

# Jump Start. Or Not.

Florida producer builds his own Angus herd.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor



► Dade City, Fla., rancher Larry Barthle is starting his own purebred Angus herd.

**L**arry Barthle is having a heck of a time growing his fledgling Angus herd. It isn't because he lacks productive, quality cows or management experience, but rather, he faces a challenge most breeders would love to have. Buyers are snatching up the bull and heifer calves by the time their hooves hit the central Florida sod.

Okay, maybe not that soon, but close.

"They buy the bulls when they are 5 to 7 months old," says the Dade City cattleman.

"They are all gone by the time they are 8 months old. Most of the heifers are sold before weaning, all by the time they are 8 months old. The first year they were all sold by the time they were 10 months old."

Not bad for a herd that just got its start in the late fall of 2013.

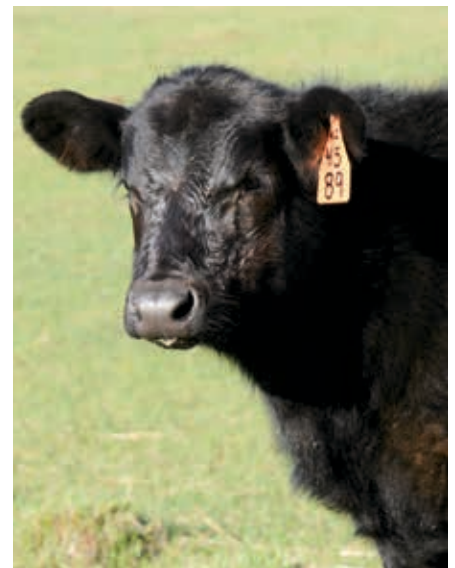
Barthle had a head start, though. Even though he is new to the Angus business, the 57-year-old rancher brings a lifetime of experience with both commercial cattle and

the purebred business. He and his family have been managing cattle on the same land since the 1930s. They have a three-breed rotational cross of Angus, Hereford and Brahmans and also use Charolais bulls for a terminal cross. In addition, they have a 75-cow Brahman herd to supply the ranch with seedstock, as well as to sell to other operations.

Barthle has had the bull-buying chores for the ranch for years and knows the Angus

CONTINUED ON PAGE 358

► Barthle grows out part of his Angus bull calves to breed to his family's commercial heifers. The rest he sells as calves.



## Jump Start. Or Not. CONTINUED FROM PAGE 357

breed. That helped with his decision when he decided to start his own purebred herd.

“We’ve always used Angus. They were the obvious choice in our rotational system. There is a big gene pool so you can sort and select the type you want to breed,” he says.

For starters, American Angus Association regional manager David Gazda clued him in on a whole herd for sale in South Florida.

“I liked the pedigrees,” says Barthle, “EXT and Sitz Traveler. Plus, they were already adapted to Florida, which can be hard on purebred Angus.” He and his wife, Lynn, went down to look and liked what they saw in the pasture, too.

He partnered with long-time friend Jim Langley on the purchase and brought 13 of the cows to leased land near Barthle Bros. Ranch.

“By the time we got them here, three had

already calved, one with twins. Half the cows we bought calved in December or the first of January.” Out of the 13, nine are still in the herd, including a 14-year-old EXT daughter that has calved three times, all in December. This winter, the rest calved by the end of January.

### Moderate is best fit

Whether he is expanding his own herd, which now numbers 21 cows and one heifer, or buying for Barthle Bros. Ranch, Barthle looks for a moderate-framed animal.

“We don’t do extremes,” he explains. “We keep the size down because of the environment. Our grass gets coarse, and moderate cows are easier to manage with the heat.”

He says that works well when he is buying Angus cows because the moderate-framed

females tend to sell for less than the larger cows, at least in areas north of Florida.

“We can breed them to bigger bulls to add size to the bull calves since the bigger calves sell better,” he notes. “We have been selling the heifers, too.”

He says once his cows have a few more breeding and calving seasons under his management, he can identify which cows work best for him, breed to more moderate-framed bulls and keep more heifers.

Ditto on milk.

“Most people have enough milk in their herd already,” he says. “We went through a time of using bulls with higher milk EPDs back in the early 2000s. The problem didn’t show up until five or six years later with harder-doing cows.”

Joe Paschal, Texas A&M extension livestock specialist, agrees with Barthle on the need for moderate frame size and milk EPDs, especially in challenging environments.

However, he clarifies, “When most people talk about frame, they are usually talking about height. If you chop 6 inches off a bull’s legs, it will reduce his frame size, but he’ll still weigh the same. We need to reduce frame size and weight.”

“That’s important, because the nutrient requirements for maintenance are 70% of what he eats. The other 30% goes to things like growth and reproduction. We can reduce the maintenance requirements by reducing the weight.”

However, the Texas specialist says that doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice production.

“A producer can have more-moderate-framed cows and bulls that eat less but produce as many pounds of calf weight as larger-framed cows and bulls.”

That is where genetics come into play, Paschal says. “You can find more-moderate-sized bulls with EPDs for growth and muscle, bulls that are productive. You can still select for growth but with lower metabolic requirements.”

When it comes to milking ability, Paschal says, “Only dairy guys have the luxury of selecting for heavy milk production. It saves on the grocery bill to have an average-milking cow. It also helps her live longer. Heavy-milking cows are more prone to bad teats and udders.”

### Structure and appeal

While moderate-framed animals and average milk EPDs are definitely on Larry Barthle’s selection list, they are by no means his only criteria.

“I’ve been judging since I was in the ninth

► Barthle buys young bred heifers to grow his Angus herd.



grade,” he says. “Being a graduate of the University of Florida, I was a student of Don Wakeman’s, so structure is first.”

He looks at capacity, muscling, the way the animals travel and eye appeal.

“We want a lighter birth weight,” he continues. “It doesn’t have to be a negative EPD. People in Florida breed lighter-birth-weight Brahman cattle, so that isn’t a problem when crossbreeding.”

While he does want a heavy weaning weight, he looks for a moderate yearling weight. Once again, he emphasizes, “We don’t do extremes.”

“Before EPDs were used so extensively, we relied on in-herd indexing. We used heavier in-herd 205-day weights combined with moderate or lower yearling weight indexes. That gave us heifers that grew fast while they were on the cows, but slowed down as yearlings.” He notes, “That also gave us heifers that reached puberty earlier, which is always a plus.”

Now that EPDs are available, however, Barthle adds, “I want a good IMF (intramuscular fat) score, and I want a higher-end ribeye score.”

When he is shopping for females, or bulls to sire females, he says, “I want a proven female in the pedigree with daughters in production. I’m not real interested in a heifer from a bull nobody has ever heard of. When you’re marketing heifers, it is easier to market her if she is from a bull people know.”

He comments, “A bull that is showing up more in our area is the proven Final Answer 0035, and of course, his sire, Sitz Traveler 8180. We used an Emblazon son on our Angus cows the first year, and last year we bred to Yon Final Answer.”

Barthle emphasizes, “When possible, I don’t like to linebreed or stack pedigrees. You get cattle that are either really good or really bad. There is enough diversity in the Angus breed you can find what you want without stacking pedigrees.”

Disposition is also a given. The Barthles insist on it with their Brahman cattle, and he insists on it with his Angus.

“My customers want gentle cattle that are easy to handle,” he explains. “We spend a lot of time getting our calves that way.”

This trait is especially critical for Barthle’s target customer.

“Because of our ranch website, I have gotten several calls a month for years, asking about Angus bulls and heifers,” Barthle says. “I figured the best way to start marketing Angus calves was to target the smaller guys that want one, two or three head.”



► Barthle was already familiar with the Angus breed because he and his family have a three-way rotational cross of Angus, Hereford and Brahman.

This is where Barthle’s years of experience come into play.

“They don’t know much about pedigrees, but I go over the basics with them,” he says.

He doesn’t have to go far to find his customers, or break the budget with advertising. So far they have all been in Florida, and two of them are 4 miles away. Along with word of mouth, he lists the calves on the ranch website, as well as the CattleRange website and other Internet sites.

Then, of course, he and his family are customers by way of Barthle Bros. Ranch.

“I transfer bull calves to the ranch to use on heifers since they have lighter birth weights,” he says. “It also gives me the opportunity to see how they grow out.”

In the mean time, he plans to stick with his strategy of buying a few select young, bred nursing cows and selling the heifers. “That saves time and space. We’re building as we go.”



**Editor’s Note:** *Becky Mills is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Cuthbert, Ga.*

## Mentors to the mentor

While Larry Barthle acts as a mentor for his customers, he also has his own mentors, whether he is buying seedstock for his Angus herd or bulls for the commercial herd at Barthle Bros. Ranch.

“We have followed Roland Starnes from operation to operation,” he says. Now Starnes is at Frank Turner & Sons in Hayneville, Ala., which works just fine for Barthle. “The Turners have been very helpful and supportive in the Florida sales, even before Roland was there. They breed middle-of-the-road cattle in size, with deep bodies and good ribeyes and IMF (intramuscular fat, or marbling) numbers. Plus, they have enough of those type to select from in a sale.”

There is also Chris Hardee in Chiefland, Fla.

“We have bought bulls from Chris for years and can always count on him to share his knowledge,” Barthle says.

He has also gotten to know the folks at Yon Family Farms because, like the Turners and Hardee, of their support of the annual bull sale at the Florida Cattlemen’s Association convention. He has bought females from the Ridge Spring, S.C., operation for his herd and bought ranch bulls at their 2014 fall sale.

Then, of course, there is American Angus Association regional manager David Gazda, who not only advises Barthle on potential seedstock purchases, but also does the actual buying when Barthle can’t be there. “We’ve known David since the ‘90s. He is an asset to the cattle industry and the breed.”