

Marbling to Top the Market



► Auburn animal scientist Lisa Kriese-Anderson critiques a carcass for Alabama producer Stephens.

Alabama cattleman expands his options with a quality plan.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

It was a case of good news, bad news when Donny Stephens got the closeout sheets from his first experience with retained ownership. Eight years ago, the Marion Junction, Ala., producer and his wife, Pat, sent a load of steers to Decatur County

Feedyard, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Oberlin, Kan.

“They gained great but didn’t grade as well,” Stephens recalls. “We had a lot of Selects and not as many Choice cattle. That headed us in the direction of Angus.”

The base herd at Stephens Farm was Limousin and Limousin-cross, inherited from Stephens’ father. “His thinking was the American public wanted lean meat. Now we know that isn’t the whole story.”

Stephens wanted the type of herd that

would produce mostly Choice-grade carcasses. He sat down with regional Extension agent Johnny Gladney to set goals and formulate a plan for reaching them.

“I want 80% Choice and 40% *Certified Angus Beef*® [brand],” Stephens says. “I can dream big.”

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“They grew really well, and his carcass

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► Stephens is striving for quality cattle that will top the feeder-cattle or finished market.

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weights were fine,” he says. “But the ribeye areas were too big, 16 or 17 inches (in.), and they didn’t have nearly enough marbling.”

The solution was obvious: high-marbling Angus bulls. Stephens shopped at nearby Sunshine Farms. “They ultrasound their cattle and pay attention to EPDs (expected progeny differences). The bulls had to be in the upper 20% of their sale in marbling before I’d even look at them. For three years I bought the upper end, if not the top bull in marbling at the sale.”

Even though marbling was, and is, his top criteria, it isn’t the only one. “I do look at carcass size,” Stephens says. “I don’t want them too large but I do want weight, and I don’t want too much backfat.” He wants to keep at least 70% of his yield grades (YG) in the YG 1 and 2 range. Next, he looks at maternal traits, then growth.

“I can always come back with a muscle bull if I need it,” he says.

He is just as conscientious about the bulls he selects for his heifers and for artificial insemination (AI) of 23 heifers and 10 cows. “I’ve been fortunate enough to get calving ease with good marbling and growth,” he says.

Getting results

Breeding cattle is a slow process, but Stephens is already seeing results. Of the five steers he sent to Decatur County Feedyard through Alabama’s Pasture-to-Rail Program, four graded USDA Choice, right in line with his goal.

Cooperation pays

While Donny Stephens would like the option of retaining ownership, for now he’s optimizing his paycheck by selling feeder calves through the Alabama Feeder Cattle Association Board Sale.

“We can get 10¢ more per pound by getting them into truckload lots, but a lot of us don’t have enough cattle to make truckloads that match,” Stephens says. “With 2,000 cattle being sold, we’re able to get those truckloads.”

While Stephens’ 130-cow herd is big enough to fill a truck, there aren’t enough calves to sort for a uniform load. So, he selects 30 uniform, quality steers and puts them with a friend who has 30 similar steers. The two cattlemen first precondition the black calves on their own operations, then commingle them for two weeks at Stephens Farm before selling the load through the board sale.

Last summer, Auburn University acquired 18 head of his feeder heifers in a load bought from the Alabama Feeder Cattle Association Board Sale for a research project. The heifers were finished for various lengths, ranging from 79 to 163 days. “We were tickled,” Stephens says. “We had one go Prime.”



► Marion Junction, Ala., cattleman Donny Stephens is upgrading his herd by using high-marbling Angus bulls.

Stephens then takes the rest of his steers and the heifers that don’t meet requirements for replacements and sends them to Leo Hollinger, Camden, Ala., for custom backgrounding. There, Hollinger and Linden Stockyards owner Jerry Etheredge sort Stephens’ calves, as well as those from other smaller producers, into uniform

groups they predict will hit the 50,000-lb. mark after a 45-day preconditioning period. The calves sell through the board sale.

“It is easy for us to commingle our calves at Leo’s,” Stephens says. “We have to have a central location, and Leo does an outstanding job with feed and health.”

He adds, “Leo and Jerry do the work, along with Johnny Gladney and other Extension agents, so we can get the most for our calves.”

After having replacement heifers measured by ultrasound, he says, “The first generation away from the Limousin were not as good as the second and third generation of greater Angus influence, but we were pleased with their marbling.”

He’s still on track with growth, too. This May, 34 of his September and October steers averaged 710 pounds (lb.) and 23 heifers averaged 616 lb. That’s with the benefit of creep-fed soy hulls, but the calves get most of their nutrition from their dams and the ryegrass, ladino clover, Bahia grass, Dallis grass and Bermuda grass pastures. Stephens put a half-ton of soy hulls in the creep feeder in early March and still had half 60 days later.

As an indicator of directional change, he reports calves from first-calf heifers had higher adjusted 205-day weights than those from his mature cows.

Stephens plans to continue the herd makeover.

“One of these days we’ll retain ownership again,” he says. “If the feeder-cattle market is weak when I normally sell my calves, I want to feel confident I can send my cattle to the feedyard, hit the quality target and get the premiums that go with it. We’re getting close, but we’ve got a few more cows that are just one generation away from Limousin that would probably produce Select calves.”

