



PHOTO COURTESY OF RICHARD KIRKMAN

Seedstock producer provides education about quality-improving technology.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

Calculating proper nutrition, managing solid vaccination and health protocols, watching markets fluctuate, and maintaining fences and equipment — these are a few of the things that rattle around in a cattleman’s brain like the tools in the bed of a ranch pickup. There is plenty to think about in raising healthy market-age cattle. However, genetic decisions should have a place within that crowded mind. Cattle are more marketable with valuable genetics.

Veterinarians have a unique perspective of what is needed to optimize cattle performance because they see so many types of management. Passing that information on, along with new tools for genetic improvement, makes for successful customers.

Basics of business

Large-animal veterinarian Richard Kirkman of Siler City, N.C., emphasizes to his customers that the cattle business is just that — a business. There is a lot that goes into managing a business, much more than just putting out some cows and bulls on pasture.

Kirkman owns and operates both a large-animal veterinary practice and an Angus seedstock operation, Tarheel Angus.

The focus of his cattle business is providing genetics that are environmentally suited to his area, animals that benefit each segment of the beef industry, and assisting in the development and marketing of those animals. It’s so easy to get caught up working in the business instead of on the business, he says, quoting the University of Nebraska’s Director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program Tom Field.

Cattle operations with fewer than 100 cows comprise 90% of the businesses and own half of the cattle in the United States, he says. Each facet of their business needs to be controlled, including calving, sales and animal management.

Kirkman suggests using your veterinarian to establish herd surveillance programs as a great business-management tool. Veterinarians have the training — and experience working with other local cattle owners — to assist in decisions that have biologic and economic merit and that enhance cattle welfare. He often sees inefficient and nonproductive business practices that, if corrected, could have a huge impact on cattle businesses.

For instance, the use of common reproductive technologies, such as breeding soundness exams for bulls and palpation for pregnancy in cows, are used by only 10% of the smaller beef herds, he cites from USDA data. A major focus of Kirkman’s veterinary

business is providing those technologies, yearling female breeding soundness information and other replacement-heifer selection tools to his commercial customers.

Once the business basics are taken care of, more emphasis can be given to genetic selection.

Genetic considerations

As a seedstock producer, he says, “We’re very conscious of animals that excel in our environment, but have got genetic potential. We like to think that we have a customer-driven business. We’re trying to provide what the next customer down the line needs and wants. We want them to know that we’re making these decisions now for them.

“It’s not really so much about what I like or what you like, but it’s about providing what our customers need on a consistent basis — animals that work,” he adds.

He does his best to stay connected with his customers to understand their needs and expectations. He says more than 90% of his customers in the Southeast retain their own replacement females. These females will hopefully stay in the herd for more than 10 years, so a wise decision is necessary.

Kirkman uses every available replacement-heifer selection tool to make educated, thoughtful decisions about replacements. Heifers need to earn the right to stay, he



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adds. It's imperative that those females can survive on endophyte-infested fescue, and will provide enough genetic merit that their calves will be marketable. Because of this, reproductive traits have high importance in both female and male selection decisions.

"Reproductive efficiency is worth at least what growth and carcass merit combined are worth. You cannot ignore that in a cow-calf business. Reproductive efficiency is probably the biggest driver of our profitability. We try to focus on that in both our seedstock-providing business and our veterinary practice," Kirkman explains.

Tracking fertility

"Assisted reproduction (artificial insemination, estrus synchronization, *in vitro* fertilization) is a big part of my business. More than 98% of our calves are born as a result of assisted reproduction. I've got records on services per conception, etc., and those go into the American Angus Association's MaternalPlus® program.

"I was an early adopter of the MaternalPlus program. Those are the kinds of tools that I think are important to my business and the way I interact with my customers — especially being able to track and monitor the genetic potential for reproductive efficiency," he emphasizes. "I also pay a lot of attention to the heifer pregnancy EPD (expected progeny difference) and individual records of how difficult it is to get these cows pregnant."

As part of his veterinary business, he tests these bulls for customers with breeding soundness evaluations. This helps him find lines of bulls that excel in semen output and quality to breed to cows that excel in the harsh eastern environment, he explains, ever conscious of making decisions that will help his customers down the line.

A proponent of using all available tools to increase quality, Kirkman uses genetic tests like high-density 50K tests on all bulls sold and GeneMax® (GMX) tests on appropriate Angus-based females, genetically enhanced EPDs, reproductive tract scores, docility scores and more. He was an early adopter of the Angus Information Management System (AIMS) when it first came out, and keeps careful records for his herd.

Adoption of these technologies is still slow in the commercial sector, but interest is growing. Kirkman says most of his customers don't necessarily want to know all of the information themselves, but they expect him to know it and to provide it.

"I think a big component of being successful in the seedstock business is to

educate yourself and stay involved in the industry — not just the registered industry but even the commercial part of it — to know where the opportunities are as a business. This can help you be on the cutting edge of providing genetics and already have them ready to sell by the time people are asking for it. Those are the people that are going to be successful."

On the other hand, some of his customers want all of the information they can get.

Early adopters

Mike Mutch grew up in a time that farming was a tough way to stay afloat financially. His only experience around agriculture was the time he enjoyed on his grandparents' farm in Canada. In 1996, he and his parents partnered to buy a farm in North Carolina.

They have about 40 cows, and he offers a cow-replacement business.

After several years of a low-input traditional system, Mutch first contacted Kirkman as a veterinarian to solve a calf-mortality issue. They got along

well, and Mutch became a bull customer, too.

Now, through his relationship with Kirkman, Mutch realizes the traditional management and genetic selection wasn't getting him the quality he wanted. He's an apt user of genetic selection tools, because, he says, "If we're going to do it, then we're going to do it right."

Mutch says he doesn't raise enough calves to send to a feedyard, so he says he is unable to get carcass data. Instead, he uses the GMX Focus™ test on all of his steers to find their gain and grade potential. Realizing that he can't be "everything to everybody," he focuses on selling replacement cows that are proven to perform in the challenging southeastern environment.

He has a GMX Advantage™ test done on all of his females, which is the more in-depth commercial genetic test available, offering a maternal score, a terminal score and a combined score. He only keeps those who score 75 or higher on a 100-point scale. After several years of genetic-selection pressure, he says all of his females are within the top 30 percentile.

With the national cow herd so small, retaining more females is important, but replacement heifers take a while to recover their development costs. To combat that, Mutch offers proven cows that have had two or three calves. These calves add value

to his herd and help him stay in business developing females. By the time the cow has had two or three calves, she has proven she can thrive in their environment.

To offer high-quality females, he places a lot of emphasis on genetic selection so those older females he sells will still provide desirable genetics for carcass quality to their calves.

"This lets me keep back the best genetics to keep improving my herd, but I'm selling proven females in their prime. I sell cows that can produce those high-quality calves to hit the quality market," Mutch says.

"It's a minor piece in a major puzzle, but it all adds up," he adds.

He's also been an early adopter of new technologies, with Kirkman's help. In addition to the GMX testing, he uses estrus synchronization, artificial insemination and

tried gender-selected semen for the first time this year to raise more females.

He does his best to make educated decisions with the use of technology. In the grand scheme of things, the cost for the tests is not that much, he emphasizes.

Above all, he admits, "Since I wasn't born on a farm, I don't want to be that city slicker trying to reinvent the

wheel. The data may be fantastic, but they still have to work in our environment. Some people just look over the fence to make their decisions, but there is more value beneath that. We keep track of data; it adds value to our herd by tracking the calves' performance."

Lamenting that size does play a role in a segmented industry, he is trying to provide quality females because he doesn't have enough steers to sell to the feedyard. He adds that Kirkman has been working on organizing like-minded producers to form a co-op to market their high-quality calves.

To get to that point, Kirkman says he has started offering a sale for his customers that is the first of its kind in North Carolina. The sale includes females with calves out of his bulls, and all of the calves have been GMX tested (and since all of his bulls have a 50K test, the calves can all be genetically sire-matched through GMX) and vaccinated. The steer calves were tested with GMX Focus, and the heifer calves were tested with GMX Advantage.

Kirkman laughs and says, "Being the first of its kind may mean it's cutting edge or on the chopping block." Not all of his customers understand the value of the genetic testing, and until the idea becomes more prevalent, he'll just keep up with the education efforts.

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