

**Hybrids vs. Mongrels**  
*Balancers disprove myth*  
**By Clifford Mitchell**

From the outside looking in, it is easy to look at the market cycles that follow the trends of the beef industry like clockwork to figure profit/loss statements for producers. In recent times, management and genetics have faced increased scrutiny as indicators of profit. Even in down market periods, reputation genetics handled correctly provide security to the bottom line.

As the industry struggled to find consistency in the end product, it made several bad decisions. Included in this fiasco was the increased mongrelization of the nation's cowherd. In an effort to swing the pendulum back to the middle, single breed sire groups were used by producers, generation after generation. This continued until some cattlemen realized the loss of heterosis was making a negative bottom line.

As the market system gradually changed to rewarding or discounting individuals, rather than pen averages, specific packages that included the right blend of genetics and management added cash incentives through the feeding and harvest stage. To answer the question of how to best blend a balance of Continental and British genetics, the American Gelbvieh Association launched its SmartCross program, which also included the first trademarked hybrid, Balancer™, for mainstream beef production.

“With hybrid cattle you increase the gene pool and can combine more profitable traits into one animal. For instance, with the Balancer cattle, you can manage growth, milk and fertility through Gelbvieh genetics and enhance some carcass traits with the Angus genetics,” says Bob Prosser, owner of Bar T Bar Ranch near Winslow, Ariz. Bar T Bar Ranch is one of the top 15 seedstock producers, according to National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), and markets Gelbvieh, Balancer, and Angus genetics.

Hybrid production has less progressive producers calling foul. After all, Webster's dictionary defines hybrid as a mongrel or crossbreed. As research projects were launched and cattlemen began developing hybrid cattle for use in commercial production, surprising results were achieved.

“Meat Animal Research Center data is the best to look at. It shows no difference between straight bred and hybrid cattle. The biggest advantage to a hybrid is producers are getting a straight bred animal with hybrid vigor,” Prosser says. “Heterosis from a maternal standpoint has a positive impact on fertility, survivability and longevity. Things we are unable to measure from an Expected Progeny Difference (EPD) standpoint. There aren't any straightbred pigs around anymore, and they are incredibly predictable.”

To create a Balancer, specific steps have to be followed to guarantee the commercial producer is getting a predictable product. Tools developed for use in purebred production can be used to develop hybrids that will add uniformity to the calf crop and build in desired traits.

“Selection is a key component to producing hybrid cattle. We have to build hybrids from sire summaries and data,” Prosser says. “You have to start with registered parents and continue to outcross with different genetics. That is the toughest thing; we continually have to source cattle back into the program to maintain heterosis.”

There are many reasons for the increased use of hybrid genetics. Perhaps the most significant reason is it allows the producer to maintain the proper balance of British and

Continental genetics in the cow herd. Less stress is put on management to create a marketable product and it eliminates extra costs associated with purchasing straight bred bulls of different breeds to maintain maternal heterosis.

“I don’t know if the hybrid idea is anything new. People in our area have been using Brangus and Beefmaster genetics for years, but the Balancer cattle work well on these cattle to improve marketability,” Prosser says. “Today, from a crossbreeding standpoint, most producers can’t manage a crossbreeding system that includes bulls from three breeds. A system that relies on hybrid bulls and hybrid cows is a lot easier to manage.”

Due to the reliability of the product produced through using hybrids in a commercial setting, improvements may come at a more rapid pace. According to Prosser, this may be seen a little easier when comparing hybrids to straight bred.

“If the proper job is done selecting the inputs for hybrid cattle, a producer can see drastic improvements in one generation,” Prosser says. “It might take several generations to get the combination of traits in a straight bred animal.”

The hybrid described through the SmartCross system allows diligent producers that scrutinize production goals, the ability to add value no matter what the end product. Enhancing reproductive efficiency adds value to replacements. The right combination of growth and carcass fits another niche, or just a uniform color pattern in the calf crop adds marketability. Increasing the gene pool through hybrid production provides a positive answer in a variety of scenarios.

“Through the use of hybrid genetics, we can more accurately manage maternal effects, growth and carcass in same package. Growth and fertility aren’t highly correlated,” Prosser says. “Carcass traits aren’t enhanced by heterosis, but with hybrid cattle you have to look at the total package. The big picture is total value, and the money made year-in and year-out.”