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Building on NWSS Genetics

A commercial ranch in Nebraska finds value in nationwide offering of Angus bulls in Denver.

by Corinne Patterson



PHOTOS COURTESY OF 7J RANCH

► Mic Coffman (right) and his wife, Melanie, manage the cows and other daily tasks for the 7J Ranch of Halsey, Neb.

Building the genetic makeup of a 500-cow commercial herd based on top bulls from across the country might seem a little time-consuming if a producer had to travel to sales in all corners of the country to view potential herd sires.

But for the 7J Ranch of Halsey, Neb., the owners and manager find the annual National Western Stock Show (NWSS) Angus Bull Sale in Denver, Colo., to be the perfect stage for viewing a cross section of the country's Angus genetics.

John Dean, along with his sons, Jeff and Grant, own the ranch, with Mic Coffman

and his family managing the cows, haying and performing other daily tasks to keep the place running.

"We get to look at bulls from different owners from [areas] a lot farther apart, instead of just buying them locally," Coffman says of the only American Angus Association-sponsored sale. He's quick to add, however, that bulls are also purchased from local ranches. But at the NWSS, "you get them from different parts of the country and different states. You get to choose through a bigger variety."

For approximately 20 years the 7J has made the NWSS a yearly event for purchasing Angus bulls. This year John attended the sale, taking home four bulls to be turned out with the cows June 10 for calving to begin mid-March.

"The original herd at the 7J consisted of Angus crossbred cows, the other half being exotics," John says. "Throughout the years, the herd has been crossed with Angus bulls, paying particular attention to yearling weights and carcass traits."

Selection decisions

Coffman has worked for the Dean family for about 17 years, noting John was purchasing bulls in Denver prior to his involvement with the ranch. In recent years, both have attended the NWSS to evaluate lots and select potential sires.

"John has the final say, but I do throw in my two cents worth," Coffman says. "We look at the bulls during the show, and then we discuss which ones he likes and which ones I like."

Coffman says he looks for middle-of-the-road expected progeny differences (EPDs) for all traits in an effort to avoid too much of one trait and not enough of another.

One unique aspect of the NWSS Angus Bull Sale is the judging of the bull sale offering by a five-person panel, which takes place prior to the sale. Coffman says he benefits from listening to others' opinions on the cattle.

An opportune time to go back over their lots of interest is during the parade of bulls in the arena following the show. This time allows buyers to speak to the breeders one-on-one and learn more about the histories of their operations.

"We usually try to visit with them a little bit and see what kind of an environment that they've come from," Coffman says. The 7J is located in the heart of the Sandhills of

Nebraska. "My environment is kind of rough out here. I don't baby them at all. They've got to compete with the old bulls."

Coffman says the 7J doesn't usually seek out bulls based on a buying history with particular breeders because they have had good luck with all their purchases. "We've always had good luck with everything that we've purchased there, and we have got along good with everybody," he adds. John points out that many of the sellers bring their top genetics to this sale because it brings national attention to their operations.

One drawback to the show, Coffman says, is the need to have the bulls in condition for judging. "They might be a little fat. I usually put them on a diet," he says. "If they aren't like that though, they don't show very good either."

One way Coffman tries to get a better feel for the bulls is to arrive in Denver a day before the show and sale.

"I usually go down where the calves are tied and kind of look through there, too, and visit with the sellers," he says. "I can go through the sale book and then look at them. I'm the kind of guy who likes to look at them before they are fit for the ring. I like to look at them in their everyday clothes . . . before they are combed up like they are when they go into the ring."

Working clothes

The working environment the 7J bull purchases move home to is a true test to the ability of the animals. John and Coffman attend the NWSS looking for bulls that move well and can handle the sandy conditions of the large pastures where these bulls are expected to cover the herd.

"I usually have three or four bulls to a pasture, and it's usually section pastures. I figure 20 to 30 head of cows per bull," Coffman says. "It's pretty sandy country, and they've got a lot of hills to cover. They have got to be able to cover the ground."

The NWSS event offers several different breed sales where commercial cattlemen can select herd bulls. But Coffman says Angus calves are what buyers look for, so Angus is an easy buying decision. In the years he has been with the ranch he has seen loyal buyers, only having dealt with four or five throughout the years.

John says the calves are weaned the last week of September, "with the steers sold right off the ranch to feeders that have fed them and know how they do in the feedlot."

Bull quality reflected through youth program

A reflection of the quality of bulls the 7J Ranch of Halsey, Neb., has been able to purchase at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) Angus Bull Sale is their reputation with the Catch-A-Calf program through the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben 4-H Stock Show, says John Dean, owner of the 7J. Representatives from the show and the University of Nebraska scour the Sandhills of Nebraska each year in search of calves for the youth-focused program. The 7J has been selected twice, which is a true honor Dean says.

With the 7J's near 20-year history of purchasing bulls at the NWSS, the majority of the calves from the 7J that have been selected for this program are from Angus bulls bought at the NWSS Angus sale.

The Catch-a-Calf program is a calf scramble where 50 youth have the opportunity to catch a calf out of 25. In return for catching one, they receive a free steer calf at a later date, which is how the 7J has been able to participate. That calf is raised by the exhibitor and is shown at the following year's Ak-Sar-Ben 4-H Youth Expo.

Dean says six of the calves his ranch donated in 1999 sold for a collective \$46,000, with funds benefiting youth.

The heifers are fed a growing ration until January, and the lightest third is sold. Another third is sold in February, many times going into a replacement heifer program.

"The people that have bought replacement heifers from us have seen the way the steers have turned out, I guess, so they like the cows," Coffman says. "And the last few years most of them went to a buyer who knows what our steers can do."

Industry future

The 7J plans to continue purchasing herd sires at the NWSS. Coffman says, "The genetics are getting better every year. [The bulls] are more predictable through their genetics."

Coffman runs a few of his own cows and purchases some of his bulls in Denver as well. "I've always got along good with everything, and I think anybody I have dealt with or visited with has been real polite," he says. "I enjoy going out there."

Like many producers, Coffman reads about the genetic tools developed by the American Angus Association that may some day affect bull-buying decisions. The ranch doesn't currently use any programs offered, but he says they like to have the bulls' registration certificates transferred so they can track breeding decisions.

"If you don't learn something every day, you aren't trying very hard," he says. "There's something new every day that we have got to deal with."

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► Bulls purchased by the 7J are expected to cover large pastures to breed cows.