



# Hallmark of Relevance

Ratcliff Angus Ranch, Hall win 2007 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

**F**rom the oil fields to soft drink distribution, banking to ranching, Jim Ratcliff never set foot without a commitment to excellence. Ratcliff of Vinita, Okla., hired Billy Hall as ranch manager in 1999 because he saw a kindred spirit.

Together, they would completely transform Ratcliff Ranch, which had added its first Angus cows in the 1980s. The stocker-oriented business that started in the late 1960s gave way to a business based upon balanced Angus genetics that unites producer and consumer demand.

Commenting in 2003 (see “Winds of Change” in the April 2003 *Angus Journal*), Ratcliff said of Hall, “Billy thinks like I do; just as much of a gambler, but he knows when to stop ... He keeps putting together new things for our customers.”

At the time, the stocker enterprise was down to 5,000 head, less than half its one-time volume, as cows took their place. “It was either keep playing the game or take the cash

and go for cows,” Hall said. The decision was easy by then.

Cashing in stockers as they came off grass, Hall bought commercial Angus cows backed by performance and carcass data. At the time, he expected cow numbers to peak at 3,000, with about 200 registered animals.

Success tends to build upon itself, however. Today, the ranch includes more than 4,000 cows, with as many as 1,000 registered Angus. It networks with bull customers to place, partner or own up to 9,000 progeny in several feedlots, learning and improving with every closeout. It’s more about quality than quantity, however.

## Commonsense approach

Since 2002, calves with the highest premium potential have been going to Chappell Feedlot in Nebraska, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed yard owned and managed by Tom Williams. In the last two years, 800 of those were enrolled through

the Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) and achieved more than 28% USDA Prime or *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance.

That helps explain why Ratcliff Angus Ranch is the CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award winner for 2007. Kansas business associate Mark Yazel accepted the award for the ranch Sept. 15 at the CAB Annual Conference in Savannah, Ga.

Williams nominated Ratcliff for the award as “the most progressive purebred breeder we work with in terms of getting data and making improvements.”

“They built a program on Northern cattle and genetics for growth and performance,” Williams says. “They have a lot of that and aim to keep it, while adding more marbling. We see a lot of their customers’ calves, too, and the results have been very positive.”

Much of the progeny buyback business goes through Ranchers Integrated Genetics

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LLC, a division of Ratcliff Ranch run by Hall's old college buddy, John Rule.

"We have not been keeping as much ownership lately, as we are more likely to partner now with feedlots and customers," Hall says. "Before we had this buying program, there was a lot of interest but not much actual buying. I wanted somebody out there who could get them bought or arrange other deals for our customers. John is getting that done."

Some calves go directly to Chappell or other feedlots; some go to contract grower Mark

Yazel near Kiowa, Kan., and others go to a Ratcliff Ranch starter yard near Cushing, Okla. Rule and Hall will help market all progeny of Ratcliff bulls, but demand is greater for calves with known health protocols.

"When customers call, I tell them what we use," Hall says. "Most of them are on the modified-live (MLV) vaccines; we usually go with the Pfizer SelectVac® program." The preweaning shots are BoviShield®, One-Shot®, Ultrabac® and Dectomax® injectables, then back out on the cows for two or three weeks, then a booster at weaning.

"I sent Tom [Williams] a few hundred early-weaned calves straight off heifers this year on that program, and we had no problems, maybe doctored three or four head," Hall says. Indeed, Williams reports a sire group of 170 Prime Time D806 calves from that shipment graded better than 90% Choice and 30% CAB.

"I'm a real believer in worming with the injectable before weaning, so they get that out of their systems," Hall says. "On weaning day, we just pop them with BoviShield in the alley and don't even stop at the chute. I've thought about giving the booster a few days

after weaning, but we have other truckloads coming in and need to keep up."

Hall uses autogenous vaccines to prevent anaplasmosis and pinkeye, the latter delivered by means of an implant pellet and made available to all customers within 200 miles. To keep costs reasonable, he doesn't use the pellet on commercial steers.

"We know it works, because one time we had an outbreak where 60% of the steers got pinkeye, but none of the heifers [did]," he says.

Williams gets involved with Ratcliff customers on health management and genetics, too, since he often buys a share of the calves.

"Most of them can get 70% Choice; we're working on moving that to 80% or more and keeping the growth," he says. "Ratcliff genetics take a commonsense approach to getting there. They don't get into high-dollar games, but their cattle are proven at every level, and that's why their customers will pay a lot for bulls."

**Commercial perspective**

The commercial side is equally important to Hall.

"I think there are more net dollars in commercial than registered Angus," he says. "Sure, we have our big money deals. I bought a cow for \$100,000, and a couple of years



► **Above:** The commercial side of the business can be as profitable as the seedstock side, ranch manager Billy Hall says. "If you can feed your commercial cattle and improve them so they work for both the industry and the consumer, you can sell some \$1,500 animals with a lot less cost in them."

► **Right:** Seedstock supplier Billy Hall (left) and customer Todd Kunkel agree on the importance of establishing a reputation for quality. "You don't get but one chance," Hall says.





later I was offered all my money back for half interest. There are certainly a lot of legitimate business deals at those levels, but they are hard to plan for.

"I'm talking about going to the bank for some loans, and let's see how well we can repay them," Hall says. "That's the end of the business that's solid, relevant, the backbone of the Angus breed."

Producers may think \$3,000 for a registered bull from embryo transfer (ET) is out of line, but Hall puts that in perspective, noting that his 18-month-olds break even at \$2,200. "Then, if you pay your ET herd cooperator \$400, you're down to a typical commercial man's \$400 net," he says.

"On the other hand, if you can feed your commercial cattle and improve them so they work for both the industry and the consumer," Hall says, "you can sell some \$1,500 animals with a lot less cost in them."

Of course, the stocker business was a shining example of low cost, but Ratcliff and Hall won't go back to commodities. Only about 1,200 yearlings now graze Ratcliff pastures, and those are replacement heifers for the ranch and its customers. Hall has artificially inseminated (AIed) about that many heifers every spring for the past five years, using more than 6,000 units of semen from D806 just since 2005.



► Consistent females with calving ease and the ability to produce calves that grade Choice or better are the goal at Ratcliff Ranch.

"We like his consistent females and calving ease, and almost always Choice or better. Here's a closeout with 44% CAB and another 15% Prime with 64% dressed yield — they brought \$159.06 per hundredweight (cwt.) cash equivalent. We like to cross those daughters with 616 — I love that cross," Hall says.

Ratcliff Ranch continues to buy commercial Angus herds, not as a "cow trader," but to build the base. Hall typically keeps the youngest half and breeds to a consistent influence, selling the older animals. "We've found that some people can run a 4-year-old cow for 10 years," he quips.

He was looking at an Alabama fall-calving herd of 600 this year, after dispersing the spring-calving mature registered cows. "The fall calves work better for us on both sides," Hall says. "I like to pick my marketing spots and get past the seasonal market dips. That's easier to do with fall calves."

### A good eye

Apparently, Hall knows how to pick them. At last year's Fort Worth Stock Show 20th Anniversary commercial show and cow sale, the winning Ratcliff pen of 10 brought \$4,500 per pair.

Ratcliff customers often buy and sell at a special auction in the Ratcliff sale barn at the north end of Vinita each fall. A few customers sell females that rival the Ratcliff cattle for demand. One of those is Todd Kunkel, from nearby Bluejacket, Okla., another Chappell Feedlot customer.

In 2002, Kunkel was satisfied with the price when Williams bought his steers. "Then he showed me how they made him \$137 per head after paying us a premium, so we decided to feed our own with Tom the last five years," he says. "The market has been up

and down, but whether it was \$135 or a \$10 profit, it's always been worth it."

A Ratcliff Ranch customer since 1999, Kunkel's cattle showed a three-year average at Chappell of 37% CAB, 3.5 lb. average daily gain (ADG) and 5.65 feed-to-gain conversion. The only problem for Kunkel is he has a hard time holding on to females from his herd of 400 cows. They are all 2- to 5-year-olds, because he sells heifers and mature cows at prices up to \$2,000 per head. Replacements, as needed, come from the pool of Ratcliff commercial heifers.

Hall appreciates Kunkel's steady commitment. "When everybody else takes the money at weaning, Todd's still in there, feeding and finding the premium he knows will be there at the other end. We've been over the mountain together."

Obviously, the feeling is mutual. "Tom's never given me a reason to feed anywhere else; I know he does everything he can for us," Kunkel says. "And why would I buy a bull anywhere else than from Billy? I couldn't find better cattle or better service. Treat him right and he'll do anything it takes to put a smile on your face."

Seedstock supplier and customer agree on the importance of establishing a reputation for quality. "You don't get but one chance," Hall says. As a Ratcliff pledge on the company's web site puts it, "What's said is done."

"Reputation means more today than it did before everybody was keeping individual records on cattle," Hall adds. "CAB built its own reputation and has helped all of us in the Angus breed. I think it's the reason we are having such a good run with Angus bull sales now, because people want the bulls that can help them hit the target."

