



# Alabama Achievement

Information, selection and cooperation lead the way.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

**A**verage isn't in Danny Rice's vocabulary. "I'd like to see my cattle go 100% Choice and have 50% make the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand."

The Moundville, Ala., producer appears to be headed that way, and he knows that thanks to stocker operator John Lang,



► Tuscaloosa, Ala., stocker operator John Lang passes the feedlot and carcass data on his cattle back to original owner Danny Rice.

Tuscaloosa, Ala. Lang bought 14 steers out of Rice's 2005 calf crop and fed them at Decatur County Feedlot, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner near Oberlin, Kan.

Those steers had a hot carcass weight of 842 pounds (lb.) and an average yield grade (YG) of a lean 2.4. This time, 64% graded Choice and 36% Select, with ribeye areas averaging 13.3 square inches (sq. in.). But Lang has been buying and relaying data on Rice's steers for some time. "Out of the 45 I've sold Mr. Lang in the last three years, I've had 13 (25.1%) go CAB," Rice says.

His feeder heifers are also making a quality statement. In summer 2007, Auburn University bought a truckload of heifers from the Alabama Feeder Cattle Marketing Association board sale and finished them for a research project. Ten of Rice's 11 heifers graded Choice.

## Balanced selection

Rice starts his quest for quality with selection, but he knows that takes balance. The 37-year-old has been in the cow-calf business since 1995, long enough to learn pasture performance comes first. "If a cow doesn't breed and raise a calf, it doesn't matter if she produces 100% Prime," he comments.

With that in mind, when he buys Angus bulls for his 55-cow herd, he starts with maternal traits. "We want a bull with a positive scrotal circumference EPD (expected progeny difference). They'll breed more cows faster and their daughters will mature sooner," Rice says.

## Measuring what he manages

When Danny Rice talks about the carcass characteristics of his cattle, he isn't guessing. Even though he sells all his calves after weaning and preconditioning, except for a handful of replacement heifers, he can still quote quality and yield grades with the best of them.

Thankfully, he has a buyer who not only allows him to get the carcass data, but actually makes it happen. Tuscaloosa, Ala., stocker operator John Lang says, "We give Danny the information on how his cattle perform in the feedlot, grade, and whether they made any money so he can use the information as a tool."

Considering they do well, isn't he worried he'll have to pay more for Rice's calves? "We're willing to pay more for them," Lang says. "Danny buys good bulls and culls out the bad cattle. He saves his best ones for me. We know how they've been treated and that they've been through a health program."





► Danny Rice gets carcass data back on his finished calves and uses it to make improvements in his herd.

His cattle have that down to a fine art: 18 out of 22 cows in one pasture calved in 22 days last fall.

Rice also wants an EPD of around 3 lb. on birth weight and a +15 to +20 EPD on milk production. "I don't want too heavy a

The steers from Rice's herd also fit Lang's needs. Rice sells his feeder heifers and heavier steers through the Alabama Feeder Cattle Association board sale but saves his 600-pound (lb.), Angus-based steers for Lang. In the fall and spring, Lang buys from 200 to 250 Angus and black-nosed (Angus-cross) Charolais steers. He puts another 200 lb. on them with grazing on his ranch, and sends them to Mead (Neb.) Feedlot or Decatur County Feedlot, near Oberlin, Kan.

Rice's cattle go to Kansas, where the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot sells on the grid, rather than on the hoof at Mead.

Rice puts electronic identification (EID) tags on his calves before they leave his place, and those stay with the cattle until harvest. "In four years with the EID tags we've gotten the data back on all the steers we've sold to Mr. Lang," he says.



► Moundville, Ala., cattleman Danny Rice has set lofty quality goals for his cattle.

milker," he says. "It takes too many groceries to keep them up. I also want around a 45 lb. or better weaning weight and 80 lb. or better yearling weight."

Weaning weight is definitely not a problem in his herd. "We're selling calves a month earlier than we used to, and we'll still have calves weighing from 690 to 900 lb. They'll average 750 lb. when we sell at 10 months," he reports.

These weights do come with the benefit of creep feed and a 45-day preconditioning period before the board sale.

While his calves excel in weaning weight, Rice would like to bump up the feedlot gains a bit. "We've been hanging around a 3-pound average daily gain (ADG), but I'd like for them to go 3.5 to 4 pounds."

When he does get to the carcass traits, he says, "We try to get a 12.5 or 13 on ribeye area. I'm leaning toward the marbling now to increase my quality grade, though. We've got the muscling."

The selection criteria is the same when Rice is choosing semen for artificial insemination (AI), although he just began AIing heifers last year.

He is also particular when he selects replacement heifers. Rice may only keep five from his own herd, selling the rest through the board sale. Any other replacements come through Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) sales. "I can get the same quality buying them through BCIA as I can raise," Rice says. "I'm going to pay \$1,200 for them, but I'll have that in them if I raise them."

While he expects heifers to have an

adjusted 205-day weaning weight of at least 600 lb., he says, "I make sure she isn't too fat because fat deposits in the udder and keeps her from milking as good. I like them a little on the rangy side."

When he is choosing bulls or heifers, Rice goes for closely related cattle. "I try to buy half sisters," he says, "and the last two yearling bulls we bought were three-quarter brothers. I want uniform cattle."

He also wants them more like his cow No. 101. "She's my perfect cow," he says. "I try to keep my cows around 1,100 pounds. She's

three-quarters Angus and one-quarter Simmental. She isn't big, but she raises big calves."

There's also his pride and joy — a cow that has produced three CAB calves by three different bulls.

"I want that ability to produce for the brand,"

Rice says. "It pays better."

He plans to keep shooting for that brand. Lisa Kriese-Anderson, Auburn University animal scientist, says, "He can reach those goals. He has a nice base."

However, she adds, "Since he is selecting for maternal and growth traits, it may take him until he is a very old man. He is doing the right thing, though, by not practicing single-trait selection."

Rice says, "I'm going to rotate my older cows out, keep my better genetics, and keep buying better bulls. Dr. Lisa has been the biggest advocate of us improving our genetics. The Southeast hasn't had the reputation of producing quality cattle, but we've followed the Extension service lead, and now we're doing everything the feedlots want us to do. I think our goals are attainable."

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**— Danny Rice**

