

Value Guides Angus Herd

Cattle,
rancher are
well-adapted to Texas
hill country.

Story & photos by **Larry Stalcup**

People had their doubts back in the early 1980s, when Marjorie May Russell said she was going to take up ranching. After all, she was a woman, and determined to build on the herd her aunt and uncle had developed in the 1950s. They were Angus cattle, a breed that was not a local favorite in the central Texas heat.

"I learned from what I had seen here on this ranch," Russell says. Cattle did not need Brahman influence to thrive, just time to adapt, she figured. Her family had summered cattle in Alabama and wintered them in Texas. "There were questions of whether they could adapt to the heat both places," she says. "They proved that they could modify themselves to the country they ran in."

Buying 50 cows from the estate, Russell decided to carry on the family tradition in the Texas hill country outside the town of Menard.

She used information feedback to build up to a herd of 200 that produce steers that gain and grade and heifers that are in demand by other Angus producers. "Just being black, and without the droopy ears or hump, the calves bring a 10¢ premium," Russell says. Beyond those visual basics, the cattle are even better under the hide.

Nearly a decade after her start, Russell heard about an opportunity through



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Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) known then as the CAB Value Discovery Project.

"It looked like a good way to develop your herd," she says. During the four years from 1992 to 1995, the ranch would send 29 steers to northwest Kansas's cooperating feedlots, culminating in Russell winning the grand championship the last year. Four of her six steers qualified for the brand, and they all gained well, for it took a combination of gain and grade to win.

"CAB gave me the total carcass data, and I tried to build on the best cows," she says. "The year I won, it was a nice cross section of the herd. But based on the performance of calves, I was really able to take off the tail end of the herd." After many generations of improvement, uniform quality is apparent. "You can't look at those heifers and pick out which one is going to produce the top carcass," Russell says.

Russell Ranch features land heavy in mesquite and prickly pear, blended with native grasses that range from winter rye to buffalo grass. The cows average 1,000 pounds (lb.), give or take 100, and feature genetics from Hales Angus Farms, of Canyon, Texas. The stocking rate is about 20 acres per cow.

"Milk is extremely important in this part of the country. If a cow can produce milk when we don't have any grass," Russell jokes, "she's a keeper."

But seriously, numbers provide guidance. "We look at the EPDs (expected progeny differences) to make bull selections," she says. "I want a milk EPD in the +25 to +28 range, and a balance of other traits," led by weaning weight. The bull's individual weaning weight

should be "at least 600 pounds, with a yearling weight of 1,100 to 1,200 pounds."

Weaning at eight to nine months may be late by some standards, but it gets past the health problems of traditional 205-day weaning, and it fits ranch resources. Calves are vaccinated for blackleg and respiratory disease at three months and boosted six weeks later, so they have well-developed immunity by their August weaning date.

As for the females, Russell has no problem starting them to calve with the herd as 2-year-olds. She appreciates the ability of Angus to breed early and rebreed.

"My grandfather told me that if a cow doesn't have a dollar sign following her, she has no place on this ranch," she says.

"Angus are doers. You can breed them earlier. And you can easily keep a cow 10

or 12 years if you want. They can keep producing good calves for a long time," Russell says.

Feedouts and carcass data have been part of her program off and on since participating in the Value Discovery Project. Russell followed that adventure with participation in the Texas and New Mexico Ranch-to-Rail programs as she stepped up to retaining half



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of her steers to finish.

Maintaining a focus on quality can be difficult. In 1999, a group of 25 steers managed only 12.8% CAB acceptance, but later that year another 33 steers came in at 28.5% CAB. Her continued use of data has helped Russell narrow the variation in quality from year to year and group to group, as she aims to consistently top the industry average.

Backgrounding on improved grass or wheat pasture after weaning gets calves up to 750 lb. by November. Loose mineral and block salt take care of supplemental needs. Then the steers head to the feedyard for 150 days or so, until finishing.

That's where the cattle show their strengths. "Marjorie's cattle perform well," says David Baumann, manager of Dawn (Texas) Custom Cattle Feeders. "They are typically above the average in performance and grade."

Performance of the 2007 set of 36 steers showed an average finish weight of 1,306 lb., an average daily gain (ADG) of 3.30 lb. and a feed-to-gain (F/G) conversion rate of 6.3-to-1. Nine of them reached the premium Choice grade required for CAB. Average fat thickness was 0.59 in., with average ribeye area at 13.77 sq. in. Average yield grade (YG) was 3.23, with a 64.18 dressing percentage.

Virtually all of those numbers were slightly better than those of a 2005 set of 56 Russell steers fed there.

"I strive to get above a 25% CAB rating," Russell says. "The numbers can differ every year due to drought stress or other factors, but we're getting more consistent."

She chooses a feedyard partly based on the ability to handle smaller pens. "I like the Dawn feedlot because they will take 40 head if you send them," she says, adding that in the few cases where she had sold steers at a local auction, the premiums have certainly been apparent.

"These calves will always bring close to a 20% higher price than other cattle of the same weight," she says.

In her heifer program, females are either

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retained or sold based on their ultrasound test results. “I keep them all until October, when they will weigh about 600 lb.” Russell says. “Then I select the ones I’m going to keep, based on their weight, records and ultrasound data.”



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Heifers not retained usually have a string of potential buyers because of the Russell Ranch’s proven performance. “I can provide the data to help show buyers what the cattle should do,” she says.

Richmond Hales, who, in his 80s, has been in the Angus seedstock business for more than 45 years, says he has long admired Russell’s ability to choose good-performing bulls and get the most out of them at her ranch. He also appreciates the heifers she sells.

“A neighbor of mine has bought 10 or more from her,” he says. They have performed well.

Russell says the early skepticism about her, as a woman, not being able to handle the bulk of the chores of a successful ranch were common 25 years ago. But having grown up on a small operation that featured some Angus, she became a good hand at processing cattle on one end, and using available sources from CAB and others to enhance herd quality on the other.

“I’ve always tried to attend beef short courses through Texas A&M University and participated in other ranch and cattle management training offered by A&M and other entities,” she says.

“I never tire of learning how to improve how my cattle perform,” Russell says. “Overall, I attribute the success of my Angus program to CAB and its ability to work for even the smaller producer. The information I have received over the years has helped me develop a herd that generates the premium prices that higher-quality cattle obtain.”