

# Minding Their P's and Q's

Young Illinois breeders driven by passion and quality.

by Barb Baylor Anderson



PHOTO BY PRAIRIE CREEK ANGUS

► Lee Stremsterfer of Pleasant Plains, Ill., appreciates the people in the Angus business, saying they contribute to his management skills. The Stremsterfers focus on meeting commercial customer needs.

Lee Stremsterfer's first word as a toddler was "cow." Now, at age 31, the Pleasant Plains, Ill., Angus breeder can't imagine any other way of life or livelihood. Driven by passion for the Angus breed and raising top-quality cattle, Stremsterfer and other young Illinois Angus producers with similar backgrounds are making a successful go of the business.

"I have had a lifelong passion for cattle and a sincere interest in making the Angus breed better," says Stremsterfer, who with his father, Norman; his brother, Travis; and their respective wives operate Prairie Creek Angus. The family raises kids, cattle, corn, soybeans and club pigs and has a Pioneer® seed dealership.

"The Angus business started out as a 4-H project with heifers from the Lamoine Valley Angus Association Sale and grew from there," he relates. "I was active in livestock judging in college, attended Lakeland College and graduated from Kansas State [University] (K-State) in 1998 with an animal science degree. At that time, I bought 17 cow-calf pairs from Mill Brae Ranch in Maple Hill, Kan., and brought the cattle and a wife back to Illinois."

## Concentrate on quality

The Stremsterfers focus on meeting commercial customer needs.

"Our goal is to have the best cow herd we can. If we can accomplish that, we will be profitable and around for the long-term to provide genetics for commercial operations," he says. "We focus our breeding and management on fertility, quality, performance and ultimately carcass traits. We want high-producing females and males — they are equally important to our success."

Stremsterfer has found that quality Angus cattle sell themselves, because commercial producers have seen that Angus genetics can help them be profitable. Prairie Creek bulls are marketed through the Seedstock Plus program, along with the Western Illinois University bull

test, Illinois Beef Expo and Illinois Angus Futurity. Females are also sold through the Illinois Angus Futurity as well as through other consignment sales.

"Everyone in the industry knows the good reputation of Angus cattle. The Angus mother is the best in America. She calves and breeds back well, which means easier management for us. The Angus breed sets the standard for efficiency and carcass traits, and both are becoming more important," he says. "Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) has a major impact on the way people view and accept our breed. As Angus breeders, we must remember that we are asked by the consumer to provide a pleasurable eating experience."

Stremsterfer appreciates the people in the Angus business, saying they contribute to his management skills. He is a director on the Illinois Angus Association board, and he and wife Stacy serve as secretary-treasurer for the Lamoine Valley Angus Association.

"The people you meet are invaluable. You can go to Denver or Louisville, and you'll have a tough time getting through the barn in one day," Stremsterfer says. "There are so many good people to stop and meet."



Angus breeders are a class act, and you can always learn something from the older breeders.”

While so many top breeders are a plus for the industry as a whole, Stremsterfer and other producers note that also presents stiff competition for young breeders.

“Having spent three and a half years in the commercial industry managing a large cow herd, I have a better grasp on what the commercial producer needs. You have to find a niche and demonstrate to commercial producers that every Angus breeder is different,” he says. “And if you run across someone that has not had a good experience with Angus seedstock, you need to change their mind. We also, as an industry, need to be tougher with our knives so we keep the best quality cattle out there.”

### **Carve a market niche**

Finding a niche is exactly what drove Joel York, Palestine, Ill., to the Angus business. The 28-year-old producer is involved with a family-owned operation with his father, Robert. York Farms was a commercial cattle and crops operation until 1996, when Joel purchased their first purebred heifer for a 4-H project.

“We got into the Angus business because we wanted something that offered a premium and better demand than just the sale barn could provide. With the numbers we could run, we needed a specialty besides local sales,” he says. “We had seen what the breed had to offer through our Angus-Hereford crosses, and the Angus people were all top-notch.”

York attended Lakeland College and then got a degree in animal science from Illinois State University. He also became certified as an artificial insemination (AI) technician. Today he serves on the Illinois Angus Association and county Farm Bureau boards and is the local 4-H beef superintendent.

“We have expanded our herd to 60 with spring and fall calving and embryo transfer (ET),” he says. “Most of our bull customers are commercial people, and we sell females to seedstock producers. We are part of the Land of Lincoln Angus Female Sale the first Sunday in November, consign to other sales and offer cattle through private treaty.”

In meeting the needs of customers, York finds they must offer a variety of animals.

“We cover everything from calving ease to growth to meet everyone’s needs. We have different bulls for different customers,” he says. “We have commercial customers that ask us to pick out the bulls in our herd that will work in their herds. Many ask us to give them what they need and tell them what genetics will work for them.”

York Farms also offers services they hope set them apart from other breeders. They participate in Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) and AngusSource®, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process Verified Program (PVP) offered through the American Angus Association, and advertise in specific publications to promote bulls they have for sale. Once the Yorks market a bull, they offer semen checks, provide guarantees and other services to try to build a base of repeat customers.

“As an industry we need to remember that most of our customers are commercial producers, and we should spend some time on the nuts and bolts of all the numbers out there. We don’t want information overload,” York says. “I would like to see us concentrate on what they can and do understand about EPDs (expected progeny differences) and how to use them. Angus is the most progressive breed to supply both the commercial cattle industry and the retail meat business, and we want to maintain that position over other breeds.”

### **Consider advice of veterans**

Kevin Rose, 30, Rosewood Cattle Co., Salem, Ill., would agree. His family’s cattle operation has had experience with a variety of breeds and breed programs.

“My grandfather, Herschel, started out with a small herd of Shorthorns in 1944. Over the years we have had every size, shape and color of cattle on our farm. I received my first Angus heifer as a Christmas gift in 1990, and from then on we found Angus to be the most productive and profitable,” he says. “It wasn’t until 1998, when I found old registrations with the Rosewood name, that we started using it as our herd prefix.”

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his dad, Jim. Many nieces, nephews, his stepmother and sisters also help. Currently, the operation includes 70 registered spring- and fall-calving cows and 1,200 acres of row crop farmland.

Rose attended Lakeland College and then, like Stremsterfer, graduated from K-State with an animal science degree and experience in livestock judging. Unlike the other two young Illinois leaders, Rose went to work for another operation. Rose worked for Champion Hill in Bidwell, Ohio, for three and a half years before returning home.

"Paul Hill helped me learn a great deal about the industry, and his knowledge and history of the breed provided a great experience," he says. "Living away from home was a great stepping-stone and opened the door for our program. Not only did I get to travel and meet the breed's top producers, I got to see firsthand how different operations work."

Junior Angus activities attracted Rose to the industry and today remain a significant influence on his business.

"The junior program sparked my interest in the industry, and I want to help others

do the same," he says. "The National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) is the best program out there. I've been every year since 1993 and encourage juniors that purchase cattle from us to attend. The show allows us more time with kids and their families, so we can give everyone a hand and help kids learn to clip and fit their projects."

The Roses market most of their cattle private treaty and to primarily repeat customers. Kevin terms southern Illinois, "a tough market," so for the last four years the operation has partnered with a ranch in Nebraska to market their bulls at weaning. Moving bulls in the fall allows more time for show prospects and sales preparation.

"The hardest part of a small family operation is that we can't compete in volume, only quality and service. Our program is focused on balanced-trait cattle that still have eye appeal," he says. "We try and 'keep up with the Joneses' through collecting ultrasound data and keeping AHIR records. We have to stay on top of our game to be competitive in such a fast-paced business. The days of just having a paper and calf are long gone."

## Focus on the future

While these young breeders may not have been in business full time for long, they all have suggestions for other newcomers to the industry.

"We need to work through our association to keep commercial producers educated about EPDs and how they can use them," Stremsterfer says. "As Angus breeders, we need to keep everything in balance with traits to keep our cows where they need to be."

York encourages others to ask questions of veteran breeders.

"If you don't ask, you can't learn. Don't be intimidated. People are always willing to help," he says. "Be respectful of those who have been in the business longer than you, and consider their advice on how best to get things done, and then make it work for your operation."

"As the Angus industry evolves, we need to look back at where we have been and what has gotten us there," Rose summarizes. "Take the time to help new juniors learn to carry the torch from where we leave off. That is how this business can continue to prosper."

