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Quest for Success

Iowa producer improves on quality through Angus influence and helpful resources.

Story by Robyn Werk

The drive to improve is sometimes best motivated by reassessment. Blockton, Iowa, producer David Loutzenhiser can vouch for that.

In the late 1980s, his cattle program had many shades of gray. Efforts were focused on a Charolais-Angus crossbred herd that came up short on predictability, milk and carcass value.

“I would get some nice-looking heifers, but that didn’t do much good when I couldn’t get calves from them that were even nicer,” Loutzenhiser says. “I just wasn’t getting the production I needed out of those calves.”

Acting on advice from his father-in-law and his veterinarian, the stockman decided to increase the Angus influence in the early 1990s. “At first it was to improve calving ease on heifers,” he says.

He tried finishing 50 of the first higher-percentage Angus calves in the home corral, but marketing “became a real pain. The buyer would say five head were ready; those 10 could go next week and 20 more in a month. I heard about the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) about that time and decided it was a better way for me to go,” Loutzenhiser says.

The TCSCF program is designed to help producers understand how their cattle perform in the feedlot and packing plant. It returns data to help in future managing and marketing decisions. Advice from project supervisor Darrell Busby, livestock field specialist for Iowa State University Extension, was a bonus.

“I asked Darrell, ‘What do I need to do, because I need to get more out of what I am doing,’” Loutzenhiser recalls.

Advice taken

The two often discussed ways to increase quality and add value.

“David was disappointed the first few years in how his cattle gained in the feedlot,” Busby says. “We had a discussion about using EPDs (expected progeny differences) and what it would cost to improve. Finally, he stepped up and purchased a really good, higher-yearling-EPD bull.”

Loutzenhiser's Angus bulls had been single-trait selected for calving ease until then, and prices never went above \$1,500.

Loutzenhiser went to Angus seedstock producer Roger Pierce of Hancock, Iowa. "He didn't have any bulls that were just calving ease or available for the kind of price I was used to," Loutzenhiser says. "But I could tell they were the kind that would improve my herd. So, I bought my first bull for more than \$2,000." Since then, some purchases have been closer to \$4,000, he adds.

Busby saw differences in short order. "Two years later, when he had calves out of the bull from Roger, they weighed 100 pounds (lb.) more at the same age as his calves from the year before," the Extension specialist says.

Impressed with that success, Loutzenhiser continues to rely on the advice of Busby and Pierce in his quest for higher quality in addition to growth.

In a 2006 TCSCF pen closeout, Loutzenhiser had 15 of the top 20 in both steers and heifers, in both retail value per day of age and retail value per day on feed. His first-place steer finished at 1,449 lb. at 383 days of age, gaining 4.79 lb. per day to ratio 143 in the pen. The Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand-qualifying carcass had 0.3 inch (in.) of back fat with a 13.5-in. ribeye and 2.58 Yield Grade (YG).

"We've worked with him, so we know what he wants and what he's trying to accomplish," Pierce says. "In fact, seven out of 10 bulls he has bought from us sight unseen."

Through the years, the trio has been able to fine-tune the Loutzenhiser herd, especially on the carcass end.

"David comes to me now looking for something that can make a very high percentage Choice and CAB, now that he's running in the 90% Choice or better area on his young cattle," Pierce says.

He appreciates Loutzenhiser as a customer because of his shared focus on quality. "He's a producer who asks me what I think," Pierce says. "That's important, because I know the background of my cattle back seven or eight generations."

Keeping track

Soon after Loutzenhiser's move to increase the Angus influence, he began keeping detailed records. Through the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) system developed at North Dakota State University and TCSCF results, he is better able to make breeding and culling decisions.

"I've been able to get to the point for the last few years to cull based on the CHAPS records and futurity results," Loutzenhiser says.

He says recording data allows a more assertive approach to culling.

“Until recently, it was just selling open cows in the fall, but I’ve been able to figure some things out,” he says with a wry grin. “Some cows were only producing 300- or 350-lb. calves year-in and year-out, when others had 500- or 550-lb. calves born the same week. I’ve gotten rid of some whether they were bred or not.”

Loutzenhiser also has been able to use records to make decisions on carcass traits, but he considers all input. “I’ve kept records. I’ve asked [for] advice. I’ve listened, and then I’ve acted based on what I’ve been told and what my records told me,” he explains.

Busby and Pierce praise his accomplishments, as do other consignors to TCSCF.

“He’s been willing to improve his cattle in every way, realizing that we in the beef business produce a higher-priced product,” Pierce says. “He is really trying to raise the level of his production to where it fits the upper level of demand in the beef industry.”

Loutzenhiser knows he has far to go as he watches the CAB acceptance rate slowly climb toward 20% for all steers. “We’re working toward more CABs through buying the right cattle that will do it, or breeding up to it,” he says.

Determination and drive keep him assessing progress and setting new goals each year. “If you’re not striving to go forward, you’re losing ground,” Loutzenhiser says.