time National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) champion.

"We're fortunate to have Mason here who has worked with his herd for many years, using many of the good bulls that are available from across the country through semen," Septer says. "He's upgraded his herd and kept upgrading."

## Group effort

Bowers put Septer in touch with his Montana neighbor Jim Hale, a commercial producer and longtime bull customer.

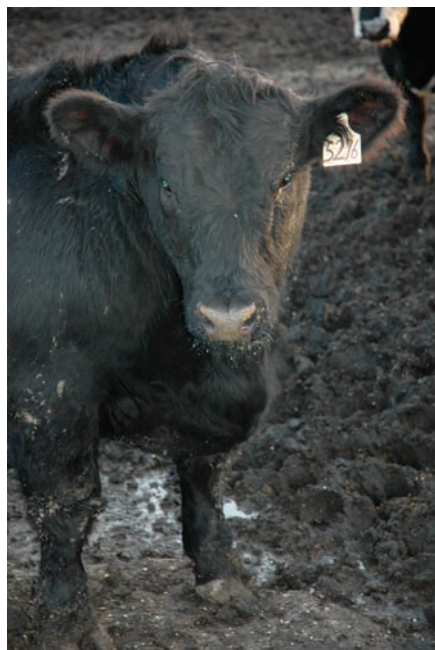
"Mason's been breeding for carcass, and that's what I wanted," Hale says. "I wanted to have a product that would suit the buyers and still work good for me in the country."

Hale, who had been selling his cattle through an internet sale, liked the idea of linking with a producer who would get him some information back on his calves.

"They look good to us, but we don't know what they're doing in the feedlot," Hale says. Septer shared feedlot performance and group carcass data. "That helps because you know what your product's doing after it leaves the ranch. You know if you're on the right track."

Septer also "stumbled upon" some calves from a straightbred commercial Angus producer from Lamoni, Iowa. After the calves

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proved themselves the first year, Septer has tried to buy them back consistently, too.

Three loads of last year's Montana- and Iowa-bought cattle averaged \$7 per hundredweight (cwt.) in grid premiums.

"When you find a bunch of cattle that have the right genetics, then you just kind of stick with them if you can," he says.

Septer expects them to have the performance to back up their quality.

"If you get the cattle that grade well, I would expect them to gain well," he says, noting last year's gains were nearly 3.7 lb. per day.

"We've been custom-feeding cattle for 10 years now and Hugh's been a customer with us about right from the start," says Greg Raasch, who manages the 1,800-head yard with his brother, Scott.

"I kind of got him interested in trying to sell cattle on a grid, so we experimented with it a few times," Raasch says. "Once we focused on asking around and knowing more of the history on the cattle and the genetics, he bought into that. He thinks it's pretty valuable."

Septer, a graduate of Iowa State University, says he's in the beef industry because "it keeps me busy." At any given time he has a couple hundred head of cattle on feed.

This year he rode out in the semi to get his Montana calves. "That's a long ride, about 1,100 miles," he says. His summer routine includes feeding cattle every morning, fixing fence and keeping the pasture clear.

"I exercise every morning for a half an hour in the winter," Septer says. "In the summer when I'm chopping thistles I don't need to do that."

While his calves are at the feedlot, he visits them every day. The feedyard is a 12-mile drive to nearby Odebolt, Iowa.



► While his calves are at the feedlot owned by the Raasch family, Septer visits them every day. The feedyard is a 12-mile drive to nearby Odebolt, Iowa. Above, Septer is shown with brothers Greg (center) and Scott Raasch.

"They're good operators," Septer says. "We get along really well."

### Sorting for market

The Raaschs hired Cherokee, Iowa, veterinarian Mark Carlson to ultrasound and sort Septer's cattle this year. They were placed in three different groups: those that were ready, ones that needed 30 more days on feed, and the cattle that should be sold on the cash market.

"That was helpful on marketing," Septer says. "Some of the cattle they said weren't ready, I'd have picked to go."

The sorting has helped avoid discounts and gain premiums, including the monetary bonus for producing *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand carcasses.

Raasch agrees. "In the beginning he would just go by visually sorting the ones that he

thought were ready," he says. "We'd still end up with heavy cattle and Yield Grade (YG) 4s."

Septer has a view that many cattle feeders have not yet embraced.

"The cattle industry has changed a great deal in the last 20 years," he says. "We didn't used to look at genetics. We looked at the quality of the cattle, but we didn't have the information on the herds of cattle. An awful lot of people haven't recognized the importance of that yet."

Septer adds, "I would encourage anybody to find cattle that have the genetics to work on a grid, because they don't cost much more than other cattle, and there's a chance you could get a pretty good premium."

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