



Four Sixes Goes All In With Angus

Higher efficiency and quality, times 7,000.

Story & photos by *Steve Suther*

When you think about the 6666 Ranch near Guthrie, Texas, the foundations of Western ranching come to mind. Browsing any real or virtual library, you'll find exploits of the open range that fueled the creative fires of John Wayne's movie-script writers.

You might also note that, like the Duke, "The Four Sixes" had a traditional tie to Hereford cattle.

"We were straight Hereford for about 100 years," cattle manager Mike Gibson says.

He grew up learning the business from his father before J.J. Gibson became general ranch manager. Spanning even more history, Gibson's grandfather had homesteaded a nearby ranch in 1886, after riding for the previous owners of the big spread.

In a family that lived the legend, tradition was important. "We dealt with Wayne and Louis Johnson (Wayne's business partner) on Hereford bulls from their 26 Bar Ranch for a long time," Gibson says. "Dad and

Louis were great friends, and it was a wonderful connection."

But Gibson looks more to economics than tradition, and that led the 290,000-acre ranching company to Angus genetics in the early 1990s. They started the conversion with Brangus bulls, but problems with disposition and grading gave way to registered Angus bulls in 1993.

There are many reasons to avoid changing breeds, but, Gibson says, "You have to look at what pays the bills. My dad and I had this discussion," he says. "We were great believers in Herefords, but I asked him how many Herefords we had on our own place. We didn't have any; they were all Angus."

Anne Marion, president of Burnett Ranches and great-granddaughter of founder Samuel Burk Burnett, supports the financial logic of the switch. "She's the most active in ranch affairs since Burk's time," Gibson says. "Talking about bulls and pedigrees is dinner-table conversation with us."

Ironically, it was another "six" company near Hereford, Texas, that helped fuel the change to Angus on the Four Sixes, based on feedlot and carcass data. Mc6 ("Mack Six") Cattle Feeders had been feeding steers for the ranch since the early 1990s, when they were comparing Herefords to black baldies,



► Gibson says their weaning percentage has improved 1% with Angus-sired cows. Percent bred has also improved 1%. For perspective, a 1% increase in their calf crop could fill a semi-trailer.

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manager Warren White says.

“Performance was always better and health was always better in the black baldies,” he says. “The advantages carried through all the way to the packinghouse. Now, as they switch over to all Angus, we don’t see the greater advantage in the baldies.”

Side by side, Gibson says, the white face is the only difference to see. “The crossbred may have a little advantage in weaning weight, but by the time those calves are grouped as yearlings on better feed, the straights have caught up with them. They do at least as well finishing, and typically grade better,” he says.

White has seen “a huge increase in performance,” in both feed conversion and gain, the latter averaging more than 4 pounds (lb.) per day. “They were changing a lot of things at the same time — health, earlier weaning, less backgrounding and genetics — so it’s hard to say it’s any one thing. But I would give genetics the edge,” he says. A group of Angus heifers last fall closed out gaining 4.3 lb. per day, converting 5.1 lb. of feed to muscle for a feed cost of less than 50¢ per lb.

Seedstock management

Besides the main 180,000 acres at Guthrie, Texas, the Four Sixes operates the Dixon Creek Ranch in the Panhandle. This 110,000-acre ranch was traditionally a yearling operation. Some 5,000 fall calves would make the trip there every June before moving into feedlots in the fall.

Development of irrigated circles of improved grasses for the calves meant Gibson could start a spring-calving herd on the native range, now home to 2,000 cows. Recent drought forced earlier weaning in both herds, but the pivots maintained excellent grazing, first for the fall calves, then for 45-60 days to background the spring calves. They all enter the feedlot in uniform groups as they near 800 lb.

Gibson bought the first Angus bulls — and subsequently 2,250 bred heifers — from Vermilion Ranch at Billings, Mont. He now buys most of the bulls from Stevenson-Basin of Hobson, Mont. Bulls for the spring herd come from Gardiner Angus Ranch at Ashland, Kan.

“For our replacement heifers, we use 28-month-olds, traded between the two herds,” Gibson says. That helped speed genetic improvement compared to the former practice of calving 3-year-old heifers.

Seedstock supplier Keith Stevenson says the Four Sixes herd is on track to produce

a higher percentage of Choice and *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) carcasses.

“The bulls we’ve been furnishing him have included a pretty high IMF (intramuscular fat) percentage. As Mike turns the whole cow base over, he’s going to get in a position where he can sell on the grid, and he’ll be ahead of the game,” Stevenson says. “He’s already ahead of a lot of the big ranches.”

Gibson marks the sale books, looking for balanced traits with positive carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs), but if a bull doesn’t look right in the ring, he won’t bid. “I’ll visually inspect each bull, then look at his EPDs [expected progeny differences] to see if they fit our requirements,” he says. Not aiming for sibling bull batteries, he says the combination of appearance and numbers can lead to buying brothers. “If everything is the same, I’m all about them.”

Stevenson points Gibson toward some of the bulls that fit the evolution of the Four Sixes toward a straightbred Angus ranch. “Keith and I work well together; he has a good understanding of what I want,” Gibson says. “They always have some new bloodlines coming on, so we stick with them.”

Still, progress takes years and years. “You don’t flip 5,000 head overnight,” Gibson quips. That’s one reason he bought 750 bred heifers in three consecutive years starting in 2001. Some of their granddaughters are helping to build the Angus base that will reach 7,250 efficient cows, each weighing approximately 1,200 lb.

“When it’s time to pick the heifers, we might have 1,500 head to look at,” he says, noting visual inspection and disposition are

keys. “We bring them into a corral, 40 at a time, cutting off the extremes and watching for animals that are on the prod. Those are culled, along with anything that doesn’t fit the picture of femininity with plenty of body and depth. We ride through them until we get our numbers.”

The numbers don’t dial down to individual identification (ID) yet, although White says Four Sixes cattle take home significant premiums for being age- and source-verified. Gibson says the ranch is ready to adapt to any ID system that is either mandated or economically attractive — once the parameters become clear.

“There are a lot of things that work on paper or in theory,” he notes. “A lot of them don’t work in practice.” Whether ID technology, breeding or management techniques, Gibson won’t be the first to jump in.

“I’m just a good thief, really,” he says with a grin. “I try to steal everybody’s good ideas after they make their mistakes and we can pick out the best.”

That’s why he only tests grid marketing occasionally, while adding genetics that should produce a tender steak from cows that work in tough country. “We’ll be ready for the grids when mechanical grading takes more of the risk out of it,” he says. “The Angus breed is three ladder steps up on anyone else when it comes to marketing beef, and that makes our cattle easier to sell.”

All about the numbers

He has an easy command of the numbers that management and selection can affect now. “We get more calves weaned from Angus cows,” Gibson says. “On a ranch this size, you turn out cows as 100% bred, but because of environmental factors, predation



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and what have you, 95% is what you can bet on at weaning. We've seen that move to 96% or better on our Angus-sired cows. They jump up and get their calves going."

Percent bred has picked up by a similar percentage point. Of course, 1% applied to this herd could fill a semi-trailer.

Gibson sees other numbers that favor Angus. "As we have culled cows, I recorded the reasons," he says. "The Herefords were 8% more likely to be culled for eyes, udders or soundness than the black cows." Switching to Angus should cut replacement needs by 8% in the long run, Gibson figures.

Disposition may be harder to put a number to, but the move to Angus led to a drop in labor requirements from 18 employees to about a dozen, he says. That has been accomplished while actually handling the cattle more often now than 15 years ago.

At branding, calves get a nasal infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR) vaccine and a blackleg shot, then boosters at weaning to include a "cocktail" of modified-live vaccines to prevent respiratory diseases and bovine viral diarrhea (BVD). "When the Angus calves get to the lot they're not stirred up, they're easier to get on feed and their health stays better," Gibson reports.

"The Herefords are just about phased out now — another year or two and they'll all

be gone," he says. "People ask us what we're going to put on those cows when we get them all Angus. I tell them, 'Angus bulls.' They just can't believe I would do that, but it's what the market demands."

Trying to maintain separate base herds to generate consistent crossbreds would defeat many of the holistic and scale advantages Gibson currently enjoys. "I believe in what we're doing, and haven't seen a downside to it," he says. The females, even the Montana transplants, thrive on the Texas plains. "They are natives now, well-adapted to our ranch locations, and exactly what we want in our closed herd. This is working better than anything else we've done through the years."

Gibson doesn't expect to reap truckloads of premiums for quality. "But in the future, you'll sure get discounted if you don't have it right," he says. "Ranchers have always been independent-minded, but we're all working on a common goal, and the market will drive us toward cooperation and quality."

Even traditions change. The Four Sixes Ranch is still run by cowboys — Gibson admits that's his core identity — but the red whiteface cattle now belong only to history on this storied spread. "Just as we were known for the best Herefords, we'll have the best Angus herd we can build," he says.

