

# Long-Term Success

At a time when every day seems to present another challenge to the industry, two legendary Northwest bull breeders reveal the strategies that are responsible for their success and longevity.

by Ed Haag

In today's hard-scrabble business environment, any family-run seedstock operation that spans a generation or more must be doing something right, says Rod Wesselman, American Angus Association regional manager. "A person who has been in the business 40 or 50 years and spent all that time striving to make an income off these registered cattle has got to be admired."

For Wesselman, these pioneers of the breed offer all of us a unique perspective into how to achieve long-term success as seedstock producers.

"They have been scraping and fighting in this cattle business to stay alive, and they have

done that and more," Wesselman says, adding that these individuals have developed their own unique strategies for their specific operations, which has allowed them to prosper through both good times and bad.

Two Oregon seedstock operations who have benefited from such leadership are Buchanan Angus of Klamath Falls and Pope Ranches Inc. of Merrill, Wesselman says, adding that both have had considerable success in utilizing the production and marketing resources available to them while growing a well-balanced and customer-oriented business.

## Keeping it local

The Popes have never been ones to follow the crowd. In the late 1930s, while the dominant beef cattle in their neighborhood were Shorthorns, Lynn Pope's grandfather was transitioning to purebred Angus.

"My grandfather was a brand inspector, so he had an opportunity to see a variety of cattle and he liked what he saw in the Angus as far as doability," Lynn says. "So he switched from Shorthorn and got the opportunity to buy some cows and a bull from Congdon and Battles breeding line."

In spite of the fact that Angus cattle were not the local breed favorite at the time, Lynn's grandfather never doubted that the Scottish Highland import would become a significant player in southern Oregon's beef production future. Lynn recalls that his grandfather's confidence came from understanding that one of the most sought after traits in his region was calving ease, a category in which Angus has always excelled.

"In those days people were already using Angus for calving ease," Lynn says. "The breeding stock my grandfather produced largely went to breed heifers."

Later, as the popularity of the black-baldie grew, the Popes expanded their customer base, but always with the local commercial producer in mind. Lynn notes that, unlike other cattle-producing regions where trait preferences change periodically, calving ease is still a very big issue in his area.

"In other parts of the country the producers selling bulls move one animal after another with birth weights in the 90s, and buyers hardly blink an eye," he says. "Around here, if a bull is in the 90s he has got to be a pretty good bull or no one will touch him." For that reason calving ease continues, to this day, to be a priority in the Pope's breeding program.

"It is still one of our primary ongoing objectives," Lynn says. "Probably that is because it seems to be one of the more difficult objectives to nail down as far as transmitting that to the user."

Other characteristics Pope's customers look for each March at their annual bull sale range from soundness to disposition to



► **Above:** "With a little more than 30 bulls of our own to sell, we needed to get the numbers up to make it viable," Bob Buchanan says. His solution was to invite guest consignors, primarily those who had purchased seedstock from them, to join them in a sale.

► **Right:** Kathleen, Robert (center) and Billy Buchanan are ranching on the same ranch that was homesteaded in 1894.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BUCHANAN FAMILY

carcass quality, with no exaggerated emphasis on any single trait.

“We try our best to keep our traits in balance — never going too far with any one,” Lynn says. “Our customers want sound bulls that are all-around consistent performers.”

This can be a significant task in itself. Citing milk production as an example, Lynn notes that identifying the bulls that will improve on a characteristic is just the first half of the battle.

“There was a time we felt that we had to emphasize milk production and udder soundness in our cattle to bring them up to what we wanted,” Lynn recalls. “Once we got there, we had to be careful not to get beyond that point. We did this by backing off and selecting bulls that would hold the desired levels of milk production.”

### **Ahead of the curve**

Rod Wesselman is well aware of Lynn Pope’s measured approach to bull breeding and sees it as one key reason why the family operation has thrived over the last seven decades.

“One word that comes to mind when I think of the Popes is longevity,” he says. “The reason they have been around as long as they have is they are meticulous recordkeepers who are always researching and figuring out ways to do a better job for their customers.”

For Lynn, it is part of a family tradition that started with his grandfather. He cites, as an example, his grandfather’s interest in improving the end product of his customers.

“Even back then he was interested in carcass performance,” Lynn says, adding that one way his grandfather monitored his progress was to feed to harvest a number of his cattle each year. As evaluation techniques and tools have grown more sophisticated, the Popes have followed suit.

“We now ultrasound our bulls and some of our heifers,” Lynn says. “We have been collecting that data for at least seven years.”

Keeping up with the technology is important, Lynn says, because he believes that part of his role as a seedstock producer is to educate his customers so they, in turn, can see a better return on their bull investment.

If repeat business is an indicator that the Popes are succeeding in helping their customers see a better return on their bull investments, then Lynn can consider both his breeding and his education program a success. A good number of Pope Ranches’ regular customers measure the time they have done business with the family in generations rather than in years.

### **Small, smart and profitable**

As a veteran Association regional manager, Wesselman has had the opportunity to

familiarize himself with a wide variety of seedstock operations, both large and small. In the cattle business, he says, long-time profitability comes in a variety of packages.

“In my region we have some very successful breeders with smaller herds of 100 cows or less,” he says. “Two of the best examples I can think of are Bob and Kathleen Buchanan of Buchanan Angus.”

Like the Popes, Wesselman credits much of the couple’s success to their well-balanced production strategies.

“The Buchanans are very consistent in their breeding program,” Wesselman says. “They are always looking to improve their

cattle by using the latest technology and the tools provided by the American Angus Association.”

But there is more, Wesselman says, adding that the couple has been very successful in scaling their operation to a size that works well with their existing resources. “They are a husband-and-wife team who have raised their kids and are now doing most of the work by themselves,” he says, noting the operation’s size is suited well to the Buchanans’ empty nest status.

Bob Buchanan concurs.

“Our herd is a size that fits with the

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property we own, and it also fits with what my wife and I can do without hiring anyone else," he says, adding that staying small is not without its own unique set of issues that require some creative problem-solving.

### Meeting the marketing challenge

One issue smaller seedstock producers are often faced with is how to sell a limited number of bulls without breaking the marketing budget. Bob notes that from when he began building his Algoma Angus herd as a teenager in the late 1960s up until 18 years ago, most of his bulls were sold through private treaty.

In 1971, when pioneer Angus breeder Scott Warren (a neighbor of the Buchanan family) retired, Bob purchased his remaining seedstock herd and leased his ranch.

"Up until then, my family had always raised Herefords," Bob says. "Scott's Algoma cattle convinced me that there was something better."

Buchanan points out that one of Warren's original bulls, which he purchased from the University of Illinois herd, had sired five Certified Meat Sires [a program developed by

Performance Registry International (PRI)], all by natural service.

With credentials like that, selling bulls private treaty did not prove to be a major challenge for the Buchanans.

But then, as his customer base expanded and competition for his best bulls intensified, problems began to arise.

"Each year customers arrived earlier to get first pick of the bulls," he says. "It got to the point that they wanted to pick their bulls before they were weaned off the cow."

Those who missed out would then complain, Bob recalls. In response, the Buchanans elected to initiate a silent auction. As in a regular live auction, a day was selected when potential buyers would congregate at the ranch to view and bid on bulls.

But unlike live auctions, bids would be made over the course of a morning on a common bid sheet. "On our more popular bulls we would fill up a page or more," Bob says.

With no bull sales occurring before the auction date and everyone getting an equal opportunity to bid on their favorite animal,

the initial problem seemed resolved; however, over the span of a few more years, a new, equally thorny issue emerged in its place.

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Because potential buyers now had ample time to converse with each other while bidding on paper, it created the possibility of customers choosing to partner on a bull rather than bid against each other.

"This again got us rethinking our market strategy," Bob says, adding that the obvious solution would be a live auction, but having a smaller herd made it difficult to justify financially. "With a

little more than 30 bulls of our own to sell, we needed to get the numbers up to make it viable."

For Buchanan, the answer was participation of guest consignors. "These are primarily people who have bought seedstock from us," Bob says. "With the added bulls we were able to switch from a silent to a live auction in 2002."

At press time, Buchanan Angus was to have its ninth live auction Feb. 28, 2010.

