



Pushing Quality

These Iowa cattle know how to eat and grade.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*

Blake Crawford's Angus calves start out gaining more than 2.5 pounds (lb.) per day on the cow, and that's just the beginning. They keep gaining faster on more and better feed until realizing their quality potential — typically more than 50% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance at 12 to 14 months of age.

Blake, who farms in partnership with his dad and brother, manages the family's cattle

enterprise near Adair, Iowa. He says feeding cattle aggressively is the key to selling loads of 100% Choice with very few yield grade (YG) issues. That's counter to the common idea that cattle need more time to grade.

"The more we push the cattle, the better the quality grade on them," Blake says. "Every day that a calf is lacking something nutritionally, it's probably hurting the end

quality grade, so they're pushed hard. We believe in that."

The 250 commercial and registered Angus females calve starting with heifers in late January and following with cows in March.

"We try to structure it so the heifers are bred before we go to the field in the spring, and the cows get bred after planting," Blake says. "It works pretty well for us that way."

His brother, Justin, manages the crop side of the operation, which includes 5,000 acres of corn and soybeans, plus hay. Their dad, Randy, is the second-generation Crawford on the farm. His primary role is manager of Adair Feed & Grain Co., a business that developed from the farm's needs. It now deals in nearly a dozen brands, including Pioneer® seed, Purina Mills feed and several lines of equipment. The whole family pitches in during busy seasons in all areas, from delivering seed corn to vaccinating calves.

Although breeding falls either side of planting, all the weaning happens in late August, just before harvest. That phase follows six months of quick growth on the cow and supplemented feed.

At the end of May or early June, calves are started on a diet of 80% corn and 20% Purina Mills Accuration®, which is provided until they weigh about 800 lb.



▶ "We enjoy feeding cattle and improving them every year," Blake says. "It's fun to get that end product and see improvement every year on those harvest sheets."

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“That takes some pressure off the cow, and it leads to higher weaning weights,” Blake notes. By the time calves come off pasture, they are weaning themselves off milk to creep, and the creep feeders follow them — literally. (For more details about the company’s suggested feeding program, see <http://cattle.purinamills.com/LifeStageFeeding/Calves>.)

“We pull those creep feeders into the lot with them. That’s one less area of stress,” Blake says. Meanwhile, the Crawfords can focus on crop harvesting.

When the corn is picked and the fields are worked, the calves are ready for the Purina Mills Impact® ration, which is 90% corn and 10% pellets. For increased intake, Blake often adds 2% ground hay, too. Calves learn to eat this from covered bunks as the last of their creep ration draws down.

“When the creep feeders go empty, we pull them out, and those cattle are flying,” Blake says.

“Guys will always question the economics of creep-feeding,” he says. “When you’re feeding your own cattle, throw that out the window, because it’s invaluable when you look at the end product.”

Quality improvement

The 800-head one-time-capacity feedyard accommodates more cattle than the Crawfords raise, so they tap into a supply from their genetic provider, Nichols Farms.

Dave Nichols, Bridgewater, Iowa, hosts two feeder calf sales each year for his customers.

“We’re able to take those calves we purchase and fit them right in with ours,” Blake says. “They’re uniform. If you didn’t know the tag numbers, you probably wouldn’t be able to pick them out.”

Last January, he placed 300 purchased calves on feed, and they weighed about 875 lb.

“My grandpa would kick me for saying this,” Blake admits, “because he believed in the old style of buying green calves, but green calves have been nearly starved. How good of quality can they really be if they were nutritionally deficient any day in their life?”

He appreciates calves that have been creep-fed.

“I’m not afraid to buy them, because they know how to eat,” Blake says. “When they get to my place, they’re going to be pushed hard, and I don’t want something that can’t handle the feed.”

Skipping the backgrounding phase makes sense to Nichols.

“If you look at any other aspect of agriculture, whether it’s poultry or swine or corn or wheat, it’s maximum production throughout the whole system,” he says.

Blake compares it to crop farming.

“You don’t withhold nitrogen from a corn plant for 30 days for compensatory gain or delay water from the root of a soybean plant,” he says. “It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Blake Crawford says feeding cattle aggressively is the key to selling loads of 100% Choice with very few yield grade (YG) issues.

So the Crawfords keep the animals on that rising plane of nutrition, feeding the purchased calves with their own for another three to four months and then grid-marketing them in March, April and May.

“Across the whole herd last year, pounds from weaning to finish, we were at a 3.7 average daily gain with no implants,” Blake says, noting the average is for both steers and heifers. Those steady gains across the calves’ lives, coupled with good care and genetic potential on the front end, helps them triple the industry average for CAB brand acceptance.

A load of last year’s heifers went 100% Choice and 50% CAB with only two YG 4s.

A change in quality

When Blake graduated from Iowa State University in 1998 and returned to the farm, he began obtaining carcass data. Their first try on the grid showed about 10% CAB.

“That was before these intake modifiers and before we knew how to really push these cattle and not hurt them any,” he says.

Randy gives his son the credit for getting the herd on the quality track.

“He’s done really well with the cow herd and brought it as far as it is,” the elder Crawford says, adding that in the past they didn’t feed them as hard all the way through. “The genetics were there ahead of us getting to the place where we knew how to do it.”

For eight years, those genetics have come from some of the top-selling purebred Angus bulls Nichols has had to offer.

“They made some dramatic improvement in two or three years with a combination of genetics and management,” Nichols says. “They pay attention to genetics, and then they feed for the genetics they’ve got. There’s no sense putting diesel fuel in a racing engine.”

Blake says management started to line up with the genetic potential in 2000.

“Everything fell into place that year, and we started seeing improvement,” he says.



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“The faster we got rid of those older cows and kept more heifers, the better.” Today, the average age of their cow herd is younger than 5 years old.

“We’re just fine-tuning now,” Blake says. The use of expected progeny differences (EPDs) and artificial insemination (AI) has helped them to further refine target traits.

“I don’t keep any heifers back that ratio under 100 for adjusted 205-day weaning weight, so we’re selecting for growth,” he says. “We’re selecting for fertility, because those cattle are bred early; and then we’re selecting for carcass on top of that. We’re trying to find a fit for all of those traits, and hopefully we’re getting superior cattle when we do that.”

All of the heifers are AIed once, along with 30 or 40 of the best cows. Some of those top females include the small registered herd that Blake has started from buying Nichols’ heifers.

“I don’t treat a commercial cow any different than I’d treat a registered Angus cow, because we’re still selling a product,” he says. “Sure, it might not go into someone else’s herd and affect 40 of those animals,

but one person who has a bad beef-eating experience is one less customer.”

That philosophy helps drive culling decisions.

“We strive for a consistent product. I hope every calf that comes out of there is 100% CAB and YG 2,” he says. “When you’re breeding, you want the sons to go in and be killed at 10 months, and you want the daughter to be 10 years old and still have a calf.”

Longevity is important, especially as they look to the possibility of marketing

replacement females in the future. Coupling proven herd history with carcass ultrasound on the heifers could prove valuable.

“If it becomes profitable to sell bred animals with carcass data to back them up, then that will give buyers a full picture of what they’re getting,” Blake says. Those who buy his cows already get that full picture because such information accompanies the cull cows they market at the local sale barn.

“If you know all this about the bull and nothing about the cows, what’s the point?” he asks.

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