

► Mains of Tonley has three generations working on the farm. From left, Neil Wattie Jr., Mark Wattie and Neil Wattie Sr. manage operations with Neil Jr.'s brother-in-law Gary Coutts. With Mark's interest, they hope to expand the herd.



PHOTO BY KASEY BROWN

# PERFORMANCE FOCUS GENERATES QUICK SUCCESS

Family's focus on performance records for the past 10 years garnered success.

Story & photos by **Barb Baylor Anderson**, field editor

**A**ngus cattle have been raised in Scotland for more than 150 years. Yet in about two decades' time, the Mains of Tonley Aberdeen Angus herd — created not far from the start of the breed in the northeast part of the country — has managed to quickly rise to the top of the industry.

“My father, Neil Senior, founded Mains of Tonley in 1993 when he bought three cows in England. Over the next few years, cows were purchased at dispersal sales that met the criteria for our new herd,” says Neil Wattie Jr. His son, Mark, and his brother-in-law Gary Coutts, manage the herd. Neil Jr. also is director of the local Claas dealer, Sellar Agriculture Ltd.



Mains of Tonley is a small family farm nestled in the Scottish Highlands with 120 head of cows and 50 acres of cereal grains for feed. Cows are the main income from the farm. Animals sold for slaughter are sold to companies on dead weight. No beef is sold directly to consumers.

“We breed our cattle for beef,” says Neil Jr. “We go for size without sacrificing conformation or calving ease. We want cattle that suit commercial breeders, but the last few years we also have added more pedigree to build the herd and sell breeding females.”

The herd purchased by Neil Sr. did not necessarily follow the trend at the time for leggier cattle. Rather, the herd

had a more traditional look with a lot of flesh, says Neil Jr.

“We like fleshing ability. Big cattle are most suitable for this area,” he says. “It is important how cattle look, but that must be backed up by performance records. You need both.”

The family has maintained performance records for the last 10 years, breeding for high-performance animals that are above average, if not in the top one-third of performance, in estimated breeding values (EBVs). They focus on EBVs for calving ease, milk and muscle, as well as growth rate, in selecting breeding stock. Bulls with below-average EBVs are avoided.

“We pay great attention to EBVs. Averages for the whole breed are creeping up all the time, so you have to select for high performance to stay ahead of the game. Buyers are paying much more attention to EBVs, so it's important to have bulls for sale with good figures,” he says.

During the International Federation of Ag

Journalists visit to the farm in September, the Watties had five 18-month-old bulls for sale. Two were top 10% performers of traits for the breed.

“We have had epic success in the last year in the showing and at sales,” says Neil Jr.

Tonley Pato N938, one of those top performers, was champion at Stirling Bull Sales in October. He sold for more than \$20,300 U.S. equivalent. The bull is named after a Brazilian soccer player.

The family has captured a number of showing titles in the last year or so. At the national Angus calf show, their nearly yearling bull was bull calf, overall calf and male champion. Later that month, the same bull took the reserve bull calf champion at the Black Beauty Bonanza show. They also had a 22-month-old heifer that won the female championship at Stirling last year and later sold for more than \$14,400 U.S. equivalent. A bull that was the son of an Australian Angus bull — with the highest ribeye muscle area of any Angus in that country — sold for more than \$22,000 U.S. equivalent at the same sale.

Neil Jr. notes there is some U.S. influence in their herd from sires Scotch Cap, Hoff Great Western SC456, Hoff Limited Edition SC594, Ankonian Elixir 100 and Mytty In Focus. They still have one older cow in the herd from the Scotch Cap bull.

“None of our genetics have ended up in the U.S., either as live animals or semen. We do have two bulls at an AI (artificial insemination) station here and have semen that has been exported to Brazil,” he says.

With son Mark and his cousins taking interest in the herd, the future looks good.

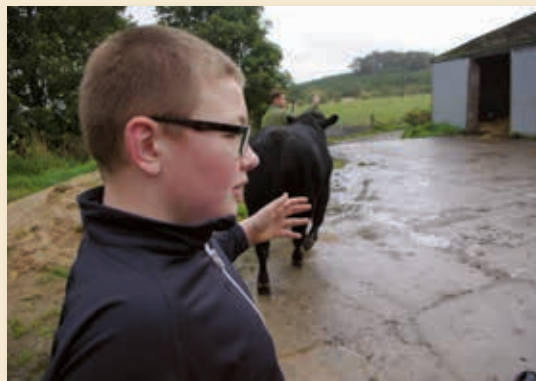
“We hope to continue breeding top-quality stock and, with Mark’s interest, expand,” he says. “Mark is 19 and at college, but once he is back home working full-time, we will look at all options.”



**Editor’s Note:** A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.

## Anxiously waiting his turn

Craig Coutts is excited to turn 13 years of age — not because it marks his passage into teen status, but because it means he finally gets to work with the bulls.



“Right now I can only show calves,” says Coutts, as he watched his cousin, Mark, parade one of the Tonley’s yearling bulls for visitors (see photo). “You must be 13 to handle bulls in the ring.”

Craig is the son of Gary and Alison Coutts. Alison is Neil Junior’s sister, and Gary helps manage the herd. Craig’s older brother, Callum, showed cattle when he was younger, as well.



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## Best use for Scotland’s hills

Scotland’s producers have found the hilly terrain and moderate weather patterns are near ideal for primarily grass-fed beef production management, including Mains of Tonley.

“Tonley is a perfect example of what we do well with land in Scotland,” says Johnny Mackey, head of industry development at Quality Meat Scotland. “We have a great, sustainable story to tell. We have a unique, grass-based system that can’t really be used for anything more than turning out cattle or sheep. We produce healthy meat with great flavor that comes from grass.”

The Watties have a deferred grazing system, which means all females are wintered on 60 acres of hills and fed only hay or wrapped silage. Cows are brought inside only during March and April to calve, and then they are turned back out to pasture. Heifers are supplemented with homegrown oats and barley so they are

ready for breeding at 15 months of age. After weaning, calves receive a ration of 85% barley and protein balancer. Bulls that will be sold receive oats, barley, sugar beet pulp, wheat dark grains and concentrate.

“There is a perception in some quarters that we should be concentrating on producing grain directly for human consumption to feed the burgeoning population of the world rather than feeding it to animals to produce meat,” says Eddie Gillanders, who served as editor of the *Aberdeen-Angus Review* in the United Kingdom. “Certainly in Scotland, much of the land which produces beef is rough grazing not suitable for grain production. We contribute by turning something which would otherwise go to waste into food people want.”