

Quality Has No BOUNDARIES

An Iowa study shows Southeastern cattle can hold their own with those from the Midwest.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**



It's no secret. Southeastern calves generally aren't at the top of feedlots' most-wanted lists. Breaking news: Feedlot operators, especially those interested in quality, might want to rewrite their lists.

In a recent study, Darrell Busby, Iowa State University (ISU) Extension beef specialist, compared data from 27,538 calves in the Iowa-based Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF). All were preconditioned for at least 28 days before shipment to the feedlots. Comparing source of origin, Southeastern calves were treated 5.54% less (see Table 1).

The USDA Choice percentage was the same as that for Midwestern calves, but the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance rate was greater by 2.55 percentage points for the Southeastern calves, which beat their Midwestern contemporaries in net returns by \$11.32 per head.

"Yes, I was surprised," Busby says. "There is a belief in the industry that Southeastern calves don't grade as well. But the black-hided cattle from the Southeast produced a higher percent of CAB carcasses than those from the Midwest."



► Miller, Lula, Ga., likes cows and bulls that have the potential to make CAB.

The Southern calves were also older and heavier when they got to the feedlots, he notes, and that could help explain their better health.

Not surprised

However, Patsie Cannon isn't the least surprised. Having worked with the Georgia Beef Challenge for nine years, she's seen the quality the state's producers have been sending to Iowa.

"Just look at the results of our calves in the 2006 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). One of our pens took first-place honors," says the University of Georgia Extension program coordinator.

"Our producers do their homework," Cannon says. "They study their genetics and try to determine what actions they should take as far as quality grades."

Bobby Miller is a case in point. He's sent anywhere from 10 to 30 calves a year to the Georgia Beef Challenge since its beginning in 1991-1992. Normally, 80%-90% of the cattle from his Angus-based herd grade Choice. In the 2006-2007 Georgia Beef Challenge, 11 of his calves qualified for the CAB premium.

► **Left:** Bobby Miller's replacement heifers have the potential to produce calves that qualify for CAB®.

"I've been breeding for carcass quality for a long time," says the Lula, Ga., producer. "We had a small slaughterhouse for 15 years, until 1989. And Millard Braswell, who buys our calves, has preached carcass quality since the '70s."

Braswell, who used to feed Miller's cattle on his own Athens, Ga., operation, now acts as an agent for Wilson Livestock Marketing, where Miller sells his cattle by the semi-trailer load.

To put the preaching into practice, Miller buys top-quality Angus bulls for his 150-head cow herd. "We've used performance-tested or known-pedigree bulls forever. But seven or eight years ago, we decided to start buying even better bulls.

"We breed for the ability to grade Choice at a very young age, and the size of the ribeye," Miller says. "Those contradict each other, so I depend on the breeders I buy bulls from to help me pick the right ones. They know more about it than I do."

He is currently buying bulls of a particular cow line from Georgia breeder Harvey Lemmon.

"I guess I am kind of targeting CAB, because the bulls and cows I like have the ability to make CAB," Miller remarks.

The proof is in the TCSCF sire list, ranked by which sires add the most value to their calves. "One of Bobby's sires has consistently been at the top," Cannon says.

Proof in the people

Although he is relatively new to the program, Castlewood, Va., cattleman Scott White is another producer who is helping change the reputation of Southeastern calves. He's had cattle since 1991 but didn't start sending calves to TCSCF through Virginia's retained ownership program until 2004. During the same period, he started making the switch from a Gelbvieh/Simmental/Brahman herd to a black baldie herd with Angus sires.

"We went with Angus because of their ability to grade," he says.

"In '06 we got our first test results back from Iowa," White adds. "I decided we needed a very consistent herd. So I've been buying like-kind, very closely related Angus to replenish our Angus herd." Futurity data helps build the consistency.

"We're still several years away from where we want to be," he says, "but we're finding we are getting the right idea. The program has shown that even on our common cows, [using] good bulls and AI (artificial insemination) is working."

Common ground

While Darrell Busby, Iowa State University (ISU) Extension beef specialist, was a bit surprised by the ability of the Southeastern calves to grade, he isn't surprised by the quality-oriented attitude of producers like Bobby Miller and Scott White. Whether they are from the Southeast or Midwest, he says he's found that producers who participate in retained ownership programs have common characteristics.

- The first thing they learn is they are financially responsible for the calves they deliver. That is an incentive for them to do the right thing.
- They are generally early adopters of genetic evaluation tools. They buy bulls from bull test stations and use expected progeny differences (EPDs).
- They use a team of advisors. They listen to Extension people, veterinarians and their pharmaceutical representative or feed dealer. They bounce ideas off them and ask how they can improve.
- They castrate, vaccinate, dehorn and precondition. Management practices don't have any boundaries. Producers in southwest Georgia can do those as well as somebody in Iowa.
- They also believe in working and sharing information with other producers. Their attitude is: If it can help somebody else, they'll share it.

Table 1: Effect of region of origin on performance and profit of 27,538 calves in the Iowa-based Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity

Item	Southeast	Midwest
No. of head	18,228	9,310
Arrival wt., lb.	640.9	629.6
Delivery age, days	324.3	252.9
Final wt., lb.	1,175.9	1,183.4
Overall avg. daily gain, lb.	3.17	3.22
Morbidity rate, %	15.22	20.76
Treatment cost, \$/head	5.01	7.38
Mortality rate, %	1.43	1.76
Hot carcass wt., lb.	724.2	728.6
Fat cover, in.	0.44	0.43
Ribeye area, sq. in	12.32	12.47
Calculated YG	2.84	2.78
% YG 1&2	58.57	63.53
% YG 3	39.39	34.95
% YG 4&5	2.04	1.52
% Prime	1.14	1.01
% Choice	67.94	69.28
% Select	28.33	27.22
% Standard	2.59	2.48
% CAB	21.57 ^a	19.02 ^b
Profit, \$/head	48.63 ^a	37.31 ^b

^{a,b}P<0.001.

Market value at home determined by USDA AMS Market Reporter.

Trucking bill charged to each calf based on feedlot arrival weight.

Value of dead cattle and expenses included in profit analysis.

The last set of cattle White finished graded approximately 75% Choice and 20% CAB.

"We're working toward CAB because of the premium," he says. "We now have all black-hided cattle, and the ones from our black baldie herd are one-half to three-quarters Angus. We want to get as many in the program as we can."

Still, even though he is focusing on the ability to grade Choice, and hopefully make CAB, that is the No. 2 goal for his 360-head

cow herd. Not surprisingly, with the current cost of feed, he says, "Our number one goal is feed efficiency. And this year we'll probably graze longer before we send them to the feedlot."


To help reach his goals, White uses a team approach.

"We work closely with our vet and vet supply person," he explains. "We try to use the latest and best products. On feed

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and genetics, we work with Virginia Tech, especially with [Extension beef specialist] Scott Greiner. They do a good job there. We also have a top-notch local Extension person. What he can't answer he finds out. And I try to read as much as I can."

White credits Busby for "a world of information," and the Iowa cattle feeders have been helpful. "But it is a slow process, especially if you want something consistent," he adds.

Slow process or not, Busby says Southeastern producers like Miller and White are proof that it's the people behind the cow herds, not location, that make for quality cattle. "Quality knows no boundaries," he emphasizes. 

Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity

While it might seem strange to some that steers and heifers from Florida share bunk space with those from Minnesota, it is business as usual for the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF).

TCSCF started in 1982 when 35 Iowa cattle producers consigned 106 calves to identify the most profitable steer in the feedlot. Now, 10 board members oversee cattle fed at 12 Southwest Iowa feedlots. But these are no longer just Iowa steers. In the last seven years, 40,000 head of steers and heifers from 15 states have gone through the program.

Many of the cattle come to TCSCF through their state's "pasture to rail" program. Busby and his team, along with the feedlot operators, collect data on everything from disposition to feedlot gain and carcass quality, all to help producers do a better job of managing their home operations.

Even when the commodity stars don't line up for a per-head profit, Lula, Ga., cattleman Bobby Miller is a firm believer in the concept. He's been participating in TCSCF through the Georgia Beef Challenge for more than 15 years.

"When I send cattle to the Beef Challenge," he says, "I gather information, plus I get cash-flow distribution."

Castlewood, Va., producer Scott White is another fan of his state's retained ownership program and its relationship with TCSCF. Although he also feeds cattle on his own, he says, "I get so much more data through the Virginia program. Anybody in the cattle business needs to be sending a few every year."