



DAMS OF DISTINCTION

The emphasis on growth and milk production is all wrong, say these cattlemen. It's time to focus on fertility and longevity.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BOYD KIDWELL

Duane Strider sells a lot of bulls, but he believes it's family that counts. Cow families, that is.

This North Carolina cattleman has built a business around identifying cows with longevity and multiplying those genetics. Duane and wife, Wendy, who raise Gelbvieh cattle, have 25 Dam of Distinction and Dam of Merit cows in their herd of 350. In the Gelbvieh breed, less than 5%

of cows earn Dam of Merit and less than 1% achieve Dam of Distinction.

The Strider's cows earn these honors by calving as 2-year-olds, maintaining regular calving intervals and producing calves that are above the herd average weaning weight. The couple sells bulls and heifers primarily to commercial cattlemen.

"When a producer tells me he wants to save or sell replacement heifers from a bull, I like to show

Good cow genetics is what Duane Strider contends the beef business is built on. The North Carolina cattleman's herd is Gelbvieh and includes 25 Dam of Distinction and Dam of Merit cows.

him young bulls out of my Dam of Distinction cows," Strider says.

"Cow families are what the beef business is built on. The more longevity we have the better. Raising or buying a replacement heifer to replace an open cow is an expensive proposition."

Strider says during the years, he's found there are three types of bull buyers: those who buy bulls for a terminal cross, who want high weaning and yearling weight EPDs (expected progeny difference); those who buy bulls to breed heifers and want low-birthweight and high weaning weight EPDs; and those who buy bulls with an eye toward saving heifers or to sell replacements. Customers also want bulls to sire feeder calves with genetics for growth and carcass characteristics.

COW POWER. While many commercial producers evaluate bulls by weaning weights and yearling weight EPDs, a growing number are realizing fertility and longevity on the female side are key factors in ranch profits.

With replacement bred heifers costing \$1,600 to more than \$2,200 per head, each cow that fails to rebreed and needs to be replaced hurts a rancher's bottom line. Even if a producer retains homegrown replacement heifers, the cost of feeding and managing young females to calve and breed back for a second calf is going through the roof. Cows that produce eight or more above-average calves really help a ranch's bottom line.

For 15 years, Judd Ranch, of Pomona, Kan., has been the Gelbvieh breed's No. 1 breeder/owner in numbers of Dams of Distinction and Dams of Merit. This year, the operation had 84 of the honored females in its 700-cow herd.

Dave Judd says the growth and

fertility his ranch's Gelbvieh and Balancer cattle demonstrate under tough range and pasture conditions are a testament to 30 years of breeding and good culling.

"If you are rolling [culling out] many cows every year, you better find a new breed or individuals within the breeds of bulls you are using," Judd says. "Whatever breed of bulls you use, select for fertility all of the time because it's difficult to infuse fertility into a cow herd."

Judd says he has also selected for light birthweight and explosive growth performance of calves. He expects heifers to calve as 2-year-olds and puts pressure on cows to conceive early in a 45-day breeding season. Cows meet these performance standards primarily grazing forage.

"At Judd Ranch, we're all about cow power," Judd says.

Zach Swaim, of Mocksville, N.C., is a Judd Ranch bull customer who agrees completely with the importance of cow power. Swaim markets truckloads of feeder calves and sells replacement heifers from his 220-cow herd at Willow Springs Farm. He also retains crossbred heifers to build his herd genetics.

The North Carolina cattleman describes his cows as Gelbvieh/Angus cross with a touch of ear leftover from Santa Gertrudis cows in his original herd. Swaim appreciates the consistency of Judd Ranch genetics.

"I always look at cow families

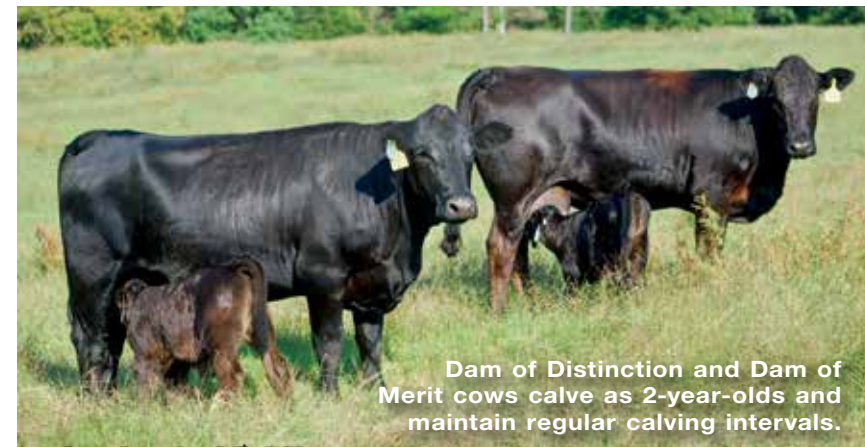
when I buy bulls. I keep my own replacement heifers and sell replacements, so I need my bulls to give me maternal strength from mothers with strong genetics for fertility and longevity, as well as weight gain and carcass characteristics," he says.

TOO MUCH GROWTH. One trend in some cow herds Texas A&M professor Jim Sanders isn't too fond of these days is the overemphasis on growth.

Sanders doesn't mind getting on a soapbox when he talks about a drop in maternal longevity in cow herds. He blames overemphasis on growth and milk EPDs for a trend toward larger, heavy-milking cows and high drop-out rates for commercial cows in tough environments.

"We've gone overboard on growth EPDs for a long time. We need to wake up and realize we've got too many big cows that give too much milk. We need cows that are more efficient and can make it on what feed and forage a commercial producer can provide," he says.

If you're saving replacement heifers, Sanders recommends buying bulls out of older cows with long track records of producing calves, especially in a similar environment to yours. "It doesn't make so much difference to me if a cow has 'Dam of Distinction' on her record as that she has stayed productive and raised a good calf every year for as many years as possible." ●



Dam of Distinction and Dam of Merit cows calve as 2-year-olds and maintain regular calving intervals.