

# Focus on Carcass Traits

4:30 p.m. session, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2005

Presenter: Rich Blair, Vale, S.D.

RAPID CITY, S.D. (Dec. 6, 2005) — Through the use of artificial insemination (AI) and a disciplined focus on carcass traits, Blair Bros. Angus near Sturgis, S.D., has moved their cow herd from producing calves that graded 65% USDA Choice to calves that consistently grade 98% Choice. Rich Blair, who operates the family Angus ranch with his brother Ed Blair and their sons and a son-in-law, shared the story of their success with attendees at the 2005 Range Beef Cow Symposium.



Vale, S.D., rancher Rich Blair shared how his family has improved grid performance and premiums. [PHOTO BY LYNN GORDON]

The Blairs began using AI sires in 1989. “Our matings were geared toward what would build a good cow herd for us,” Blair shared. “We want cows that are efficient on grass and will produce calves that perform in the feedlot and produce a desirable consumer product.” He added that they’ve always kept an eye on calving ease and have never selected for extreme growth.

In 1998, they sent their first set of steers to U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) to be marketed on the grid. At that time, the

cattle went 65% Choice and earned a \$5-per-head premium. Blair said they were pleased with the results, but recognized there were greater premiums to be had, particularly for USDA Prime.

“We recognized it starts with genetics,” he said. “I knew I could change birth weights, weaning weight and calving ease through genetics, and I found out marbling score and ribeye area are even more heritable.”

As the Blairs used more AI with a selection focus on marbling and retained the second generation of AI-sired females, they began to see more expression of desirable carcass traits in their herd. They’ve had some groups of calves achieve 100% Choice with an 80% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) or higher acceptance rate. One set of heifers fetched a premium of more than \$200 per head.

Blair attributed their success to the focus on cow herd genetics. “That’s what happens when you stack a couple generations of marbling on top of each other,” he said.

Regarding premiums, he added, “I think raising pounds is great, but if you’re selling on a grid, pounds isn’t everything. It’s often said packers don’t want Yield Grade (YG) 4, but if that animal goes Prime, the premium is worth it.”

“Sometimes in selection there are tradeoffs in traits, but I haven’t seen a tradeoff in our pursuit of marbling,” Blair said.

“Without good data,” he concluded, “it’s hard to make good progress in breeding. The American Angus Association has done a good job of providing data. Their sire data is our bible, and I think the recently developed indexes are going to make even more of a difference in enhancing trait selection.”

— by Kindra Gordon, field editor, Angus Productions Inc.  
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