



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

Risk Leads to Reward

Find out what you're missing, Oklahoman says.

by *Chelsea Good*

In fall 2006, corn prices shot through the roof, and the feeder market took a big hit.

Monte Tucker, a fourth-generation Sweetwater, Okla., rancher, had a group of Angus-sired calves he didn't want to sell at those prices. So, he took a chance and retained ownership for the first time. Little did he know the results would change the way he conducts business.

"If I had just sent them to the feedlot and sold them on a liveweight basis, it would've been a breakeven deal," Tucker says. "But being able to age- and source-verify them, and the fact they were Angus genetics, put me over the top. So I decided to take the leap."

Tucker sent the group to Cattleman's Choice Feedyard, a Certified Angus Beef

LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Gage, Okla. Although Tucker hadn't fed cattle there before, owner Dale Moore encouraged him to retain ownership after he saw the cattle.

Moore visited Tucker's ranch and looked at the cow herd. He advised Tucker to retain at least partial ownership to get the most value out of his quality, preconditioned calves.

He pointed out that age and source verification can bring in an easy \$25-per-head premium. That's money often left on the table, Moore says, because many producers already keep all the needed records.

But, that isn't the only benefit Moore sees in retaining ownership.

"The genetic quality and the preconditioning producers do at home can go down the drain if they just haul the cattle to the sale barn," he says. On the other hand, higher bids mean something, too. "Monte's cattle had been topping the market for a good reason."

Sale-barn buyers spend a bit more for quality calves, even without knowing the specifics, Moore allows. However, he says, many small-scale producers like Tucker don't realize full value that way.

"If your cattle top the market at \$3 a hundredweight (cwt.) more than your neighbor's cattle, and they weigh 700 pounds (lb.), that's \$20," Moore says. He knows there is more than \$20 worth of added value in many good calves. Tucker found out firsthand.

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► Monte Tucker says his first retained-ownership experience has led to a little more focus on carcass quality, because he can capture more value in the feedlot than by selling stockers. Dottie, the blue merle cow dog, keeps Tucker company and helps as needed when he's out checking cows.

The results

The 75 head Tucker fed at Cattleman's Choice averaged more than 30% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and USDA Prime. Selling in three sort groups helped hit the grid target: One load of 21 steers went 57.1% CAB and 9.5% Prime.

"That \$132-per-head premium (at Tyson Fresh Meats) really made a difference in our overall profit," Tucker says.

Beyond the financial benefit, he says, it's exciting to get data back and learn that he's producing the quality that consumers demand. He knows quality is the consumer's No. 1 concern, and it's something he wants for himself as well, literally.

"I was kind of jealous when I had two go Prime," Tucker says. "I wouldn't have minded having those on my own plate."

The results surprised Tucker, who claims no secret recipe for hitting the quality mark. However, his seedstock producer, Greg Mouse of Elk City, Okla., offers some insight.

"Monte has done an exceptional job of management from conception on," Mouse says. "Reaching quality is a chain of events; if there was a lapse at any step during the process, there's no way he could have reached that high CAB acceptance rate."

Future plans

After the rookie cattle-feeding experience, Tucker says he's hooked.



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"Now that Monte bit the bullet and kept a set, he wouldn't sell them to me if I had to buy them," Moore says. "With the numbers he got back, I expect he'll retain ownership forever."

Well, nobody can see quite that far ahead, but the next generation was on feed in November 2007, and Tucker can hardly wait to get the results.

"The data will help define my top 10 and bottom 10 cows," he says. He intends to cull the bottom 10 and keep heifers out of the

top half. That's how he'll target carcass traits through carcass data and expected progeny differences (EPDs) in bull selection.

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Mouse and Moore encourage cow-calf producers they work with to retain ownership. Like Tucker, many of them don't really know what they have.

"Either the producer needs to realize the extra value along the way, or the packer will realize it all at the end," Mouse says. Now, Tucker is partnering with Mouse to get that message out to other producers.

"Monte is just as excited as I am to try and win over other commercial producers," Mouse says. They have even talked about ways to share that story of finding unrealized value at his next bull sale.

Tucker wants others to know retaining ownership isn't nearly as difficult as popular opinion suggests. His ranch philosophy of keeping it simple by using quality genetics and sound management practices set him up for excellence in the feedlot without any extra steps.

"If a producer has been selecting good Angus bulls for several years, and they have a decent cow herd that they retain back to, I'd recommend they take a chance and send cattle to the feedlot," Tucker says. "They should at least try it in partnership and see what happens. There's no need for the order buyers to have all the fun."

