

Solutions to the Puzzle

Data, observation, trial and invention lead to answers for West Virginia family.

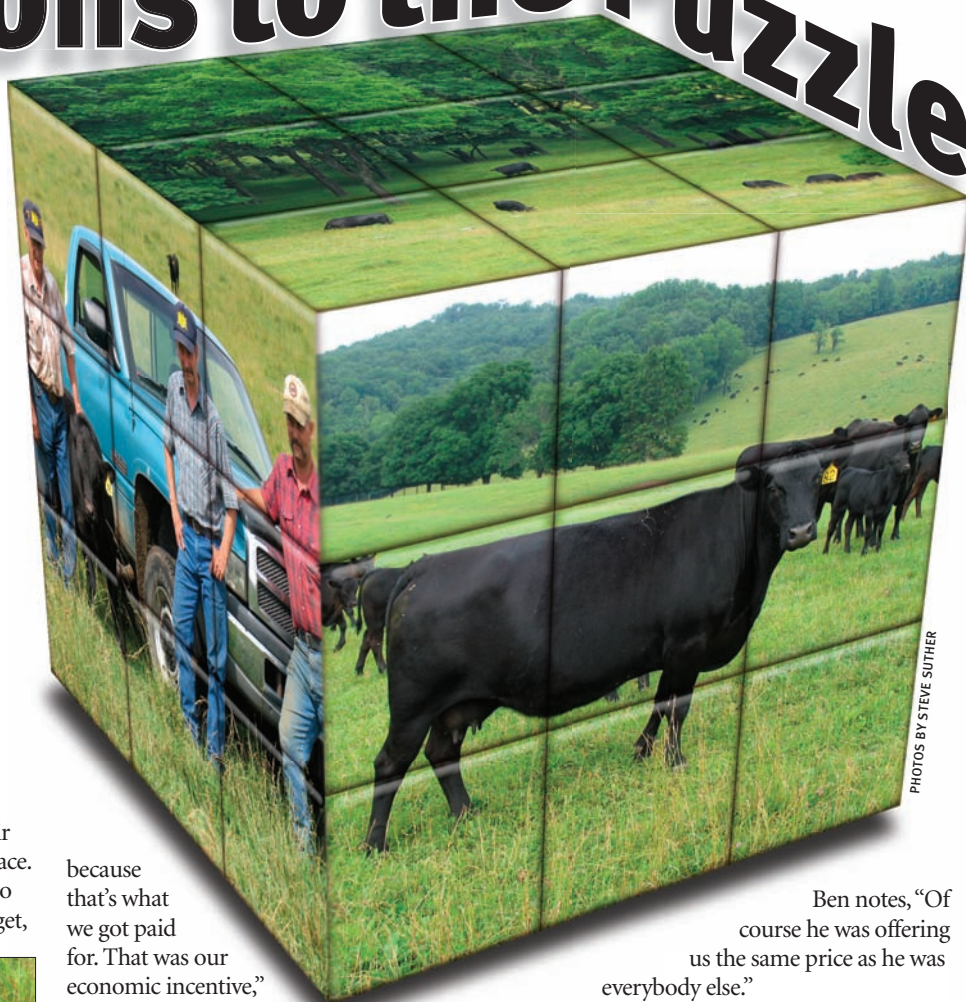
by *Miranda Reiman*

Finding the right combination of maternal and carcass traits can be like solving a complex puzzle, but the Tuckwiller family has a strategy for their Triple T Angus herd.

"I liken it to working on a Rubik's Cube®," Byron Tuckwiller says. "If you just work for one side, you'll destroy it fast. The trick is bringing all six together at once."

Twenty years ago, Sam Tuckwiller and his sons Byron and Ben added a registered Angus side to their cattle operation near Lewisburg, W.Va. Since then, they have made adjustments and turns, tracking their progress as the pieces started to fall into place.

"Our philosophy to begin with was to go with the biggest yearling weight we could get,



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

because that's what we got paid for. That was our economic incentive," Ben says. "Then we started getting some heavy birth weights, and we saw that there was economic incentive to get lower birth weights. It really wasn't until we put cattle on feed that we saw the economic importance of carcass traits."

In 1998, the Tuckwillers started feeding the steers from their 200-head commercial Angus herd. Most of their nine-year feeding history has been at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Gregory Feedlots near Tabor, Iowa.

"That was a jump for us to change our marketing scheme at the time, but it worked out pretty good," Ben says of their first year retaining ownership. "The cattle gained better than average."

"The local order buyer here was disappointed he was losing that supply of cattle," Byron says. "We just needed to get a handle on what the cattle were, so we could know where to go with them and how to produce better cattle. He came back and said, 'Well, I believe you're all right.'"

Ben notes, "Of course he was offering us the same price as he was everybody else."

Feeding their cattle helps the father-sons trio discover the true value of their calves, which typically grade 85% Choice and at least 30% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®). Early challenges were heavy carcasses and Yield Grade (YG) 4s.

"The feeder had to learn a little bit about how to feed these cattle," Ben says. "They were getting pretty big, and they weren't looking like fat Angus cattle. We have a lot of growth in our cattle, and they got big without getting patchy."

David Trowbridge, Gregory Feedlots manager, says the cattle do finish out at a heavier weight than the feedlot typically sees with straight-Angus cattle.

"Once we fed them a couple of times, we knew where to project the cattle to finish," he says. "We were able to market the cattle better, more consistently once we had that track record with them."

Investing in good genetics

Uniformity from year to year helps.



► Byron Tuckwiller scratches TTT Fusion 649, or "Franklin" as he is affectionately known. Probably the biggest pet in this unusually gentle herd, he sold to a customer who participates in the Triple T buyback program. "Hopefully, we can continue to receive data on the bull's progeny in the feedlot for some time to come," Ben adds.

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"They'll run a very high percentage of Choice and CAB cattle very consistently," Trowbridge says. Performance numbers also run above average, with last year's average daily gain (ADG) nearing 3.5 pounds (lb.) per day and feed conversions at about 6 lb. of feed per lb. of gain. "They've been great cattle to feed, great people to deal with."

After learning what their own cattle would do, the Tuckwillers were ready to find out how their bull customers' calves stacked up.

"Every time we sell a bull here, we ask them what they do with their calves," Ben says. "We ask if they would be interested in having us bid on those calves at the market without them having to haul them to market."

The Tuckwillers retain ownership on calves from their own herd and typically put together a few loads of purchased customer cattle to feed in partnership with the feedlot.

"Communication throughout the segments of the industry is vitally important," Ben says. "We have a good line of communication with (the) Gregorys and that's helpful to our situation."

One message they are trying to get across is end product value.

"All the cow-calf guy cares about is his profit at weaning," Ben says. "That's been a problem because genetic selection occurs at the cow-calf level. The only incentive they realize is weaning weights."

The Tuckwillers are trying to make sure their customers see the importance of investing in good genetics that include both the maternal and carcass sides.

"That's why we're working to buy our customers' calves and taking particular care of people who buy bulls that are valuable," Ben says. "As long as we improve the quality of the bulls we sell, then the rest of the cattle will improve, too."

The informal buyback program has also allowed the family to enlarge their business.

"Around here, there's a lot of development going on, and there's very little chance for us to expand our acreage," Byron says. "For us to expand, cooperating with other producers looks like the avenue."

The 1,100 acres they do have is divided into bluegrass pasture and cropland, where they raise corn silage and alfalfa. The cows serve as brush control on the rocky, hilly land.

"What we really grow here is grass," Sam says. "We market grass through beef cattle."

The combination of registered and commercial herds totals 290 females on their acreage and a rented farm 4 miles away. The Tuckwillers retain about 25 of their registered bulls each year, keeping two and selling the rest

locally and across the border into Virginia. Heifers are wintered at the farm so they have ample time to select the "right" replacement heifers, Byron says.

The first 105 purebred cows to calve, along with 30 heifers, are artificially inseminated (AIed) each breeding season.

"We're trying to move the intervals as fast as we can," Byron says.

That's why Triple T Angus began last fall to consign and feed bulls for the Cattleman's Edge Bull Test and Sale. The previous year, in an effort to benchmark progress, they entered six bulls in a test at Wardensville, W.Va.

"On the 200-mile trip up to the sale," Byron says, "I was thinking, 'We ought to buy the high-marbling bull out of this sale.' It turned out to be ours."

So they bid and brought back TTT Ultralad 5130, with 7.52 %IMF (percent intramuscular fat) at 0.40 inch (in.) backfat and 15.2-square-inch (sq. in.) ribeye area (REA). Similarly, TTT Image 56 came home because his third-high %IMF and second-high REA fit Triple T's breeding needs with a \$46.05 beef value index (\$B). Moderation is key, though.

"When I go into a CAB steak house, I know that I'm not going to sit down and eat a 17-inch ribeye," Byron says.

It comes back to getting all sides of that Rubik's Cube lined up in a herd that produces high marbling, moderate ribeyes, calving ease, high weaning weights and docile, maternal females. It's not easy, but with patience and practice it's an attainable goal for the team at Tuckwillers' Triple T Angus.

BY



► Ben Tuckwiller operates Triple T Angus with his brother, Byron, and father, Sam. Twenty years ago, the family established a registered Angus side to their cattle operation located near Lewisburg, W.Va. Since then, they have made adjustments and tracked their progress, investing in both maternal and carcass genetics.

► The Tuckwillers have 290 females and retain about 25 of their registered bulls each year, keeping two and selling the rest. Heifers are wintered at the farm for selection of replacement heifers, and the first females to calve are AIed each breeding season, Byron says.

