SECURING the Next Generation

Using environment and business to manage replacement heifers.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

The Business Breed

was founded on a maternal female that didn't lack in performance or beauty. It's why so many pastures are home to black-hided herds today, and it's why so many breeders place value in their replacement heifers.

From coast to coast, members of the American Angus Association have learned to maintain the foundation of their herds in their females, even when the industry or Mother Nature deals them a bad hand.

Grown in Georgia

In 1971, when Randy Daniel told his father, "Dr. Dan," that he wanted to come home and breed cows, he remembers being told, "the party is over." Turns out, things were just getting started for the duo as they started Partisover Ranch.

The rolling hills of northeast Georgia are what Daniel calls "pretty good grass country." His herd grazes on Bermuda, fescue and winter annuals year-round, about three acres for each pair.

Daniel describes his ideal female as big-bellied, good-footed, great-uddered and gentle.

"We don't need them to get too big," he adds. "We don't need them extreme as far as milk production or birth weight."

There's an emphasis on balance when it comes to these traits, so no animal at Partisover tips the scale too far right or left. The Burgess cow Daniel's father originally brought home is ten generations deep today, and the cow family's distinct look is the backbone of the herd.

"If you're going to go feed them, you like to have cattle that you enjoy looking at, you enjoy working with," he says. "Our focus has always been on the females."

Daniel breeds for "cow-makers" and wants to improve on the next generation — ambitions made a reality as he keeps about 80% of each year's heifer calf crop at weaning until he further sorts them with the help of genetic data. Daniel uses proven bulls with strong genetic profiles to help create more low-input, efficient heifer calves.

"The objective is to see if we can build on their number base without giving up the cow to get it," he explains.

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Cows are turned back on grass once they're bred. Knowing his ground is low on copper, selenium and zinc, minerals are provided year-round, with an amplified program being offered to females 60 days before the start of the fall calving season.

Other than the occasional cottonseed to 2-year-olds or hay to the cows, the herd is expected to sustain themselves on the Georgia landscape. Cows winter on hay and limited winter annuals, ensuring they have the forage available to meet performance expectations.

"We are firm believers that cattle are trained — trained to be foragers and self-sufficient. If we start pampering them too much with a feed bucket then all of a sudden, they rely on us to take care of them instead of doing it themselves," Daniel explains.

While calves have creep-grazing access to winter annuals, they never offer concentrates. Though they might wean a slightly lighter calf, the future potential to push the herd forward is never called into question.

Daniel makes the first cut for replacement heifers at weaning. He sorts off the bottom portion and identifies the top females — typically embryo transfer calves. Expected progeny differences (EPDs) help with culling the middle-ground individuals.

Though management has evolved through the years, Daniel says he's stayed fairly consistent. He has learned, however, that stewardship goes beyond livestock. Part of being a manager is recognizing an issue before it becomes a problem, especially when it comes to Mother Nature.

"In the Southeast, we can get into trouble fast, we can get out of trouble fast," he says.

It's a narrative that could be different from other areas of the country, but Daniel says all cattlemen have a common interest: water. He's learned to watch rainfall patterns and monitor stocking rates so he can make the proper management decisions before there's a negative effect on his cattle or the breeding season.

Though the ranch has faced some tough times, Daniel says they've never given up the heifer calf. He's willing to lease ground, create more partnerships or ship cattle to new locations — Daniel says he'll even make an exception and provide supplemental feed.

"We always feel like the most valuable thing we've got is the next generation of those females," he says. "Things would have to get tougher than they ever have here for us not to retain those top-end females."

Daniel jokingly says it's his hard-headedness that drives that philosophy, but the thought actually goes back to Dr. Dan. When Daniel and his father first started breeding cattle together, they realized every cattle operation has access to the same genetics, thanks to technologies like artificial insemination. The defining factor of an operation comes in the form of the genetics at home — the females.

Kept in Kansas

A gently rolling prairie serves as a beautiful backdrop for 500 head of registered Angus cows, and that's where Gordon Stucky focuses on keeping a moderate female that offers growth, carcass quality and maternal value. His south-central Kansas herd is designed to produce easy-fleshing bulls for commercial cattlemen in the

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— Randy Daniel

area, customers who manage about 100-500 cows and diversified farming operations.

"Our guys are really busy," he explains. "They like problem-free cattle that kind of do it all on their own."

If cows ratio well with their calves and breed back early, they'll stay at the ranch for 10-12 years. Performance is really the driving factor when it comes to Stucky's females.

"We want the environment to dictate the type of cattle that work here," he says, but emphasizes that he prioritizes a moderate-framed, easy-fleshing type female. He says she has to exhibit good breed characteristics and still maintain a feminine appearance.

While producing a marketable bull calf is the top priority, the ranch hopes to retain 60-70% of the heifer calves to breed back. At weaning, Stucky starts with his cattleman's eye to identify those moderate individuals who possess the phenotype he likes. Potential replacement heifers have to have good feet and legs and a calm disposition.

"We'll do our initial culling process…then we'll genomic test after that and let that fine-tune with EPDs," he explains, adding that traits like heifer pregnancy and foot scores have joined the list of considerations that Stucky uses to help decide which females stay and which ones are sold.

"We just try and continue to make them better," he says.

Stucky keeps the weaned heifers selected as replacements at headquarters and feeds a hay and grain protein mix, designed to keep them at an average daily gain of 1.25 pounds (lb.). The goal is have them at 800 lb. at breeding season, Stucky says, noting that any heavier or lighter has seemed to hurt conception rates.

He's kept the process of developing replacement heifers at home the same for many years, but he admits it's fairly dependent on the property receiving its typical 30 inches of rain annually.

This year, unfortunately, the weather hasn't played nice.

"I've been doing this for over 40 years, but this spring is the toughest our area has probably seen since the 1950s," Stucky says.

There hasn't been enough water for the growing season to start, meaning grazing is limited and hay is both sparse and expensive.

This year, having lost some key grazing pasture, Stucky finds himself marketing young, bred females to lighten the load for the coming year. It's a hard decision, but he says it comes down to the business equation.

"Nobody has the answer," Stucky says. "I'd say the challenge is more related to how the producer feels the quality of his cattle are. There's really that whole spectrum of how valuable your cattle are to yourself."

While seedstock breeders generally want to keep herd numbers strong, there's a moving target Stucky shoots for, all while weighing out total herd numbers, available feed and the operation's overall budget.

"When you get this close to when the growing season is supposed to get started and you still haven't had rain, that's when the decision has to be made. You've either got to buy some really expensive hay to keep them going, or you've got to market them," he explains.

When following that ever-changing goal, the past can provide clues. Stucky studies weather patterns of decades prior to help him try to predict whether it's in his best interest to find that hay or market females.

It's part experience, part business savvy; but Stucky consistently works to adopt the right mindset. Approaching each year with a sharp mind and a heart focused on the success of both his ranch and the entire beef industry, he's able to uphold the integrity and strength of his herd, no matter what amount of rainfall the year brings.

Universal quality

Stucky knows the cattle industry is competitive, but says his Angus cows keep him at the forefront.

He's proud to be tied to a breed that looks good in the field, is competitive on paper and can produce a calf that his customers will return to buy year after year.

There are so many reasons to turn to the females of the Angus breed, but they all center on one simple theme: she's good at being a cow.

"I think the thing that attracts you or holds you to the Angus breed is the just their maternal side," Daniel says. "In my heart, it's always been Angus." AJ