

Ready for FRONT PASTURE



Texas ranchers see multiple benefits to the Angus breed.

by *Miranda Reiman*

The first Angus bulls on the Clayton Ranch, near Bryson, Texas, were hidden in the “back 40.” Ken and Kirk Clayton’s dad was afraid of what his father, a long-time Hereford rancher, would think when he came home with the new breed. But it wasn’t long before the entire herd was converted.

“When he weighed those black baldie calves, they weighed more and were of superior quality,” Ken Clayton says. Since the late 1950s, the fourth-generation ranch has been predominantly Angus.

“Angus is the best beef breed, and I don’t see that changing,” Clayton says.

The brothers took the reins when their father died in 1975. The ranch has grown to include a 440-cow herd, split into nearly equal-sized fall- and spring-calving groups. That allows for efficient use of resources and spreads marketings.

Around 200 females are artificially inseminated (AIed) each year, using CIDR® and a shot of Lutalyse® to synchronize the heifers. The Claytons watch for heat and get a 50%-55% conception rate on the heifers. They get an 80%-85% conception rate on the cows without synchronization.

The fall heifers that don’t breed the first time join the spring herd, where they are pasture-bred to calve at 30 months of age.

“We feel like we can use superior genetics and improve our herd by using AI,” Clayton

says. The first breeding goals included adding frame along with maternal characteristics, like milking ability and efficient reproduction.

“Now, we’re starting to use bulls with the high-value carcass traits,” he says. “By maintaining our selection for maternal traits, we’re adding value to our calves for the next buyer.”

Equal exchange

Clayton uses a lot of Donnell Cattle Co. and Wehrmann Angus genetics in both his AI program and natural service sires.

“We hope we’re improving our calves every year,” Clayton says. “Tommy

(Donnell) has been real helpful to us. He’s so knowledgeable in all the bloodlines and pedigrees. We’ve leaned on him for advice in what direction to go.”

Donnell says the Claytons have been good students and are qualified to teach lessons on their own. Before this spring’s bull sale, the men went over the sale book and picked out bulls together.

“Ken said, ‘You know what, we’ve used AI and this is what we have. Let’s mark some bulls that fit our criteria that would not be closely related to our program,’” Donnell recalls. “He asked lots of good questions, logical questions.”

The exchange keeps both sides focused on balance.

That’s especially important to the Claytons, who look to return buyers for both their steer and heifer crops. The AI-sired heifers out of the fall herd are kept for replacements, and the rest have been sold for 10 years to one ranch for the same purpose. Heifers out of the spring herd join other breeding programs as replacements.

“After we got our cattle big-enough-framed, we just tried to look at bulls like EXT that could put some maternal quality and milk into these cows,” Clayton says. “That has kind of taken care of itself.”



PHOTOS BY STEVE SOUTHER

► At first, the Claytons used AI to emphasize maternal traits. “Now, we’re starting to use bulls with the high-value carcass traits,” says Ken Clayton.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 146



► The Claytons look to return buyers for both their steer and heifer crops. The AI-sired heifers out of the fall herd are kept for replacements, and the rest have been sold for 10 years to one ranch for the same purpose. Heifers out of the spring herd join other breeding programs as replacements.

An eye on the feedlot

While keeping reproductive and maternal traits in line, the Claytons have had an eye on what the cattle feeders want. That's evidenced by the fact the same Iowa farming family

purchased all of their steer calves for nearly 30 years — an arrangement halted only by health problems on the purchaser's end.

For the past six years, cattle feeder Bud Hill, Dimmitt, Texas, has been a repeat buyer

of the calves weaned both in October and June.

"They're good Angus cattle," says Hill, who actively recruits the higher-quality kind. Hill sells most of his finished cattle on a value-based grid and appreciates the chance to buy the Claytons' calves year after year while the product keeps improving.

"They're nice people to do business with," he says.

The group carcass data on finished cattle shows an ability to grade 85%-90% Choice or better. To understate it, Clayton says, "They've been hanging real well on the rail."

Donnell says the Claytons' success comes from a number of factors.

"They've substituted good genetics for heterosis and made a lot of progress that way," he says. "They appreciate good genetics."

Then it's how they care for the herd. Careful management, health and nutrition makes the most of good breeding.

"If I had a ranch and I was just going to pitch somebody the checkbook and say, 'Here, you run it,' the Claytons are the guys I'd pick," Donnell says. "They're just that good."

From the back 40 to the front pasture on the edge of town, this Texas Angus herd not only works, but now produces some of the most sought-after cattle in their region.

