



BETTER CATTLE: Lisa Zirkle, owner of Shenandoah Valley Simmentals, says the SimAngus female offers improved milking ability and more pounds of calf at weaning.

Science makes the difference

By **ROCKY WOMACK**

RAISING cattle today requires a mixture of farming and science rather than relying on a hit-or-miss breeding management program similar to that used by our fathers and grandfathers.

"I focus my breeding program on producing cattle that are easy fleshing, structurally sound, growthy and have abundant longevity and high carcass merit," says Lisa Zirkle, owner of Shenandoah Valley Simmentals in Quicksburg, Va. "The brood cows must be able to raise a baby on their own without a feed bucket under their noses. These cattle must convert grass to pounds very efficiently."

Zirkle, who has raised cattle for 30 years, owns 285 head of purebred red and black Simmentals, calving in the spring and fall. Her management plan involves behind-the-scenes day-to-day and long-term decisions based on solid scientific data.

"The generation interval of cattle is such that the decisions I make today affect the profit and income in years to come," Zirkle says. "I spend a lot of time studying sire summaries and pedigrees and planning matings to determine which sires will produce the type of offspring that are in demand. I continually strive to improve the production and profitability of my cattle while maintaining eye-appeal and balanced EPDs [expected progeny differences]."

Part of her management plan involves flushing donor females to collect embryos and then implanting them into recipient cows. Through this genetic process, Zirkle vastly improves the genetics of the herd faster and receives additional lifetime productivity out of a female.

Targeted marketing

Zirkle targets her marketing toward commercial cattle producers who want to improve their own breeding programs, as well as marketing to purebred breeders. A large part of her business is selling on-farm performance-tested bulls. She particularly targets cattle producers who are raising Angus or Angus crossbreds and says the SimAngus female can improve milking ability, the pounds of calf at weaning, disposition and carcass merit. She adds that this is an exceptional cross to use for

Key Points

- Raising cattle today is not a hit-or-miss process, but a science.
- Producer targets her marketing to commercial producers.
- Excellent recordkeeping can improve a marketing program.

replacement females.

"I've had great success and have many repeat customers who have been extremely satisfied with the cattle they've purchased here," Zirkle says, "and I have standing orders for females every year."

"I strive to thoroughly understand the customer's needs and how he plans to use a particular animal. I spend a lot of time before we even look at the cattle, trying to determine which ones will meet his particular needs. Is he looking for a calving-ease bull to use on heifers, or a bull for use on mature cows where he wants to get the maximum possible weaning weight? I suggest bulls that I believe will best fit his needs, then he makes the final selection based on personal preference. That makes for a very satisfied customer. It's a win-win situation for both of us. Also, I always encourage customer feedback on their purchases. That information is valuable for use in my continuous herd-improvement plan."

Misconceptions about breed

The Simmentals originating from Switzerland were large-framed cattle used for both milk and beef production.

Zirkle says the Simmentals of today are not those of yesterday. The American version today sports a moderate frame, is easy-fleshing, much easier calving, and has solid-color patterns, excellent maternal ability, exceptional growth and improved carcass merit.

The American Simmental Association has worked on addressing the calving-ease issues. "We've made tremendous improvement in the past five years," says Steve McGuire, director of operations with the American Simmental Association in Bozeman, Mont. "We've collected a large amount of data on Simmental bulls bred to Angus virgin heifers as part of the association's calving-ease project. This data along with calving-ease data collected from

Simmental breeders is used to generate expected progeny differences for calving ease and other traits. EPDs essentially rank animals based on how their offspring will perform in certain traits. Using EPDs, Simmental breeders are producing bulls today with much more calving ease than five years ago."

Historically, about one-third of calves born to heifers received some type of assistance at birth. By selecting a calving-ease Simmental bull, this number can drop to one out of five or


less. McGuire emphasizes that every animal has strengths and weaknesses and says EPDs are an excellent tool for producers to select the best bulls for their operations.

The ASA has taken a scientific approach to improving genetics and educating the public about calving ease. The scientific approach looks at determining strengths and weaknesses and where the breed can improve.

Womack is a writer from Danville, Va.



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