



► “If they do well here, they can go north, south, east or west and just bloom,” says Holly Meyer (left), pictured with her father, Don Bush.

Hey BUB, What’s Hot?

Ozark-based Angus alliance aims for quality cattle that can take the heat.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

The BUB Ranch Beef Alliance, Koshkonong, Mo., is a tool that helps small producers think, act and profit like bigger ones. Driven by cooperation across all segments of the beef industry, it just keeps bubbling up new opportunities.

Don and Jalonne Bush, son Don Jr., and especially daughter Holly Meyer form the



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nucleus of family management, with after-school help from Holly’s sons Danny and Ethan Ulmanis. The ranch, known by its acronym for those surnames, moved south from Michigan as the family moved from Simmental and Salers to registered Angus in the early 1990s.

The well-appointed headquarters for the 300-cow, 1,000-acre registered Angus ranch was once home to the famous Wesson Charolais operation. Facilities are extensive enough to allow for species diversity, where the family has developed a regional meat-goat market that often establishes the price in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) market report.

Still, BUB Ranch concentrates mostly on cattle. Efficiency led the way to Angus, and the tough environment of the Ozark foothills near the Arkansas line helped inspire cooperation. Between endophyte-infected fescue and a tropical summer heat index, outside genetics rarely thrive.

“We needed to work with local herds to develop the best-adapted cattle possible,” Don says. BUB Ranch began feeding progeny from those herds in 1995, using performance data to gauge consistency and guide improvement.

The diversity was obvious and expected as BUB shared data with customers. “It would

be nice to think your bulls are so great they can work wonders on any cow, but this is the real beef world. If everybody had purebred Angus cows and used purebred Angus bulls a lot of things would change,” Don says.

Data might lead BUB Ranch customers to that change in time. Links to Intervet pharmaceuticals, Bovigen DNA technology and IMI Global identification systems are part of the alliance, along with Purina Mills through Don Jr.’s feed dealership. Open to anyone who buys a BUB Ranch bull, the alliance took a turn for the better just after the turn of the century when a feed customer joined in the network.

An important role

Bud Bostic was operating an 850-cow ranch near Enola, Ark., and had purchased Flint Rock Feeders, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner located near Gruver, Texas. The big picture was coming into focus. “I got acquainted with Don and his family,” Bostic says. “I appreciated them and what they were doing to help make the Angus breed the best it can be, so I started buying bulls from BUB Ranch.”

That and the connection to Flint Rock led to Bostic taking on an important role in the alliance. He helps Holly and Don arrange marketing options ranging from 100%

buy-back to any level of partnering or 100% retained ownership of BUB-sired calves at the Panhandle area feedlot.

"If you are our bull customer and you have 50 calves, we'll sit down and say here's what we can pay for them outright; here's what we can pay for a share if you want to partner," Holly says. "We never push feeding, because we don't want to be seen as an advisor who costs them money if the market turns. We make sure customers know what is available."

All those who feed get to see all performance and carcass data.

Some of it is impressive by any standards. Flint Rock manager Levi Berry says the BUB Ranch Alliance calves tend to excel in gain and conversion. The feedlot faxed a report to the ranch last year noting that a pen had posted a 3.7-pound (lb.) average daily gain (ADG), converting pounds of feed to beef at an amazing 4.3-to-1 ratio.

Several pens have exceeded 4 lb. ADG through closeout. Ultrasound scans this year predicted 80% Choice for a pen of Alliance cattle. "We know there is always room for improvement," Don says. "But, that's pretty good for all the diversity in those customer cows."

"The feedlot is the key," Holly says. "Instead of dividing our management in a lot of different directions, we just coordinate with Levi and Bud. If the market tells our customers to feed cattle, there's almost no limit to what we can handle through that 12,000-head facility."

BUB Ranch also works locally with Jerry Cooper's backgrounding and starter yard at Summersville, Mo., about 50 miles to the north. Don says Cooper's "meticulous" nature works well with increasingly coordinated Purina Mills nutritional strategies and two rounds of vaccines with Intervet products. "The calves really take off when they get to Texas," he says.



Besides the opportunities to improve added value through the whole chain, BUB Ranch customers have the advantage at auction, too. In 2003, the Joplin Stockyards cooperated with the ranch in a customer progeny sale. Nearly 800 calves sold at a \$60-per-head premium over other calves sold that day but not linked to the BUB Ranch. "Most of the heifers went to Kansas buyers as replacements," Jalonne says.

Bostic and other ranchers in the Alliance keep improving those heifers with data feedback. Weaning weights and data from sibling feedlot and carcass performance tell the story about what is working in the Ozark Plateau. "If they do well here," Holly says, "they can go north, south, east or west and just bloom."

The good, bad and ugly

Open exchanges with customers help interpret data. Bostic pitches in with the customers from Texas to Arkansas. "We show them the truth — good, bad and ugly," he says.

"After so many years and cattle, we know what the BUB Ranch bulls can do," Bostic says. "Sometimes we have to tell a guy, 'It may be your herd.' If they have their identification and records in order, we can go down the line and say these should be sold. You'll want to draw your replacements from these."

The BUB Ranch team sees its mission as building consistently better cattle. A promotional slogan describes the focus with the compound question: "How young can we harvest them, what quality will their carcasses be and how much will it cost to get them there?"

"We know some purebred breeders who seem to live for the next great calf," Holly says. "They don't really want next year's calves to look much like this year's. They



► Don Bush Jr., a Purina Mills feed dealer, helped bring feedlot partner Flint Rock Feeders to the BUB Ranch Alliance.

like the thrill of gambling that some new matchup will hit the jackpot. Our feedlot link is telling us we have to take a different approach."

Every available tool is brought to bear in developing Angus cattle to fit that approach. Through Bovigen, customers participate in GeneSTAR® DNA marker testing that helps build a case for the genetic consistency of BUB Ranch bulls for tenderness and marbling.

"Beginning in 2006, we are including the GeneSTAR ranking when culling within our herd of 300 cows," Don says. "We're not betting the farm on it, but we're putting some credence in it."

"If you breed Angus, we think you should work toward getting more of them that hit a home run from the ranch to the feedlot and packer," he says. "It can be done. The perfect Angus animal is not out there yet, but we're going to keep moving all of ours closer to that ideal."

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► Feedlot partnerships allow BUB Ranch to focus its management. Pictured are Flint Rock Feeders owner Bud Bostic (above) and manager Levi Berry (left).