



Twice the Work, Twice the Reward

Passionate about their seedstock program,
the Colyers transcend breed bias to deliver what their customers want.

Story & photos by Ed Haag

The Colyers have always paid attention to the demands of their market, even if it sometimes meant challenging the status quo.

In 1993, Ray Colyer and his son Guy decided to liquidate the last remnants of their commercial herd and add a registered Angus bull component to their very successful registered Hereford seedstock operation. This action was the cause of more than one raised eyebrow in southern Idaho's cattle community.

"Taking on another major breed wasn't as common as it is now," Guy says. "People back then seemed to be more locked into breed loyalty."

But for Ray and Guy, deciding to raise Angus bulls alongside their prize-winning Herefords wasn't a repudiation of the Hereford breed, but a response to the needs of their loyal commercial customers.

"We could see that the F₁ cross of the Angus and Hereford was able to fit all spectrums of the industry and that the benefits of heterosis are well-known to commercial beef producers around here," Guy says, noting that in the high-desert region of southern Idaho, northern Utah, northern Nevada and eastern Oregon, upward of 70% of the commercial calves produced are Angus-Hereford crosses.

For Kyle Colyer, the third generation to participate in the family operation, offering both Angus and Hereford animals at their annual bull sale is an important part of their family's customer service ethic.

"When bull sale season is going on, calving season is also going on," he says. "Many of our commercial customers don't have the time to go to several sales a year. It works really well for them to be able to come here and buy Hereford and Angus genetics under the same roof at the same time."

History of customer service

With more than 100 years of ranching

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history behind their family, the Colyers have not only survived, they have thrived in the beef business by providing their customers with what they needed to succeed.

As commercial calf producers, the Colyers responded to their buyers' requests by producing high-quality Hereford calves for harvest that more than met the expectations of their purchasers.

Then, in the 1970s, Ray and Guy saw a growing demand for high-performance bulls from proven bloodlines that could function in the rugged high-desert conditions. Guy had always had an interest in evaluating animal performance, but the scope of their commercial operation limited the practice.

"At the time, we were running on open range on large allotments," Guy says. "I just wanted to get a better handle on individual performance records."

In 1976, with that goal in mind, the Colyers decided to expand their ranch operation beyond their 700-cow commercial herd. "With the desire to raise a superior product, we decided to go into the registered business to fill the need for our commercial cattle as well as our customers," Guy recalls, noting that he believed he and his dad were particularly well-suited for the task of raising seedstock. "From our commercial experience we knew what kind of bulls were needed to perform in those conditions."

Even though the Colyers stopped raising commercial cattle in 1993, they have maintained their connection to their commercial roots through their seedstock cattle and the locations in which they are raised. Most of their cows are turned out on summer mountain ranges in the vicinity of Fairfield, Idaho, or in the Owyhee Mountains of southern Idaho.

In what could be described as "bull boot camp," each summer yearling bulls are put out on open range with the expectation they will learn to fend for themselves.

"Our bulls are expected to perform and hold up under the toughest of conditions," Guy says. "That is what our customers want and expect."

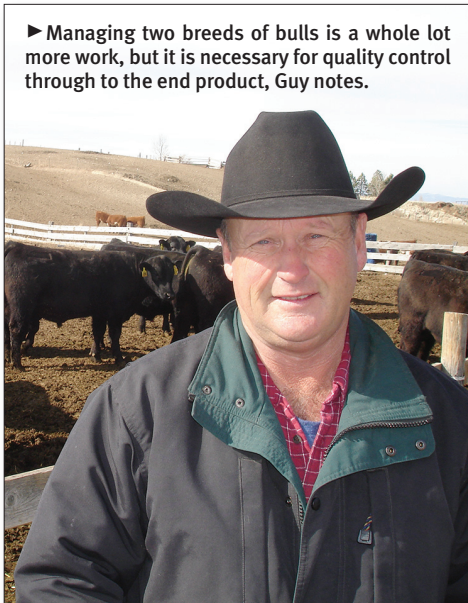
Brad Little, a commercial cattleman from Emmett, Idaho, sees himself as a beneficiary of Colyers' efforts to develop bulls with staying power. As a customer for the last three decades, he considers their track record for turning out tough, high-performing bulls exemplary.

"We didn't get one bull hurt this breeding season," he says. "With our rough country, badger holes and all, it is quite remarkable."

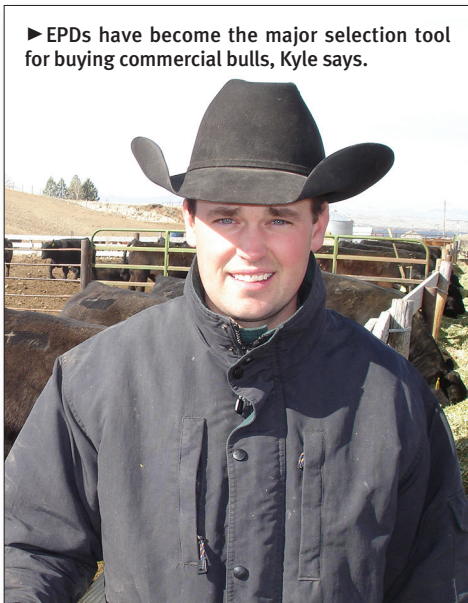
► Ray sees the beef business as a lot more demanding than it used to be.



► Managing two breeds of bulls is a whole lot more work, but it is necessary for quality control through to the end product, Guy notes.



► EPDs have become the major selection tool for buying commercial bulls, Kyle says.



Little believes that the quality of Colyer bulls is a direct reflection of the energy the family devotes to their bull development. "It is clear that Guy spends a whole lot of time with his bulls," Little says. "From how he plays golf, it is obvious that he doesn't spend it on improving his game."

No longer the same business

While longevity and performance still remain the gold standard of beef production in the often inhospitable high-desert country, Ray admits that much has changed in the industry since he and Guy managed their 700 head of commercial cattle.

He recalls a time, as a commercial calf producer in the 1960s, when buyers docked cattle that didn't look enough like the stereotypical Hereford. Ray notes that today's buyers have much more sophisticated criteria for determining the value of calves.

"Now they look at the individual animal and what kind of meat it will produce," Ray says. "They got it figured out right down to the bloodlines."

Kyle notes that as the calf buyers have grown more technical and exacting, so have the commercial calf producers. Bull purchases, once based solely on animal appearance and the instincts of the buyer, have given way to serious research into production records and progeny criteria.

"It isn't like it used to be when you could turn out a lot of cleanup bulls and expect to sell them for a premium," Kyle says. "Today, you have to offer your customers animals out of well-known AI (artificial insemination) sires that have highly proven traits behind them."

He has seen a growing reliance on expected progeny differences (EPDs), sometimes even to the exclusion of other bull assessment methods.

"EPDs have become the major selection tool as far as buying commercial bulls," Kyle says. "A lot of people come to the sale with their books pre-highlighted on the bulls that they think will work for them. Their decisions are based solely on EPDs and often without even looking at the bulls."

He adds that their commercial customers are also taking a serious look at sire groups in an effort to develop predictable traits in their herds that will draw a premium at sale time.

"You will see a commercial guy come in and buy all half brothers so that he can get some predictability in his herd," Kyle says. "That is happening more often now."

In order to keep current, the Colyers

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devote much of their energy to research, data collection, selecting appropriate matings and building on breeding programs that best suit their commercial customers.

Guy sees their use of current technology as a real aid in making the right breeding decisions from the outset and then following through with only the appropriate matings.

"A big advantage for us is that we are 95% AI and embryo transplant (ET), so we are

able to individually mate cattle vs. the random mating you get with pasture bulls," he says.

He feels that one area that is of particular interest to their customers is carcass quality.

Using ultrasound data, the Colyers have worked with the American Hereford Association to establish carcass EPDs in major Hereford herd bulls. "We've been using Angus bulls with superior carcass traits," he says.

One-stop shop

Guy admits that his penchant for selective breeding with proven genetics was one

reason why they began raising Angus bulls. "The advantage the Angus has over other breeds is that they have a huge genetic database," he says. "They have a tremendous amount of AI done, so they can get proven genetics a lot more quickly than the other breeds. That means you can select from a larger base, and you get a lot more accuracy in your data a lot quicker."

He notes that this access to information has allowed Angus breeders to focus on multi-trait characteristics that give commercial producers the benefits of selecting for lower-maintenance cows while improving their gross return on each calf.

“For example, the Angus breed has been able to identify lighter-birth-weight bulls with both excellent performances on weaning and yearling gain,” Guy says.

He points out that while the Angus breed’s extraordinary database was incentive enough for becoming Angus seedstock producers, the fact that most of their customers raise black baldie calves — Hereford/Angus crosses — gave the Colyers added incentive to develop a working knowledge of the Angus breed.

For Guy it is a matter of maintaining quality control through to the end product. “There are advantages in the Angus and the

Hereford, and by combining the two you are able to bring out the strengths in both,” Guy says. “By having Angus and Hereford bulls available to our customers, we are able to help our customers shape their program, so that it will be more efficient on both ends of the cross.”

He adds that while they work with both Angus and Hereford separately, they always leave the final crossbreeding to their customer. “My philosophy is that the black baldie is the ultimate heterosis in breeding,” he says. “If we crossed the breeds ourselves we wouldn’t be giving the customer the chance to get those two breeds to express

their genetic potential to the customer’s full benefit.”

Guy is the first to admit that there is a downside to working with two breeds. Besides having to keep two sets of record books, he is faced with a double dose of all the other paperwork required of a conscientious seedstock producer.

“You have to keep up with both breeds, and it does take extra time and effort to find your matings and individually mate cattle that will give you superior product,” he says. “But if that is what our customers want, that is what they get.”

