

# Science & Management

## BUILDING BETTER BULLS WITH TECHNOLOGY AND GENETICS

By: Clifford Mitchell

**B**eef cattle can flourish in many different environments. The rugged terrain of Southeastern Oklahoma, in the shadows of Sugarloaf Mountain, provides a home to a progressive Angus operation; Wann Ranch. The ranch's history dates to the 30's, but the modern Angus herd started with one female in 1989. Jim and Nancy Wann along with sons Roger and Danny have built the operation to the 10th largest in the state of Oklahoma according to registrations with the American Angus Association.

Today, the operation will sell 100 bulls and 75 females in an annual spring sale along with another 25 bulls private treaty, but that has been built over time. In the beginning, the black-hided cattle that are so common in today's beef industry were to be a thing of the future.

"The herd, like most, was originally commercial Herefords. Our Granddad bought bulls from Leroy Brant in Muldrow and Watson Ranch in Okmulgee and Santa Gertrudis bulls were also used in the commercial herd. My Dad bought a group of commercial Angus females from his uncle in the late 70s and soon afterwards we purchased a calving-ease Angus bull from Belle

Point Ranch and were really happy with the calves," says Roger Wann.

According to Roger, some of the commercial herd was black when he graduated high school in 1981, but the love for the Angus cattle was realized in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

"I worked at the Purebred Beef Center at OSU and I fell in love with the Angus cattle. I liked their calving-ease, fertility and marketability," Roger says. "As we incorporated the Angus genetics to our commercial herd, we saw drastic improvements and realized we wanted to raise purebred cattle. I bought the first Angus female in 1989."

Roger also serves as Sales Manager for ABS and an important trip early in his career helped reinforce some of his beliefs what it would take to be successful in the seedstock business.

"I had just started working for ABS when my rounds took me to Gardiner Angus Ranch and R.A. Brown Ranch. After observing and listening, I decided that if a person couldn't figure

out how to sell commercial bulls, there was no reason to be in the seedstock business," Roger says. "Selling commercial bulls has always been our primary focus. We had our first bull sale in 2003 and before that we sold bulls private treaty, at the OK & T Bull Sale and what was then the East Texas Angus Association bull sale."

Roger, who just recently was able to move back to the ranch, gives all the credit to his brother Danny and father Jim for doing the day-to-day management building the Wann Ranch herd to what it is today. To be an active participant in the ranch, coordination and communication are vital between the brothers.

"Scheduling is very important for us to be successful. Danny will make







a schedule and let me know when we need to put CIDRs in, when we're going to AI cows, when we need to preg check, and when we will wean calves," Roger says. "We focus on all practical technology that will make us and our customers more successful."

Putting selection pressure on certain traits over the years has led to improvements. Artificial insemination helped have access to certain genetics that otherwise would not have been available.

"I had a professor in Stillwater, Dr. Bob Kropp, who told me the only way to improve was through AI; because for \$20 a straw I could have access to any bull in the breed," Roger says. "We have done some ET work over the

years, but not sure it pays."

Improvements to synchronization programs have allowed Wann Ranch to become more efficient in the AI program and make life a little easier at the end of the day. Synchronization and defined calving seasons provide a lot of value, while making other management practices easier.

"Improvements to synchronization protocols over the years has helped us manage reproduction more efficiently. We use timed breeding and get all the cows bred in a three-day period. We used to spend more time getting fewer cows bred than we do today. We can get a lot of cows bred on the first day of the breeding season, where we used to spend a lot of time checking heats trying to get a few more cows bred," Roger says. "We rarely leave a cleanup bull out for 60 days. We'll settle 50% of our virgin heifers, 60% of the two- and three-year-old cows and between 65 and 70% on the mature cows."

Practical technology combined with management skill would accurately describe Wann Ranch, but just because there is new technology avail-



**Roger and Kathy with all their family, plus Mom and Dad.**



able doesn't mean the brothers are on board. If the technology can help the bottom line or improve the customers bottom line; Wann Ranch is all in.

"I try to go to the NCBA Convention every year I can and when I first saw genomics, I didn't have much confidence in the technology at that time. It wasn't accurate. We started genomic testing in 2014 and it has taught us a lot of lessons," Roger says. "We had to re-educate our customers, because they were relying on half and three-quarter brothers, which on paper they had the same interim EPDs, but they may be nothing alike. It helps us make more informed breeding decisions and allows us to market bulls with more confidence. Genomics gives us a different view on cow families too and we focus more on the individual."

As much value as it brings and the confidence the Wann Ranch has in genomics, there are also pitfalls with the technology. The speed of genetic improvement or better interpretation of data can be frustrating to a discriminate breeder.

"The industry moves through AI sires so fast anymore. Genomics allows the younger bulls to be more reliable and gives us more confidence," Danny says. "Genomics change every day and that can be frustrating. It's hard to make goals and reach targets with everything changing so fast."

Bulls are developed with longevity in mind and to express their genetic potential. A different philosophy, but 17 bull sales and a large repeat customer base proves it works.

"We don't try to achieve extreme weights we want 950- to 1,150-pound

yearling weights on our bulls, which allows them to express their genetic differences without getting over conditioned." Roger says. "Too much feed as yearling bulls leads to feet problems and poor semen quality."

"We have as much as 50% repeat customers maybe even more and we have to have them," Danny says. "Every year we are trying to get new customers and sometimes it's hard because of the way we develop our bulls. They aren't fat enough for what some people are used to seeing."

Behind these bulls is a strong maternal cow herd that has been tailored to their environment. It starts with selection of the right kind of cow and then managing her correctly.

"We like a moderate type of cow that ranges from 5.8 to 6.2 in frame size," Danny says. "We try to concentrate on cattle that shed out quickly in the spring, even though we don't have a large concentration of fescue in our pastures."

"Once we have culled our females and they make it to mature cows they don't make a lot of mistakes after that," says Roger.

Science and management is consistent at Wann Ranch. Nutrition and herd health are key components to making the technology relevant. The nutrition program starts with a mineral Danny, who recently retired as a science professor at Carl Albert State College, developed for the ranch.

"We are deficient in copper, zinc and selenium so we developed a mineral as an organic, because organics are more digestible. The new organic mix holds together until it's absorbed in

the small intestine," Danny says. "We supplement the feeding program with an all-natural molasses tub that allows for better forage utilization. During the winter alfalfa hay is the protein supplement and each cow gets five pounds per day. The weather will tell us how many days a week to feed it."

Herd health can be approached in a variety of ways; Danny's knowledge has also tailored the health program to the herd at Wann Ranch.

"Herd health begins at birth with a three-way nasal vaccine; at 60-days calves get a Black leg and Endovac; pre-weaning is a killed BVD and a modified live at weaning," Danny says. "For the cows pre-breeding they get the same killed BVD vaccination; de-wormed and an Endovac because it boosts immunity. When we preg test I booster their Lepto vaccination."

Science and practical management skills are employed in their own way by a lot of different operations. For Wann Ranch, the right blend of technology with sound decision making allow them to produce the best product they can supply, backed by information customers can believe in.

"Job 1 is overall well being of our cowherd. We were the 2014 OK Beef Council BQA ranch of the year because of the sound day to day management practices that Danny has instilled in the ranch, Roger Says." "Beyond the care of the cow herd, we have to raise bulls that work for our customers and they have to perform as advertised."

"Our bulls have to be known as bulls that were raised in the real world and our cows work for a living," Danny says.

