

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



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DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

Data Makes the Difference

By Lisa Bard, *Santa Gertrudis USA* Editor

The genetic advancements made in the Santa Gertrudis breed in the past 10-15 years are apparent now more than ever. At a time when some other breeds struggle, demand for **Data Driven – Profit Proven** Santa Gertrudis bulls and females is strong and remains so, even when the cattle cycle began its downward trend following the highs a few years ago. Santa Gertrudis has proven to be a breed whose performance is backed by data – and that is what has made the difference.

At the recent 2020 International Super Sale, held March 6 during the Houston Livestock Stock Show and Rodeo, Leachman Cattle of Colorado (LCoC) bought the pick of the Schuster Farms ET calf crop and then, in partnership with Shuster Farms, bought the pick of embryo transfer (ET) calves from Quail Valley Farms. For one of the leading seedstock bull producers in the nation to invest in Santa Gertrudis genetics is no minor thing.

Annually, LCoC markets more than 2,000 bulls, including Angus, Red Angus, Stabilizer composites (with both black and red lines) and Charolais. Approximately 2.5 years ago, they started to incorporate Brangus into the black Stabilizer line and have been looking for ways to add *Bos indicus* genetics to the red Stabilizer line.

Lee Leachman, LCoC CEO, acknowledges that they have been investigating ways to incorporate Santa Gertrudis into their breeding program for quite some time. This year, with confidence that the breed and breeders are moving forward, the tipping point came. Leachman was very encouraged by a group of cattle in the International Super Sale offering that were substantially better than the mean in terms of their expected progeny differences (EPDs) – and they decided to jump in.

“We are highly aware that genetic improvement in different breeds is occurring at different rates. If you are going to be competitive, you must work with breeds that are improving,” Leachman says. “As we looked at the American breed options, we looked at what SGBI is doing and what progressive Santa Gertrudis breeders are doing with genomics. We also like the approach of taking a more open view of their herdbook and allowing breeders to incorporate new genetics and then breed back up to purebred status. We concluded that all of those things have created a genetic trend in Santa Gertrudis that is unique and special.”

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Building Hybrid Lines

Leachman picked two breeds – one red (Santa Gertrudis) and one black (Brangus) – as a means for them to incorporate *Bos indicus* into their hybrid lines – or more correctly, to develop new hybrid lines based on those gene pools.

“We are very much looking at our investment in Santa Gertrudis as a way to build hybrids that have a percentage of *Bos indicus* blood in them,” Leachman says. “We will use them to make the best hybrids that we can design.”

Assuming that the embryo picks are females, they plan to multiply them rapidly, both as purebreds and as hybrids – breeding back to Santa Gertrudis as well as outcrossing. Their intent is not toward a specific percentage of breeds, but instead to evaluate the resulting animals and their traits and see how it all plays out.

“We do not go into these projects with any predetermined percentages of bloodlines – we simply see what we get and measure the outcomes and then determine what is optimal,” Leachman says. “Our strategy with Santa Gertrudis will be to multiply purebreds but then also outcross them to make hybrids, but with no predetermined idea of what the right mix is. We will let the production seek its own level.”

LCoC works with Galen Weaver, DVM, a consulting veterinarian for feedlots and owner of Emma Creek Cattle Co., south of Amarillo, on their *Bos indicus*-influence breeding projects. They also partner with Taylor Schuster of Schuster Farms, a longstanding Santa Gertrudis breeder who is also producing American Red females. These partners are involved in their Santa Gertrudis purchases.

“We had the opportunity to go into the Quail Valley Farms and Schuster Farms herds – where they are stacking these top genetics – and pick from a set of ET calves from each herd,” Leachman says. “That is a pretty unique opportunity. If we are going to get into these breeds, we want to get in at the top.”

Why Santa Gertrudis?

Leachman started looking at *Bos indicus* breeds and the existing composites that were around years ago because they were marketing genetics and working with breeders in Florida. They knew that in the Southeast, cattle would need a level of

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acclimation that cannot be obtained easily with *Bos taurus* cattle. There was a realization then that they needed (and there was opportunity) to build the right kind of animal for that environment.

“Quite simply, we need populations of *Bos indicus* cattle that are actively improving the same way *Bos taurus* populations are improving and moving rapidly. We see a huge market potential there,” Leachman says.

The selection pressure that Santa Gertrudis breeders are placing on economically relevant traits is very important and relevant in LCoC’s decision to buy into the breed, as well as the involvement of genomic-enhanced selection to accelerate that.

“If Santa Gertrudis breeders were not doing that, we would not have purchased these genetics because you cannot be an island unto yourself,” Leachman says. “All of our success – and anyone who breeds Santa Gertrudis – is dependent on the rate of improvement of the breed. You can’t do it without the data and the desire to put emphasis on those traits.”

In Leachman’s opinion, Santa Gertrudis cattle are supremely acclimated to southern environments but will still hair up in the winter and then slick off in the summer. On top of that, breeders are putting upward pressure on marbling – which is very important to LCoC and their customers – and downward pressure on birth weights, which will be important as they outcross to the *Bos taurus* populations. Selection for the fertility traits is also possible now and is almost equally important from a financial standpoint as is selection for growth and carcass traits.

“Our task as breeders is to find the genetics that work and in today’s environment. Cattle must have the ability to acclimate, they must have fertility and they must have carcass merit. If you don’t have all those things, the cattle are not going to work,” Leachman says. “The reality is, you need sufficient populations to make genetic improvement and unless you are measuring all of the traits related to profitability and then combining that in a genetic analysis, you’re going to get left in the dust.”

Santa Gertrudis is making the dust as they continue to march forward.