

Commercial Connections



PHOTO COURTESY OF MURPHY'S ANGUS

Small-scale breeders combine genetics and management for bull sale success.

Story by **Barb Baylor Anderson**



Small-herd breeders may not share the same background or reasons for producing Angus bulls for commercial cattlemen. But the skilled ones seem to share the same general strategies for success: combine sound genetics and management. These breeders say offering key economic traits to educated buyers through specific outlets is imperative.

Sell quality genetics

Phil Ehnle, Princeville, Ill., worked for Peoria-based Caterpillar for 30 years. After retiring, he got into the precast concrete business and started Eagle River Angus on the side. For the last 10-12 years, Ehnle has grown his operation to 40-50 Angus cows.

"I've slowly grown my herd to where I want it," Ehnle says. "I bought my foundation stock and now retain heifers and expand internally. Within my cattle operation, raising and marketing bulls to commercial buyers is my primary interest."

Ehnle focuses his genetic selection on performance and calving ease. He also is finding he must factor in carcass and feed efficiency data more and more.

"I have found that many commercial bull buyers are often confused about what data

► **Above:** "A satisfied customer will come back and tell others about your bulls. We do what we can to ensure our cattle work for people," Steve Murphy (far left) says. Steve is pictured with (continuing from left) family members Francis, Kevin and Alec Murphy.

they need to ask for in making decisions on buying bulls. You have to do your research," he says. "Before I got into the business, I networked with people to decide what genetics I wanted. The temptation is there to chase fads, but genetics work slowly. You have to improve your herd over time. I try to sell to people not running after the trend."

Through the Illinois Performance Tested

Bull Sale and bull test stations, Ehnle sells the top end of his bulls as breeding stock each year. He sells bulls individually off the farm as well, but says the advertising expense can get pretty high. He tries to minimize the cost by attracting repeat customers and word-of-mouth referrals.

"If you continuously improve your herd and treat people well, you can succeed in building your bull business."

— **Keith Kramer**

"If people like what I have, they will come back. I would recommend small breeders not oversell their bulls. Only sell those quality animals that you would use in your own herd. It hurts your business to sell bulls



PHOTO BY BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON

► Keith Kramer says he uses the showing to help keep his seedstock visible to potential customers. He also participates in several test station and regional consignment sales.

you wouldn't put in with your own cows," he says.

Ehnle shares his records with potential buyers and helps commercial buyers understand what expected progeny differences (EPDs) tell about his bulls.

"The good news is the Angus breed has a lot of data. That benefits smaller breeders competing for sales. And it allows us as smaller breeders to have the opportunity to be just as efficient and have the same quality seedstock as bigger breeders," he says.

Ehnle says genetics are the priority for a small herd, but management is a close second.

"Over the years, I have learned that you need to cull out problem animals as soon as you identify them. You won't get any better if you don't," he says. "Let your management capabilities set you apart from other commercial bull sellers. Set a goal and stick to it."

Be visible to buyers

Showing Angus cattle helps Keith and Denise Kramer and family stay in front of buyers. The Farina, Ill., family believes that if they are visible and successful in the showring, commercial buyers will take note and seek out their Angus seedstock.

"We go to four or five county fairs every year, the Illinois State Fair and DuQuoin State Fair to get some exposure for making sales down the road," Keith says, adding their diverse farming operation also includes raising row crops and Asgrow/Dekalb seed sales. The Kramers' son, Brady, a student at Lakeland College, assists with the 45-cow operation, along with his two sisters, Bethany and Sarah.

"Being visible at these shows has helped us sell bulls over the years," he explains. "Most of our bulls are going into commercial operations."

Kramer Farms consigns bulls to the Illinois Performance Tested Bull Sale, the Southern Illinois University (SIU) Bull Test Station and Sale and the Wabash Valley Angus Association Sale in Harrisburg, Ill., in March each year. The Kramers also sell yearling bulls off the farm. Most buyers are from southern Illinois, but participation in annual sales has given them some reach into Indiana and Kentucky as well.

"We average about 10 bulls for sale per year," he says. "We advertise in the local papers and in the *Illinois Angus News*. We get a lot of repeat buyers, which is good, and word of mouth from those satisfied buyers brings in more business, too."

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PHOTO COURTESY OF EAGLE RIVER ANGUS

► “The temptation is there to chase fads,” says Phil Ehle, “but genetics work slowly. You have to improve your herd over time. I try to sell to people not running after the trend.”

The Kramers keep Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) on all their calves for performance. They turn in weights and scan bulls for carcass data at a year of age.

“Only about half of commercial producers we work with look for that information, but that could increase,” he says. “We try to raise

sound cattle that will grow, have good weight-per-day-of-age (WDA) and the right thickness. We don’t always follow the trend.”

Rather, Kramer says they zero in on breed characteristics. He recommends small breeders who want to increase commercial bull sales choose calving-ease bulls with good bloodlines. Keith’s original cow families came from his father’s herd. His father, Eugene, has raised Angus cattle for more than 45 years.

“Producers should research AI (artificial insemination) sires and find solid base genetics for their cow herd. A good genetic foundation will go a long way,” he says. “You also have to watch how you feed and take care of bulls so they are in good condition for buyers. If you continuously improve

your herd and treat people well, you can succeed in building your bull business.”

Build the beef business

Supplying commercial bull buyers is not only the basis of existence for Murphy’s Angus near Illiopolis, Ill., it is the foundation of the entire beef industry, says Steve Murphy. Steve owns a 25-cow herd with his brother, Kevin, and father, Francis. They have focused on providing top Angus bulls to commercial operators for more than a decade.

“We have been in business for more than 20 years, and the commercial bull buyer has been a very significant part of that business in recent years,” Steve says. “We believe that providing quality Angus bulls is what the cattle business is all about. Supplying the best breed genetics for commercial cow operations is the foundation of our industry.”

While Kevin and Steve have full-time, off-the-farm jobs, Francis and Kevin’s son, Alec, care for the cattle day to day. They participate in the Illinois Performance Tested Bull Sale, Illinois Angus Futurity and a joint production sale every fall, as well as sell bulls

privately off the farm. Advertising and word of mouth help market their bulls to commercial buyers in the region.

“A satisfied customer will come back and tell others about your bulls. We do what we can to ensure our cattle work for people,” Steve says. “It takes time to build a base

of customers, so newer breeders need to be patient and be sure customers are pleased.”

When the Murphys began to concentrate on meeting the needs of commercial cattle buyers, they stepped away from the

showring and researched cow families responsible for producing performance AI sires to determine what genetics would work best in commercial herds. Today, their cow herd is based on four cow families whose descendants have raised such AI sires. They focus on producing functional cattle that offer calving ease, growth, maternal strength and carcass quality.

“We try and balance all of those traits,” he says. “We have always kept complete records, and until recently have found our buyers are primarily interested in calving

ease and growth. More often, though, we’re also getting interest in our carcass traits and data.”

Steve says proper management of bulls is also important, and says that begins a few years prior to a sale with the selection of key genetic traits.

“You need to do your homework up front when you decide on genetics,” he says. “If I could offer advice, it is that small breeders should communicate with larger breeders on how specific genetics are performing. Larger breeders have a bigger sampling base and can provide insight into helping smaller breeders make the best genetic selections.”



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— Phil Ehnlé

Tips for making the connection

- ▶ Do your genetics research. Study statistics on Angus bulls available through artificial insemination (AI), network with other breeders and avoid the temptation to chase trait fads.
- ▶ Sell only those quality bulls you would use in your own herd to attract repeat customers and encourage referrals.
- ▶ Advertise locally, if necessary.
- ▶ Cull animals right away that you identify as hindering genetic progress.
- ▶ Be visible on the show circuit, where commercial buyers have the opportunity to see your cattle and make connections with you.
- ▶ Keep good records and provide commercial bull buyers with the numbers, even if they don’t realize yet they need the information.
- ▶ Be patient. You can’t build a commercial customer base overnight.
- ▶ Talk to larger breeders that may have tested a wider range of genetics over a wider range of animals to see what they think works and doesn’t work.