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Bulls of the Big Sky

By Dan Reider, *SimTalk* Editor

A chance meeting between a Montana Simmental breeder and ASA CEO Jerry Lipsey has led to an enthusiastic, momentum-gathering effort to collectively develop and market more than 200 bulls.

Dale Miller of Gildford was in attendance at the Montana Simmental Association's 2008 State Tour and sat down next to Lipsey. During the course of their conversation, Miller asked him for marketing advice. Lipsey suggested that he consider joining together with other breeders and referred him to Marty Ropp, ASA's Director of Field Services, who had previously assisted in the formation of several other groups of breeders.

"There were four of us on that tour: myself along with Joe Konesky, Phil Gilbert, and Sig Pugrud, and the more we talked about the idea, the more we liked it," Miller recalls.

The group of four quickly expanded once the word got out. "We were pleasantly surprised when several other people showed up and asked if they could join us. When we saw that kind of interest, we knew that we were on our way," he said.

Miller serves as spokesman for the group, which chose "Bulls of the Big Sky" as its official title — a name that reflects their Montana and Idaho base, an area widely renowned for its quality seed stock. Idaho is represented by Ryan and Maureen Mai, and Maureen, who had been very active in the American Junior Simmental

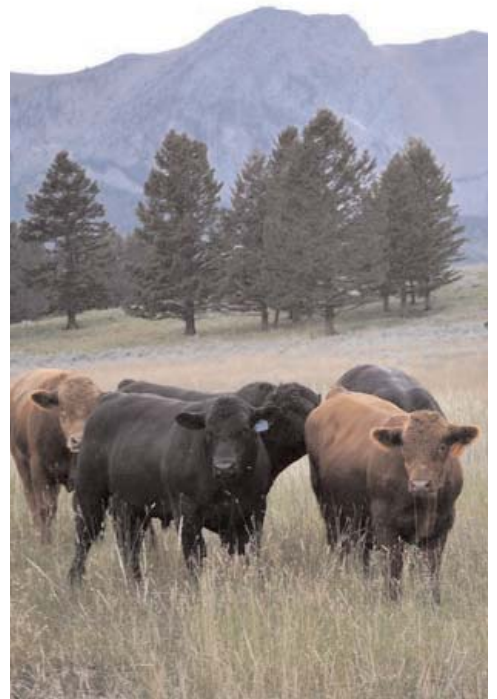
Association in the early 1990s, was asked to serve as group treasurer.

Ropp advised them to concentrate on the success of the entire group and to focus marketing efforts into the largely untapped commercial potential of southern Montana, Northern Wyoming and Idaho.

The group responded by scheduling the sale at the Billings Livestock Commission on Monday, February 22, 2010. Roger Jacobs of Billings, highly regarded and well known throughout the region, was retained to handle auctioneering duties.

The bulls are being developed by Phil Veltkamp, whose feedlot, at Manhattan, has had considerable experience, developing more than 1,000 Angus and Red Angus bulls annually. "The bulls were delivered on October 1, underwent a brief warm-up period, and will be fed for a little more than four months prior to the sale," Miller explained.

"If everyone shows up with the bulls they have committed, we'll have 185 yearlings and about 40 long-yearlings to offer for sale," Miller said. "About half will be Sim-Angus; there will be a sizeable number of purebred Simmentals, plus several Angus bulls from Jamie Lannen and Hayes Ranch. Although most will be black, we'll also have one of the largest offerings of red Simmental bulls in Montana," which should appeal to Hereford and Red Angus commercial breeders who want to crossbreed and not change hair color."



Founding members of the Big Sky Sale have more than 300 years of collective experience in the Simmental breeding business alone and are united in the hope that combining that experience with a spirit of cooperation will help to ensure the success of their effort.

Maureen Mai, in her capacity as treasurer, has been impressed by the excitement generated by her fellow members of the Bulls of the Big Sky Sale group. "It's a neat assortment of people and cattle, and the enthusiasm is contagious," she concluded. "We fervently believe that this sale will prove to be beneficial to a lot of people, both producers and buyers."

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All About Relationships

By Dan Reider, *SimTalk* Editor

We buy bulls, regardless of the breed, based largely on personal relationships,” says Matt Pearce of Pearce Cattle Company, Okeechobee, Florida. “We do not buy bulls randomly. We’ve continually purchased them from a handful of producers that we know and respect. Most of the time, we don’t even go to their bull sales – we buy them based on a combination of the breeder’s opinion, by studying the sale catalogs and through DVD observations.”

The Pearce Cattle Company cowherd, located on the shores of Lake Okeechobee, just a couple of hours north of Miami, consists of 2,000 Brahman-influenced females.

It’s managed on a day-to-day basis by Matt’s younger brother, Mark, with assistance from their father, Roy. “Mark and Dad are the ones who keep this outfit up and running. My brother is one of the top cowhands I know – the best I’ve seen at handling and managing cows,” Matt continued. “Since I’ve been working in sales for Purina Mills as the Cattle Specialist for South Florida for the last 10 years, my involvement is focused on buying our bulls and handling paperwork. They call me the pencil and paper guy and Mark is the guy on the ground.”

Roy’s brothers and sisters also have a stake in the ranch, sharing in any profits that may accrue. Mark and Matt are the fifth generation to work the ranch, which was established in the 1800s, when their great, great grandfather settled in South Florida after migrating from Georgia.

For many years, the Pearce cowherd revolved around a three-breed rotation involving Angus, Hereford and either Brahman or Brahman-based breeds like Beefmaster. “What we’d do was run five or six years of heavy Brahman breeding to produce replacement heifers or until we’d get too much ear — then we’d infiltrate some Angus and Hereford back on the herd to balance them out on the *Bos taurus* end,” Matt recalls.

Disappointed in their weaning weights, which were running in the 500 to 525 pound range, a decision was made a few years ago to change direction with regard to sire breed. “We’d heard about the impact that Simmie-Angus bulls were having around the country and thought that they might be just what we needed,” Matt said. “We were looking to add some more weaning weight and get some additional hybrid vigor. We’re now utilizing SimAngus bulls in a terminal situation, but we are

retaining more and more of their heifer progeny. There is no question that our SimAngus bulls are weaning heavier calves than our straight Angus bulls. It is very likely that we’ll continue to move away from straight-bred Angus bulls in the direction of more and more SimAngus.”

Sunshine Farms in Clanton, Alabama, has been the source for most of the SimAngus bulls they have used. “I’ve never been to their sale — that first year, I got hold of Tommy Brown of Sunshine Farms, who by the way is one of the finest men I’ve ever met, and asked him if those bulls would hold up,” Pearce said. “When Tommy told me ‘man, they will work and they will hold up,’ that was good enough for me.

Since then, they have also acquired SimAngus bulls from the Georgia-based Bull Power Group. “Randy Daniel of that group is a good friend, so I know some of those guys personally and have established an equally good relationship with them,” he stated.

In all, the Pearces have purchased more than 60 SimAngus bulls over the past four years and turned out 40 this breeding

season. In a normal year, they’ll purchase 15 to 20 SimAngus sires, and will keep them in the herd as long as they are physically sound.

Four years ago, the Pearce bull battery consisted mostly of Angus, along with smaller numbers of Brahman, Herefords and Charolais. Today, 40% of their herd bulls are SimAngus, with another 40% Angus, 10% Brahman and 10% Charolais. “We’re phasing out the Charolais because we can get the same results, weight-wise, from SimAngus,” he said.

He believes that their emphasis on carcass traits has paid off. “It is my opinion that our buyers become familiar with our cattle, know how they perform and that’s why they keep coming back to buy them. If you provide those guys with a good product, it pays off in the long run. This is also a relationship thing,” he reiterated.

“You can put a SimAngus bull on these Brahman-influenced cows and get the calf crop straightened out very quickly,” Pearce concluded. “You get a more uniform bunch of calves, then sort those heifers off and they’ll make outstanding cows. At the same time, you don’t sacrifice the steers because they’re going to be black, they’ll fit the Certified Angus Beef criteria and they’re going to be heavier.”



Crew, left to right: Roy, Aubrey, Jacklyn, Jared, Chandler, Cali and Mark.