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ASCC brings out the best

Second quarter winners zero in on quality through AngusSource[®]

Mason Fleenor may squint a little when checking pens, but he certainly sees 20/20 when it comes to selecting top-quality cattle.

The Iowa seedstock producer and manager of GG Genetics feedlot picked out 41 of his own steers to win the northeast region's AngusSource[®] Carcass Challenge (ASCC) second quarter title for 2009, with 90.2% qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand or USDA Prime.

But he's not the only one with a vision for great AngusSource genetic- age- and source- verified cattle. Mike Kasten, Millersville, Mo.; Jimmy Thomas, Homedale, Idaho; and Jack and June Zimmerman, Checotah, Okla., also took top honors in their regions for the April-June quarter.

This was the first ASCC entry for Fleenor and his wife Diane, but for more than 20 years they have focused on producing Angus bulls that enhance carcass quality. From 2003 to '06, their cattle set the pace in the National Angus Carcass Challenge as well, winning two championships.

"We've always tried to breed for carcass traits, and you just have to keep breeding them – you have to have those traits on the cow and the sire sides," says Fleenor. "We've been using high-marbling, high-carcass bulls for a long time, and now it's finally getting into the cowherd, too."

Besides feeding their own calves, the Fleenors buy calves from their bull customers to feed in their CAB-licensed feedlot. There, they get a high-energy, high-roughage ration but minimal implants. This recent ASCC-winning pen, comprised of steers culled from bull prospects, entered the contest implant-free.

The feedlot pens are stock-full of cattle that consistently grade above the curve. "All of our cattle grade good, because they're all out of our genetics," Fleenor says, while admitting, "I guess I'm kind of prejudiced."

He doesn't use ultrasound to sort, relying on focused information and a practiced visual focus, an eye for quality: "When I know the genetics and have the data behind me, I can pick 'em every time."

To the southwest, the crew at Irsik & Doll Feed Yard (IDFY), Garden City, Kan., maintains sharp sights as well. Missourian Mike Kasten repeated his first quarter ASCC victory in the central region with the help of feedlot manager Mark Sebranek and CAB quality assurance officer Jerry Jackson. IDFY also foregoes the use of ultrasound technology for a trained eye and historical data on animals from a herd they have worked with for more than 10 years.

"We have enough data and pedigrees from the past on our cows, we've got a good handle on estimating which ones are going to do well," says Kasten. He and wife Priscilla have kept carcass data for more than 20 years. The couple work to closely match proven bulls to cows with a history of top-quality carcass progeny.

Using timed artificial insemination (AI), Kasten attributes much of his carcass contest success to one bull. "His calves have been averaging 42% Prime," he says. "We work hard to get those cattle

bred with the best proven genetics, and getting in there with AI gives us more consistency and quality in our cattle.”

Nearly 90% of Kasten’s 39-head pen of steers made CAB or Prime in the second quarter, consistent with the 90.5% pen that won first quarter. Both were heavily influenced by the same bull, which Kasten has spent 20 years stacking pedigrees to produce.

In the north-central region, Jimmy Thomas similarly relies on proven genetics. He and wife Sarah have sourced bulls from Rancho Casino and Dal Porto Livestock in California for nearly 15 years. “They’re good people with good cattle, and we are good friends,” Thomas says. “That makes it pretty easy to do good work.

“All the bulls we buy are performance tested,” Thomas says. “We don’t just go by the EPDs (expected progeny differences); they give us the actual marbling scores and ribeye measurements. We put quite a bit of emphasis on that.” A tight genetic focus paid off with 85% of his 40-head pen achieving CAB acceptance or Prime.

Thomas puts those genetics to use at Beller Feedlot in Lindsey, Neb. He and feedlot manager Terry Beller share a competitive spirit. Beller says, “We love challenges. Our goal is always to produce as many Prime and CAB carcasses as we can without getting too big and too fat.”

Thomas is right on cue. “I guess you could say I’m kind of competitive,” he says. “CAB is the most noted branded beef program there is, and over the years I’ve been able to finish above the national average on CAB acceptance rates.”

Thomas and Beller are no strangers to success. They met in 2003 when Thomas was accepting the CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence award and Beller was being honored as the brand’s Small Feedlot Partner of the Year. Both have frequented the winner’s circle in Angus carcass contests.

But it’s not always a focus on attaining the best cattle that matters. Sometimes, success is found in getting rid of the poorer ones. Jack and June Zimmerman won the ASCC southeast region for the quarter with 48.8% CAB acceptance or Prime, and no grading discounts. The couple feed their cattle with Buffalo (Okla.) Feeders.

Buffalo manager Tom Fanning says that perfect record is a key to profitability: “Look at this – it’s zero discounts!” he says, pointing to the data sheets. “What we’ve learned is, the premiums are great, but it’s not always how many premiums you have; it’s how many discounts you don’t have.”

The Zimmermans started keeping detailed ranch records in 1979 when they purchased JZ6 Ranch. Thirty years later, they still meticulously track herd records and carcass data.

“June and Jack know every cow on their place. They know their bloodlines – they know everything about everything in their herd,” says Fanning.

All ASCC contestants will be in the know by the end of the calendar year when the overall annual winner is announced. All regional winners from each quarter will be eligible for the \$500 cash award. The completion will stiffen as the year goes on – entries nearly quadrupled from the first quarter to second quarter. “We would really like to encourage more feedyards to enter the contest,” says Sara Snider, director of AngusSource. “It is so exciting to see this contest grow. The carcass results we’re getting back are a real tribute to what quality Angus genetics can do.”

For more information on AngusSource or the ASCC, call 816-383-5100 or visit www.AngusSource.com.

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