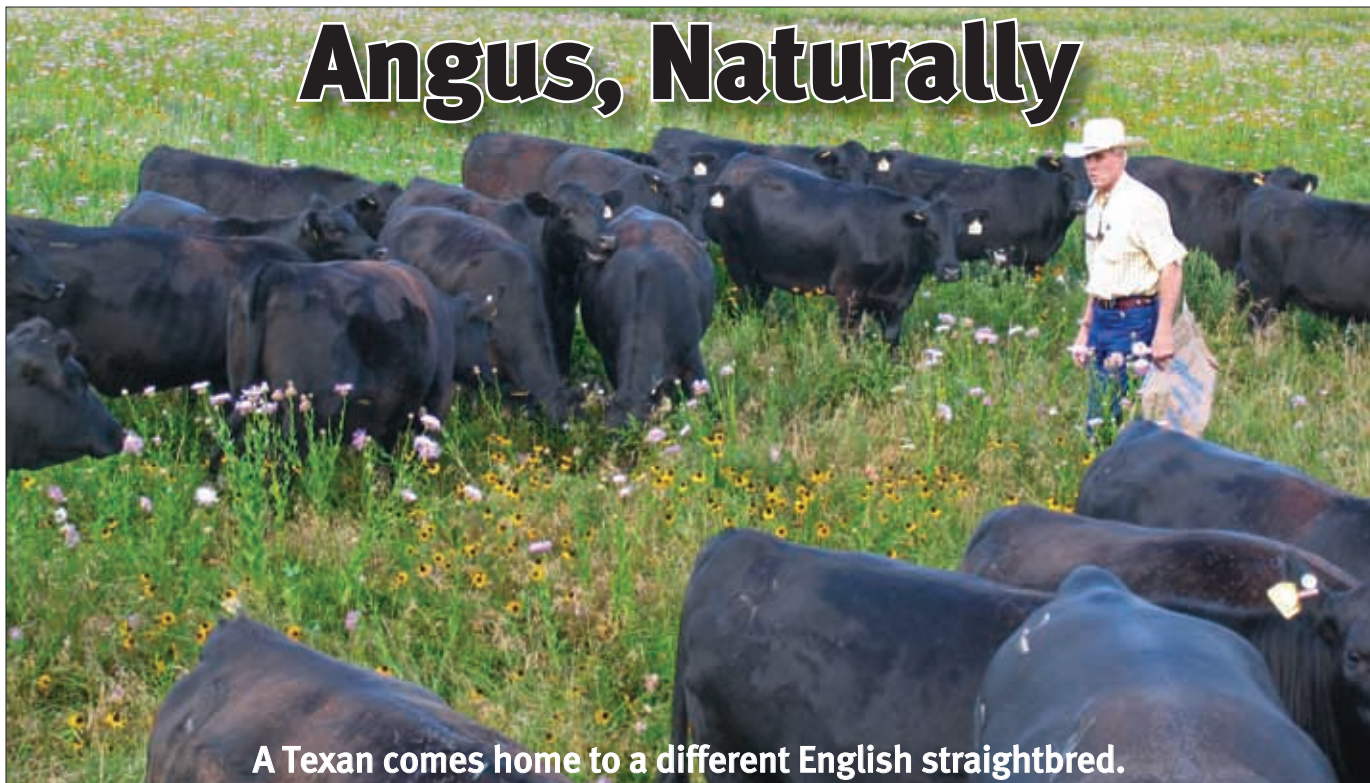


Angus, Naturally



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

A Texan comes home to a different English straightbred.

by *Lindsay Domer*

Texas, Montana, Nebraska and back to Texas. Diaz Murray made his way across the country, trying to find the most profitable place for his ranch without compromising the herd's high-quality Angus genetics. Rather than pointless wandering, the knowledge acquired from diverse environments has helped shape the ranch and herd at home south of the Red River.

Raised in central Texas on his family's Hereford ranch, Murray grew up without the benefit of carcass data, expected progeny differences (EPDs), implants or most other modern technologies. Crossbreeding was almost unheard of, and hard work was the main key to success.



► "We've fed steers for a long time, but the cow is what I'm after," Diaz Murray says. "She has to have the right shape; I like them deep and thick, but I want some stretch in them, and I look at muscle shape, too."

"They were true pioneer ranch people," he recalls. "All they had was their vision in selecting Hereford cattle, but they had a market for their Choice calves in Iowa.

"I'm lucky enough to go back to my roots and know how those families worked," he says. "A lot of young people didn't see that vision of the straight English herds, only the crossbreds and exotics. It helps to understand what you can do if you work with the cows and the land."

His family bought a Miles City, Mont., ranch in 1972, and Murray moved northward in 1979, switching to Angus. Impressed by the level of leadership in Montana producers, geneticists and range scientists, he quickly

adapted to their ideas as well as the prominent breed. Lund's B Bar Angus was an early supplier; then Gartner-Denowh Angus Ranch became the foundation builder for the herd, and that influence remains strong to this day, he says.

"When I moved to Montana, I had never heard of performance bull testing," Murray says. "In Texas, we always went to bull

sales and just took a look at the bulls." But the whole country was changing.

Going natural

The Murrays finished cattle in Nebraska in the 1990s and experimented with growth implant strategies.

"We saw the quality grade go up as we moved from two implants to one and then to none, while our genetics stayed the same," he says. "We also saw gains slip, but without implants we got to 81.4% Choice and Prime and 27% CAB [*Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB® brand)]."

Even 10 years ago, Murray saw a consumer trend toward "natural" beef. "That's why we decided to aim for growth in our quality genetics," he says. "Corn prices could go up, but if you buy bulls that put the genetics in the calf at birth, you don't need those other things to get the gains. It's built into them."

In 1998, Murray and his brother split up the 1,200-cow ranch, and he moved his share to northeastern Nebraska for a while.

"I learned in Montana [that] if you want to get the most weight on your calves you have to optimize cow numbers and keep the range in top condition. But I learned a lot more about forage management in Nebraska," he says.

"It was much more productive range, so we confined cattle to smaller areas for grazing," Murray says. "But grass quality dropped soon after frost, and then it was

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time for cake, hay and corn byproducts.”

Texas was calling, and Murray answered the call with a place near Wichita Falls in 1999, adding to it in 2004, for 20 sections of grass in all. He still buys most of his Angus bulls from Montana, lately from Performance Breeders, and others from Express Ranches in Oklahoma.

Known package

Local “advisers” have warned him that he should start crossing with some other

breed. “But they don’t take into account what you can do with cow families and data,” Murray says. “We’re building our genetic pool and producing the most valuable replacement heifers and carcass steers.

“With these Angus bulls, I’m getting the carcass merit, calving ease and milking ability all in one package,” he says. Bulls stay with specific groups of 50 to 60 cows per 1,000- or 1,500-acre pasture. “That

“I’m getting the carcass merit, calving ease and milking ability all in one package.”

— Diaz Murray

adds to the consistency of our calves.”

AngusSource® tags go on calves while they are still on the cow — many of which still sport that program tag — to help keep track of data on the cows and replacement heifers. But it takes more than data to impress Murray, who keeps his

visual-judgment roots in mind.

“We’ve fed steers for a long time, but the cow is what I’m after,” he says. “She has to have the right shape; I like them deep and

thick, but I want some stretch in them, and I look at muscle shape, too.”

Going natural

In late 2005, Murray was about to become one of the first to produce CAB Natural, after the Beef Marketing Group (BMG) made an offer on his AngusSource calves, if he could maintain their status. To qualify for CAB Natural, cattle need detailed records to support that they have never had implants, antibiotics or animal-derived feeds, and meet the 10 CAB carcass specifications.

An abnormally hot, dry summer left some of Murray’s calves fighting off pneumonia that fall, however, forcing him to use

antibiotics and forfeit eligibility.

“We ended up sending them to another commercial yard, and they still did very well,” Murray says. But, dang it, he wanted to try the natural niche.

In February 2008, everything came together for another go with BMG. This time, he sold 156 big [892-pound (lb.)], naturally raised AngusSource steers. They headed to BMG’s Thomas County Feeders CAB-licensed yard near Colby, Kan.

Murray toured the yard with manager Mike Hunter in July, a few days after the first 112 head were harvested. Soon thereafter, the first data came back showing 95.5% Choice or better and 49% CAB Natural.

“It looks good,” he understates.

Raising natural beef has not been an economical pinch, Murray says. “Our balanced range conditions and health programs, combined with proven-performance Angus genetics reduce the need for antibiotics and implants. I see the demand for natural beef continuing to rise, and more Texas producers will probably adapt to fit the market.

“I think our customer base is getting more and more health-food conscious, but they are still driving the market for high-quality beef,” he says. “The natural niche has only begun.”

