



► T.J. Curtin says at Blue Ston they plan to make more efficient use of their time by moving all their calving to a December-February time frame rather than calving in both spring and fall. This timing will avoid calving during corn harvest.

# Curtin Call

Angus is a passion for one young Illinois breeder.

Story & photos by **Barb Baylor Anderson**

**B**eing involved in the Angus business is more than a career for T.J. Curtin. The young, fourth-generation Illinois breeder says raising Angus cattle is his calling.

“Growing up, I always loved the farm, playing in the dirt with tractors, but especially the Angus cattle,” says T.J., whose family farm, Blue Ston Farms, is located 30 miles southeast of Springfield, Ill. “Angus cattle are my passion. There was never any other option in my mind what I would do after college. I always took it for granted that I could come back to the farm. Not everyone gets that chance.”

Curtin has taken full advantage of the opportunities to prepare for his career. The oldest of

nine children, T.J. grew up modeling his interests after his grandfather John Curtin; his father, Fred; and his uncle Jim. He was active in 4-H, showing cattle, and in FFA, where his diversified livestock production project was a state qualifier. T.J. served as FFA chapter president as a senior in high school. Today, he continues to work with the local FFA advisor, providing educational opportunities for students to come work with Blue Ston cattle.

T.J. attended Lake Land College for two years and transferred to the

University of Illinois, where he majored in animal science and was a member of the judging team. He graduated in 2000, and returned home to

farm and manage the cattle full time.

“When you are involved in a family operation, going away to college can open your eyes to new thinking and processes and other points of view,” he says. “At the University of Illinois, I met so many people and learned so many new ways to approach a task. When you are able to look outside your small town, you can increase your understanding.”

## Infusion of fresh ideas

T.J. wasted no time in offering fresh ideas on ways Blue Ston could expand to accommodate a third family.

When he returned to the farm, John retired and moved to town. T.J. moved to the farmstead on the original 160 acres. T.J.; his wife, Megan; and their daughter, Audrey, now reside in the long-time family home.

“Since I came back to the farm, we have doubled the cow herd and almost doubled the total acreage we farm,” T.J. says, adding they plan to continue to expand. “We have 125 registered Angus cows, and we plan to add about 50 more in the next two years.”

The Curtins are in the process of establishing new pasture to make room for the additional cows. The pasture is currently planted in wheat, and water lines and fence





will be added this year. T.J. says the area should be ready for animals in 2008.

“We have added new fence in other areas, too, and have installed fenceline bunks to make our chores easier to manage,” he says. “We also built a new barn this year.”

The new barn serves as an indoor sale barn and cattle working facility, which T.J. says was welcome during a cold winter this year. The facility is equipped for artificial insemination (AI), embryo transfer (ET) and ultrasound technologies, as well as “all the other work we always used to only do outside.” Blue Ston hosted its first production sale at the facility in mid-March, marketing some 25 bulls and a few females.

“We have always consigned to sales like the Illinois Angus Futurity and the Illinois Performance-Tested Bull Sale,” T.J. says. “By hosting our own production sale now, we are trying to create our own clientele base. We feed out our steers, have several local bull buyers, and we also market show heifers and females to others in the Angus business.”

### Making the most of it

T.J. notes one of the biggest changes he’s seen since he started marketing cattle in the Angus business is the complexion of the Angus buyer base.

“Buyers have become more discriminating, for bulls, heifers and cows. There are so many good cattle out there and so many choices that you have to keep raising the bar,” he says. “We also have so many more tools at our disposal to focus on quality. In just a few years, ultrasound technology has become as routine as collecting weaning weights.”

Of course, that means more time spent recordkeeping. T.J. believes Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) provides the best way for him to manage records.

“I am still learning all that we can do with AIMS, but I can tell you it is a good thing. We have less guesswork when we keep good records,” he says. “We have found that to be useful when we market our bulls locally. Commercial cattlemen want to buy a sound breeding animal that is not going to give them any calving trouble.”

T.J. says they also have plans to make more efficient use of their time with their calving program. Blue Ston has traditionally calved 75% of their cow herd in the January-March time frame and the other 25% in September and October.

“We want to have all our cows calve at the same time. We are going to move all of our calving to December through February,” he says. “We are always busy. But we grow almost all corn now, and that takes more

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### T.J.’s tough standards

To build extra value into Blue Ston Farms cattle, T.J. Curtin focuses on producing artificial insemination (AI)-sired and some natural-service Angus calves with solid pedigrees. “We strive to produce Angus cattle that have balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) and pedigrees, along with function and eye appeal,” he says.

T.J. describes the ideal bull as a sound-moving bull with good feet, smooth and clean through the front end with a tight sheath. Secondly, he says the perfect bull should have some depth and spring to his rib, and a thick top and rump.

“The perfect cow needs to be sound-moving, feminine-fronted, have a good udder, good mothering ability and a good disposition,” he says. “My experience is that the calf usually gets its disposition from its mother. Our good cows are typically the ones I never have to think about. They have a live calf every year, wean it off heavy and breed back on time ... and they don’t give you trouble when you have to work them.”

►Above: T.J. (left) came back to the farm to pursue his dream of being the fourth generation of his family to raise Angus cattle in Illinois. He is pictured with his dad, Fred, and grandfather and former American Angus Association Director, John.

►Below: After John retired and moved to town, T.J. moved to the farmstead on the original 160 acres. T.J., wife Megan and daughter Audrey now reside in the long-time family home.





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time in the fall than other crops. By moving our calving to strictly the winter months, we can make better use of our time.”

T.J. also plans to keep exploring new opportunities as he pursues his passion for raising Angus cattle. “I like to talk with prominent breeders and pick their brains about how they do things, and learn other ideas for management and genetics,” he says. “What makes the Angus business great is the great people you meet and the chance to get to know them.”

He offers some advice for other young Angus enthusiasts. “I would encourage

others, after they graduate from college, to work for another operation or business for a year or two and then return to their home farms. You get to see a different perspective and then you can adapt good ideas to your own operation,” he says. “I appreciate the different ideas I have gotten from other people. We have three families that depend on this farm to work, and we found a diversified operation works best for us. I am lucky to get to work outdoors with the cattle every day and preserve my family heritage.”



### Blue Ston's rock solid foundation

The operation known today as Blue Ston Farms has a rock solid foundation in south-central Illinois. T.J. Curtin's great-grandfather, Lawrence Curtin, bought the farm in 1928. Angus cattle were first introduced in 1936, when Lawrence purchased Angus heifers as 4-H projects for John Curtin's three older brothers. The Angus herd continued to flourish, as validated by John's 1951 Illinois State Fair champion steer.

After college and the passing of Lawrence in 1957, John and his wife, Alice, formed a partnership with John's mother known as Curtin Angus Farm. The operation hosted several joint production sales throughout the years with John's brothers, Larry and Bill, and an uncle. In 1983, John and his oldest son, Fred, entered a partnership and renamed the farm Blue Ston Farms, in recognition of the two closest communities, Blue Mound and Stonington. The arrangement continued until the early 1990s, when John's youngest son, Jim, joined the partnership. The farm expanded to include T.J. in 2000.

Today, the Curtins farm about 4,000 acres of corn, soybeans and pasture, in addition to the growing herd of Angus cows. They also manage Blue Ston Farms Trucking LLC, which specializes in hauling grain, rock and fertilizer.



►**Above:** “I would encourage others, after they graduate from college, to work for another operation or business for a year or two and then return to their home farms,” T.J. says. “You get to see a different perspective and then you can adapt good ideas to your own operation.”

►**Right:** Today, the Curtins farm about 4,000 acres of corn, soybeans and pasture, in addition to the growing herd of Angus cows. They also manage Blue Ston Farms Trucking LLC, which specializes in hauling grain, rock and fertilizer.

