



► Randy and Beth Daniel, Colbert, Ga., tried early weaning to give their 2-year-old heifers and purchased cows a break.

Cut the Apron Strings

Cows and calves benefit from jump start with early weaning.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*

After six years of kitchen-table discussions, Randy and Beth Daniel put early weaning to work. “We did it to help the cows, but the calves came along great,” Randy says. “We didn’t doctor a baby.

“We got the cows pregnant, too,” he adds.

Roy Wallace, vice president of the Beef Department at Select Sires, planted the early weaning seeds at the Daniels’ Colbert, Ga., operation. “He was here on a routine farm visit,” Randy recalls. “He asked me what my biggest production challenge was, and I told him it was the same as most everybody else’s — trying to get those 2-year-olds bred back.”

Wallace suggested early weaning to give the young cows a break. “He told us with the performance bred into these cattle, the cows milk more and the calves nurse more. Those calves hammer on their mamas all the time,” Randy says.

This past January was the time to go from talk to action. In addition to the 75 2-year-olds bred at their Partisover Ranch, the Daniels bought a potload of bred cows from both Nebraska and Kentucky, as well as cows from Montana. All were due to calve in September and October. “It is always hard to bring western cows into the Southeast,” Randy says. “They can’t handle it. But we wanted to keep them in a fall-calving program.”

To make matters worse, the winter was cold, they were out of grass, and their hay was of low quality.

“This was the group of cows to do it on,” Beth emphasizes.

Early weaning at work

The husband-and-wife team eased the transition for the young calves by putting creep feeders in the pastures in December, a month before weaning the calves. They normally practice fenceline weaning anyway, Randy says. “The weaning process was just a matter of taking the cows away from the calves.”

“The bawling was over in three days, five days max,” Beth adds. “I think the cows missed the calves more than the calves missed the cows.”

“The calves never missed a lick,” Randy agrees. “They laid right into the feeders.”

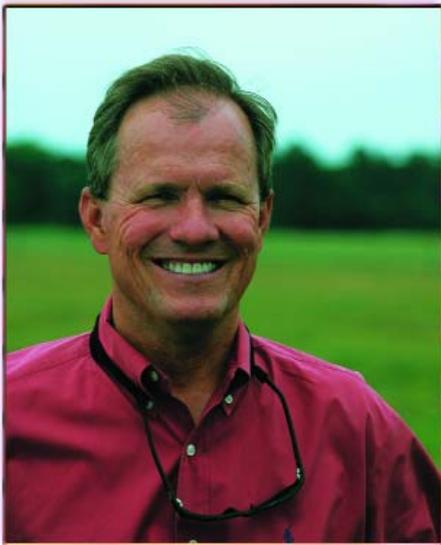
The Daniels pulled the heifers out and put them on winter annuals so they wouldn’t get too fat, while the steers and bulls continued to have access to the self-feeders.

When they took weights to adjust to 205-day weaning weights, Beth says, “They were



► Early weaning didn’t set back these September heifers, pictured the first of June.

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► Randy says he batted around the idea of early weaning for years.

The American Angus Association will accept weaning weights collected between 120 and 280 days of age to adjust to a 205-day weight for use in establishing expected progeny differences (EPDs).

really pretty good. The bottom line is it didn't hurt the weaning weights."

In 2003, when the calves were weaned at seven or eight months (mo.), their adjusted 205-day weights were 771 pounds (lb.) for bulls and 645 lb. for heifers. "Last year we had a super spring," Beth says.

This year, even with the lack of grass, the bulls still averaged 771 lb., and the heifers averaged 616 lb.

And, yes, it worked for the cows. "They started cycling immediately and gained flesh immediately. It was an overnight turnaround," Randy says.

Hillsboro, Ohio, Angus breeder John Grimes is a longtime advocate of early weaning. "We've practiced various forms of early weaning on some or all of our herd for at least 10 years.

"In years of drought or low feed resources, it should be a standard practice. It should also be standard practice on all first-calf heifers," he states. "In times of limited forage or poor body condition in cows, it is more efficient to feed the calf than to feed the cow.

"Some people say if a cow can't take care of her calf until weaning, she isn't a good cow. But that isn't true if the calf has a lot of genetic potential for growth," Grimes says.

Grimes actually has double experience with early weaning. Besides using the practice at his own Maplecrest Farms, he works as a county agent and is involved in a long-term early weaning study with Ohio State University (OSU) being conducted at the Southern Agricultural Research Station near Ripley.

He says that in the OSU trial, the calves

have a feed conversion of 4:1 when they are 100 to 200 days old. "You can put on significant gains cost effectively," Grimes says.

Timing is everything

When it comes to early weaning, just how early is early?

Grimes says he has seen early weaning work on calves from 60 to 160 days old, but they shoot for 100 days at OSU. "That is generally when milk production starts to diminish with beef cows," he says.

Like the Daniels, he puts creep feeders out for his own calves before weaning, but says the calves at OSU don't get a drop of grain before early weaning, and they still take off. Even better, they keep going.

For the six-year trial, the steer calves from OSU's herd are divided into thirds. One-third is weaned at 100 days and put straight in the feedlot. Another third is weaned at 200 days and put in the feedlot. The third group is weaned at 200 days and backgrounded on forage until the calves reach 800-900 lb., when they are put in the feedlot.

Grimes says the early weaned group is targeted for harvest at 12-13 mo., the group weaned at 200 days and put on feed is a month or two later, while the backgrounded group is usually 17-18 mo. old before it is ready for harvest.

"In the first four years of the study, we had 45 Angus-sired steers in the early weaned group," he reports. "Forty of those steers graded average Choice or higher. The remaining five early weaned steers graded low-Choice.

"The second group did well, too, but with group 3 we did see some significant differences in tenderness."

Encouraging results

The news is similar at the University of Illinois (U of I), animal scientist Dan Faulkner reports. "With young calves, 70 to 90 days old, we put them right on a finishing ration. They haven't been eating forage, so there isn't an adjustment," he says. "The older calves have been eating forage and need to be adapted to a concentrate ration. We start them on a forage-based diet and change over to a concentrate diet."

He continues, "The early weaned calves are very, very efficient in the feedlot. We're seeing a 10% increase in feed efficiency."

He also says the early weaned



► The Daniels say their cows started putting on flesh and cycling as soon as they early weaned their calves.



► Beth says the hard part of early weaning is getting used to the idea.

calves shine at harvest. “We are getting 70% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB) and Prime with the early weaned calves.”

A high-starch diet is the key, he notes. “For every 100 days on a starch diet, we can get one extra quality grade. So with early weaning, we get about 100 extra days and pick up a full quality grade without adding extra backfat.”

Faulkner adds, “We’ve looked at a lot of different programs and found no disadvantage to implanting as long as the calves were gaining enough to deposit fat.” He says this is around the 2-lb.-a-day mark.

Still, for all the advantages for the calves, early weaning is a boon for the cows, as well as the people who manage them.

“The calves don’t make a lot more money because of the extra yardage fees and feed,” Faulkner says. “The big benefit is lowering cow costs. We can pick up an extra \$100 to \$200 by early weaning and changing the calving seasons. Our speculation is we’re seeing a 30% reduction in the forage needs for the cows.”

He adds, “It is a very, very easy way to manage cattle.”

“I think there is a real opportunity for fall-calvers,” Grimes adds. “If you calve in September, you can take the calves off the cows when the mud and bad weather hit. A cow nursing a fall calf can really go down in the hard part of the winter.”

Beth says, “Getting used to the idea was the hard part. It was just easier.”

Randy adds, “We’re born-again believers.”

The young and the healthy

Apparently Randy and Beth Daniel’s experience with the health of their early weaned calves was no fluke.

“It is amazing. Generally, we get a healthier calf. Apparently there are some lingering antibodies from the colostrum,” says John Grimes, Hillsboro, Ohio, Angus breeder and county agent.

Grimes takes no chances, though. He vaccinates for respiratory diseases, plus the clostridial complex, three to four weeks prior to weaning, then gives boosters after weaning.

At the Ohio State University (OSU) Ripley research center, Grimes says they administer both rounds of vaccinations before weaning.

University of Illinois (U of I) animal scientist Dan Faulkner says they have the same positive results with the health of early weaned calves. “We’ve early weaned 4,000 calves,” he reports. “Our experience has been the calves are extremely healthy, provided we have a good vaccination program.”

He says, “We give them the first round of vaccinations prior to early weaning and we give the second round when we wean them. We give them the third round at six months. We don’t get real good titers with the first two vaccinations because the colostral immunity is still present.”

He says with the early weaned calves, they have sickness rates of about 2%. With the traditionally weaned calves, sickness rates are around 40%.

University of Georgia veterinarian Mel Pence says vaccinating early weaned calves is a challenge because of the maternal antibodies. “In general, we feel that at somewhere between four and six months of age, most calves should respond favorably to vaccination. If we are weaning at 100 days, we will need to immunize these calves before weaning. However, a percentage of them may not respond because of the maternal (colostral) interference.”

He recommends, “On early weaned calves you may want to vaccinate with a four-way viral vaccine at weaning, again two to four weeks later, and booster 30 days before they are shipped to the sale or feedlot.”

