

## **Keeping It All in Balance**

*Kansas ranch counts on Balancer bulls to optimize production*

*By Mark Parker, Freelance Writer*

Striking a balance between what the market wants and the production traits essential to keeping a cow-calf operation in the black—that's the 800-lb. gorilla in the room for American beef producers.

For Kansas rancher Gary Cotterill, a big part of the solution is Balancer bulls and a genetic strategy which captures the virtues of both Gelbvieh and Angus cattle.

"Buyers want to know what they're getting and they seem to like the program we're using," the Cherryvale, Kan., producer says. "Our Gelbvieh-based cowherd gives us reproductive efficiency and excellent calf growth while the Balancer bulls complement those traits with the end-product characteristics needed in the feedlot and the packing house. And, since both breeds offer strong maternal traits, we can also retain quality females to go back into the cow herd."

Cotterill believes the genetic package adds value to his calf crop and, coupled with management practices such as a controlled breeding season and age source verification, helps him make the most of merchandizing opportunities.

Of course, the marketplace dictates where those opportunities exist so he doesn't want to lock himself in to an endgame strategy.

"Historically, we have sold just-weaned calves," explains Cotterill who runs the ranch with the help of his wife, Marie, and sons, Rex and Paul, "but now the market favors calves that have been weaned for a minimum of 45 days, are started on grain and are veterinarian certified. So, that's what we'll be giving them. We utilize our own scales to sell off the ranch in load lots and we use the futures market to limit risks.

"This market is dynamic and we believe we have to be ready to adjust to what it's telling us," adds Cotterill, who is also vice-chairman and senior agronomic officer for Community National Bank, which has locations across southeastern Kansas.

Fenceline weaning worked well for the operation this year and the steers weaned off at a 690-lb. average with the heifers going over the scales at 625 pounds after a very good grass year in southeastern Kansas.

None of it works, though, if the production system doesn't reflect the forage resources of Cotterill Ranch. Cows calve during a 70-day window in the fall, beginning September 1. That means Cotterill's fescue pastures are at peak quality plateau when the cowherd is at its highest level of nutritional demand. And, the cool season grass will hit another spike in the spring when the calves are large enough to respond to higher quality grazing.

Weaning weights, he notes, increased 50-75 pounds when the ranch went to a fall calving program and merchandising those calves in the late summer to early fall period fits the historic market well.

"It's all about matching the nutritional needs of the cattle to forage quality," Cotterill explains. "When you get right down to it, we're in the business of selling our grass so we try to make the most of it."

While fescue provides the forage base, Cotterill interseeds the cool season grass with legumes to extend grazing quality in those pastures into the summer months. The

ranch also has bermudagrass and native pastures that stretch forage quality as well as providing hay. For those wintertime lactating cows, alfalfa is relied upon as a supplemental protein source.

Like all cattlemen, Cotterill is being crowded by the sharp increase in fertilizer prices. While meeting the soil nutrient needs of the forage program has always been critical to the operation, the ranch is considering poultry litter as an alternative, as well as increasing its focus on legumes such as lespedeza and clovers in the pastures.

To utilize the entire package more efficiently, Cotterill relies on cell grazing to keep forage quality and quantity at a higher level.

The cows grazing those pastures are most typically one-quarter Angus and three-quarters Gelbvieh with a goal of moving the herd to a 50-50 cross. Cotterill notes that economics indicate that a 1200-lb. cow will optimize profit potential in southeastern Kansas. Cows are culled on the basis of productivity. The feedlot performance data Cotterill gets back from feedyards such as Caprock and Lane County Feeders give him a more complete picture of the direction the operation is going. In addition, all cows are pregnancy tested.

The Cotterills' son, Paul, is a veterinarian and Gary believes a stringent ongoing herd health program has brought the operation to the point where serious health issues are few. Good herd health, he says, puts the cowherd in a better position to produce the healthy, growthy, "reputation" calves that will leave the ranch at the top of the market.

Son Rex handles much of the day-to-day work on the ranch in addition to operating a horse training enterprise and Cotterill's partner since the operation's humble beginnings, his wife, Marie, helps out as well.

For bull power, Cotterill Ranch has relied on herd sires from Seedstock Plus for several years. A coalition of Gelbvieh, Angus and Red Angus breeders, Seedstock Plus offers Balancer bulls through public sales and by private treaty.

"We screen the EPDs before we go to the sale and then match them up visually," Gary Cotterill explains. "We'll make an assessment of our cows and the type of calves they're producing and use the EPDs to help us adjust our end product. The numbers are important but we also want conformation—especially in regard to stretch and bone—and we want to get an idea of the bull's disposition."

The Cotterills buy 18-month old bulls and prefer those that have not been pushed from a ration standpoint. All bulls are semen tested prior to a December 1 turnout.

According to Seedstock Plus President and CEO John Burbank, the demand for Balancer bulls is strong and is yet to meet the demand of the marketplace.

"It's a two plus two equals five situation," he asserts. "These breeders are taking good Angus or Red Angus genetics, combining it with Gelbvieh, and coming up with bulls that really work. And, commercial cattlemen can find the kind of bull they need for their particular operation. There are calving ease Balancers, growth Balancers and of course maternal traits are very strong. The bottom line is that the Balancer bulls are siring calves that work for the commercial cattleman as well as in the feedlot."

The American Gelbvieh Association registers and generates EPDs for Balancer cattle.

Gary Cotterill is also a pilot, a banker, a champion sheep shearer and is active in his church and community affairs. The hat that seems to fit most comfortably on his head,

however, is the one he snugs down as he swings into the saddle to gather the calves that represent yet another beef crop ready for harvest.

Those calves are the product of countless management decisions and dynamic influences. Gary Cotterill would be the first to admit that it's a lot for any cattleman to keep up with and it's easy to head down the wrong path.

For himself, he's just striving to keep it all in balance.