

# The Herd That Feedback Built

Deep in the heart of Texas beats an Angus herd based on feeding and carcass data.

Story & photos by *Larry Stalcup*

**S**eventeen years of feeding at Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) feedlots has helped a Texas producer build a solid foundation. He figures selection for a high-quality carcass leads to a high-quality herd.

Michael Klein operates Windy Bar Ranch, an Angus seedstock operation near Stonewall, west of Austin, Texas. Every year he castrates up to half of his bulls and sends them to the feedyard, along with a number of heifers. The feedlot performance and harvest data help guide his herd management.

In some years, more than 60% of the calves have earned CAB acceptance from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) graders. Of 68 head fed in 2007, 43%

earned the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand.

"I want to sell breeding stock that I know can produce the calves that do well coming out of the feedlot," Klein says.

He maintains a "master data sheet," where he logs the performance of every animal placed on feed. Of more than 250 fed out since 1993, nearly 90 have made CAB, or about twice the national average. Nearly 65% have graded Choice.

Klein's family has ranched in the Hill Country in Gillespie County since 1858. His 150-year-old "Half Moon K" brand has seen Angus genetics throughout the years, but in 1983 Klein got serious about black and entered the registered Angus business.

When the CAB Value Discovery Project

(VDP) started in 1993, he was among the first to enter cattle. Talk about a reality check.

"I sent five head to the [Kansas] feedyard and two of them died," he says. "That's when I learned I needed a VAC [value-added calf] program."

He added a VAC-45 preconditioning phase to his operation, and the tables quickly turned. In 1995, his entries placed fifth in the VDP carcass merit category, fourth in retail yield and ninth in feedlot performance.

"That year, Texas had three out of the top five entries," Klein says. "We participated in the value discovery program all eight years of its existence."

The practice of managing herd genetics based on feedyard and harvest performance emerged from those years. Now, every sire or dam at Windy Bar comes from lines with calves that performed well on feed and on the rail.

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## Concentrating on cows

Klein fawns on females. More specifically, he monitors them and studies what their offspring tell him.

Data from every calf's feedyard and packer performance are entered into his "master data" Excel spreadsheet. There are at least 20 entries for each animal. Each calf's sire, dam, birth date, CAB tag number, dam's tag number, cow family, feeding in-weight, days on feed, harvest weight, average daily gain (ADG) and hot carcass weight are included.

Also logged are their age in days, marbling score, quality grade, back fat thickness, ribeye area, yield grade and CAB status, along with selling price if available.

"We have a closed cow herd," Klein says. "Every one of our 135 females was conceived, born and raised here. There are no 'trader' cows. This practice helps ensure consistency of herd genetics. We have a base cow herd with predictable genetics."

Klein tracks cow families with more diligence than some human genealogy projects. Each family has an identification (ID) number. "Those 250-plus animals we've fed out and collected carcass data on were out of 130 different cows in our herd," he says.

Of the top 15 performing steers, historically, nine were out of three cow families. "We emphasize reproductive efficiency," Klein adds. "We work to have Pathfinder® cows. We had 16 in the 2007 *Pathfinder Report* and 12 in the 2008 report. Whatever kind of bull a Pathfinder raises, that's the kind I want."

Sires in the Windy Bar program are also selected on carcass and feedyard performance data, of course. The same bull sired six of the top 15 steers.

If they don't sell at his annual spring sale, Klein keeps them for herd bulls, so "people can see that we trust our genetics," he says. It's an effective strategy: In a 2004 example, only one yearling bull passed through to work in the Windy Bar herd. When Klein put him in the 2005 sale, he was the high-selling bull.

Bulls get a breeding soundness examination (sometimes called a BSE) to analyze the entire reproductive tract. "We utilize EPDs [expected progeny differences] and ultrasound data in selection, but emphasize actual carcass data, not simply expected carcass traits," Klein stresses. "That's why we steer so many of our spring bulls to go on feed, to learn what they'll do."

## Feed 'em to know 'em

His first 16 years of feeding to identify CAB carcasses were through T-Bone Feeders



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Inc. of Goodland, Kan., about 800 miles away. "I use a CAB partner yard because of the focused management they provide," Klein says.

In 2007, he switched to Wheeler Feed Yard Inc., near Wheeler, Texas, an eastern Panhandle CAB yard about 350 miles closer to the ranch. Wheeler has been honored in recent years as both CAB Progressive Partner and Feedlot Partner of the Year.

"One reason I made the move was because of high transportation costs to Kansas," Klein explains. "But the Wheeler feedlot also specializes in source verification, which is an automatic \$25-per-head premium."

"That's the easiest \$25 we make," notes Don McCasland, co-owner of the yard with his son, Stacy. "We've been involved in source verification since the QSA [Quality Systems Assessment] program got started. It's easy; you just have to enter the first day born for the herd, since all calves are considered no older than that firstborn."

His son points out that the narrowed Choice-Select spread in early 2008 made it hard for many high-quality cattle to earn premiums. "But his (Klein's) kind of cattle can sure get it."

Noting the cattle arrive weighing about 600 pounds (lb.) rather than 750 lb., the younger McCasland says, "That helps produce yield and quality grades. His cattle performed really well this year. They were mostly high-Choice and did well on the grid."

## Marbling matters

The CAB program tends to emphasize marbling, because 93% of unsuccessful Angus cattle fall out because of its lack. Klein knows marbling spells tender, juicy flavor for consumers. And he doesn't buy the myth that it can weaken a cow herd.

"Marbling is very important. It's what the consumer wants for taste," he says. Klein also uses the GeneStar® DNA marker test

for tenderness, since that trait is not identified in beef grading. "It's working well for us," he adds.

Klein's preconditioning program aims to maintain quality by getting calves started on a ration "right off the cow." It consists of 40% corn, 40% coastal Bermuda

grass hay, and either peanut or cottonseed hulls. He's even started adding a little wet distillers' grain (WDG) from a local liquor distiller.

"The calves really go to it, even though overall it's still a high-roughage ration," he says.

Klein knows he can't produce calves that make CAB every time. "The main thing is overall consistency," he says. "You can make good money off a calf that grades Prime. But you can make more money on the group by not having any YG 4s."

"With the data we receive through our feeding program," Klein says, "we can mold our herd genetics to produce what our commercial customers want in their cattle and what consumers want on their plates."

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