

Information Drives Improvement

It pays to know what you are starting with when building a quality herd.

by *Chelsea Good*



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

Lenox, Iowa, Angus producer LaRell Wilkinson has been using records to evaluate cattle in his operation for more than 25 years.

"I guess maybe I'm an information nut," he says, "but I don't think you can ever have enough."

Wilkinson began to work with Iowa State University (ISU) and CHAPS (Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software) early on, and maintains that relationship. He's also used American Angus Association expected progeny differences (EPDs) extensively since they were introduced.

"No other tool is better-suited to improve a herd than Association EPDs, and now the dollar beef (\$B) values as well," Wilkinson says. However, EPDs should be ratified with actual data, he adds.

With that in mind, he started feeding out some of his cattle in hopes of gaining insight into the final product.

"I was an NFO (National Farmers Organization) member, so I could go into the packing plant, see my carcasses and visit with the graders," Wilkinson says. "That was a very educational time, trying to figure out carcass values. But I still wasn't getting all of the information I wanted."

When ISU started the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) in 1982, Wilkinson was a prime candidate. ISU Extension beef specialist Darrell Busby says the futurity started with Wilkinson and other producers enrolling three to five of their calves to see which ones made the most money.

"The first year we had 106 head," Busby says. "The past seven years we've fed out 40,000." Wilkinson's involvement has grown with the program. The past nine years he's sent all of his steers to the TCSCF.

Volume and quality of data have been enough to impress even an information nut.

This was a new level of data.

"Trying to feed cattle on my own was difficult," Wilkinson says. "I didn't have enough to feed in one big lot and get the premium prices I needed. Also, it's to my advantage to feed with other producers and see how my cattle do in comparison."

Busby says that a big TCSCF advantage is providing smaller producers with carcass data they couldn't access on their own.

"Producers use the information to identify their herds' strengths and weaknesses," he says. "The first test is finding out how good their vaccination and health programs are. Shortly after that, they find out if their cattle have the ability to gain. With carcass data, they discover if they have the quality necessary to garner CAB® (Certified Angus Beef® brand) premiums. Finally, when they get a financial statement back, they find out if retaining ownership was the thing to do."

► **Above:** Iowa Angus producer LaRell Wilkinson attributes his success to the pivotal role information — from EPDs to carcass data — plays in his operation.

The best indicator that retained ownership is paying off is when they keep feeding with TCSCF. Busby says about 75% of producers return. These go on to even greater earning potential as they apply the information.

Wilkinson says TCSCF data helped refine his operation. He used it to make culling decisions by trying to select against genetics that didn't offer the growth and carcass quality he wanted.

"It was a long process," Wilkinson says. "You don't get three litters a year with cows, so it takes time to sort everything out."

However, it was time well-spent, he says.

"I'm comfortable that my cattle will perform better than others, and that's always been my goal," Wilkinson says. "Each year they perform very well in the feedlot with weight per day of age (WDA) and quality grade on the rail. I feel good about that."

When genetic improvement is working properly, replacement heifers lead the way, he says.

"The heifers I keep back tend to outproduce their mothers," Wilkinson says. "To me, that's very encouraging."

The TCSCF's relatively new sire-ranking program has provided another opportunity. The futurity now evaluates sires that have at least five progeny fed, on a basis of their feedlot gain, carcass weight and quality grades.

"A lot of the top performers are artificial insemination (AI) sires," Busby says. "But you'll also see a sprinkling of individually owned bulls that have done very well." Some of these bulls belong to Wilkinson.

"LaRel has had two sires achieve the silver award status and had another promising one that only has five progeny evaluated," says Daryl Strohehn, an Extension beef specialist who helped set up the sire evaluation system. To earn silver classification, sires must have had 15 or more progeny evaluated and have an overall percentile ranking in the top quartile.

"As you look at the rest of the bulls LaRel has tested, all but one has been in the top 50% for sire profitability," Strohehn says. "That's a record I'm sure he is and should be proud of."

Wilkinson attributes success to the pivotal role information — from EPDs to carcass data — plays in his operation.

"I'm 71 years old, but I still enjoy the idea of looking at genetic information to breed better-quality beef," he says. "I'm extremely excited for the opportunities that advancements in information will provide for cattle producers in the future."

After all, you can never have enough.

