

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



Post Office Box 1257 | Kingsville, Texas 78364
(o) 361.592.9357 | (f) 361.592.8572
www.santagertrudis.com

DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE | May 12, 2021

This article first appeared in the May issue of Santa Gertrudis USA

Positioning and Predictability

Insights from the Cattlemen's Panel at Santa Gertrudis Field Day

Written by Micky Burch

KINGSVILLE, Texas - A panel of speakers as colorful as Santa Gertrudis cattle entertained and educated attendees during the "Celebrating Santas" Field Day held March 27 at Wendt Ranches, Bay City, Texas, as part of the 70th Santa Gertrudis Breeders International (SGBI) Annual Meeting.

Donnell Brown, fifth generation on the R.A. Brown Ranch, Throckmorton, Texas, sat on the panel and shared his experience with raising 18 different breeds of cattle and currently selling more than 800 bulls annually. Joining him was Ky Pohler, Ph.D., assistant professor and graduate faculty member, Texas A&M University Animal Science Department. Pohler's research concentrates on physiological and molecular mechanisms that control reproductive efficiency in cattle.

Mike Arnold, Arnold Land and Cattle, Columbus, Texas, also shared his experiences through his personal ranch and as a representative for Superior Livestock, a leading satellite video auction. Last, but certainly not least, was field day host Gene Kubecka, Wendt Ranches, who utilizes SGBI genetic selection tools and a robust artificial insemination (AI) program to meet the ranch's production goals and market more than 200 bulls annually to commercial buyers.

SGBI Executive Director and panel moderator Webb Fields initially posed the panel with a question about how they believe the Santa Gertrudis breed is currently positioned within the cattle industry.

"The Santa Gertrudis breed, this day in time, is absolutely in the best position that they've ever been in because it far exceeds any other breed in the endless possibilities for a crossbreeding program for commercial cattle people," Arnold stated confidently. The discussion for much of the panel stemmed from this statement and how Santa Gertrudis seedstock producers can better serve the commercial cattleman.

"The bottom line here is we sell bulls to the commercial cowman," Kubecka said.

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



Post Office Box 1257 | Kingsville, Texas 78364
(o) 361.592.9357 | (f) 361.592.8572
www.santagertrudis.com

DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

Brown agreed, and explained that a large portion of the customer base at R.A. Brown Ranch is the commercial cowman. "Our No. 1 goal is to improve their profitability and their sustainability in the cattle business with our genetics and with our service," he said.

Brown's formula for success is simple: select the female to fit the environment; select the bull that best complements the cows to produce the calf that best fits the market; and select the breeding system that best fits your management.

Environment

Early in the breed's development, Santa Gertrudis cattle demonstrated a relatively high degree of varying environmental tolerance and, equally important, exhibited calving ease, mothering and milking ability. Many ranchers operating in harsh climates turn to Santa Gertrudis for survivability, as they thrive in hot, humid coastal regions as well as arid territories.

Kubecka is a believer in Santa Gertrudis genetics.

"In order to get those mother cows that we're talking about, we've got to keep that Santa Gertrudis look and what makes Santa Gertrudis the hardy animals they are," he pointed out. "You've got to be able to produce a female that can take the conditions that we raise these cattle in."

Adding to that and expressing the versatility of Santa Gertrudis to match many other breeds, "You've got the animal that has more ways to go than any other animal out there and still has enough *Bos indicus* in it to run in any country you want to put them in," Arnold said.

"We're fortunate that they can survive in the environments that we put them in and we challenge them in," Pohler pointed out.

Brown echoed that, adding, "Our cattle here fit to adapt to a hotter environment. They've got strong maternal traits [and] they've got tremendous longevity."

Part of the reason Brown believes the cattle have adapted so well is attributed to crossbreeding. "I'm a huge fan of hybrid vigor – heterosis," he said, adding that creating crossbreds aids in females fitting their production environment.

Buying Bulls that Fit the Females

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



Post Office Box 1257 | Kingsville, Texas 78364
(o) 361.592.9357 | (f) 361.592.8572
www.santagertrudis.com

DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

To find the right bull to mate to females in varying environmental conditions, the panelists recommended studying phenotype as well as the data. "I want to know as much about my bull that I'm going to have breed all my cows as I possibly can," Brown stated. "My breeding program is dependent on it – my future is dependent on it – and so I want to use all the tools I have available to make the best decision."

When evaluating physical conformation, all the panelists agreed structural correctness came to the top as a priority since bulls, like their female counterparts, are oftentimes expected to live, travel and reproduce in rugged environments. "I'm going to start at the ground and I'm going to evaluate his feet – his foundation – and I'm going to go up from there," Brown explained. "They've got to be functional; they've got to be sound; they've got to have good feet to last a long time in any environment."

Pohler seconded that, adding that a physical evaluation is a very important part of breeding soundness exams (BSEs). "The first aspect of a BSE should be all physical about the bull," Pohler shared. From there, BSEs include scrotal measurements and semen evaluation.

Generally speaking, an ideal scrotal measurement for a yearling bull is 32 to 36 centimeters. One topic of discussion that came up is if scrotal size can be too big. Pohler commented that measurements entering the 40s would be "too big" in his book, though there is a theory that in extreme environments, low hanging testicles and larger scrotal size is Mother Nature's way of creating distance and surface area in order for the bull to keep the testicles away from his body to maintain a temperature 5 degrees lower than body temp.

From there, the conversation turned to semen. "Semen quality and semen production is highly dependent on environmental status," Pohler explained. "Reproduction itself is highly dependent on management – there's a management aspect that goes into it that you have to be focusing on year-round that you can't think about one time a year.

"Realistic expectations are probably the most important aspect of any reproductive management program," he continued.

Bull management and development can be a hot-button issue among beef producers.

"Bull development continues to be a highly debated topic in regard to what that means for lifetime longevity and lifetime fertility of those bulls," Pohler continued.

For example, bulls that have been fed hard and developed through gain tests may "melt off" once they're kicked out the with the cows. "We have to balance their lifetime longevity and being able to make sure that they can maintain themselves," Pohler explained.

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



Post Office Box 1257 | Kingsville, Texas 78364
(o) 361.592.9357 | (f) 361.592.8572
www.santagertrudis.com

DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

Kubecka agrees, and explained that at Wendt Ranches, bulls are limit fed during development. "By reducing the amount of feed they can eat per day, we're growing them out like they need to be grown out," Kubecka explained.

Like physical management of the animal, Pohler emphasized how important it is to manage each animal's data. "The No. 1 thing in fertility-based indexes is it takes really good data to develop a really good fertility index," he said.

Pohler encouraged attendees to collect sound, accurate data to help increase index accuracy. "These indexes are always going to exist, but the data that we put into them is going to determine how successful they are or not."

The data does make a difference, according to Brown. He relies on data from his own herd via DNA-test results to increase the information's value and accuracy, which enables him to make more confident decisions to enhance the profitability of the business.

"Today, I'm using less proven bulls because the tools we have are so much better," he explained. "Even with the accuracy of DNA, if we don't continue to report the data, the DNA loses its power very quickly.

"We can best manage what we measure, and we're measuring more traits than ever before," he continued. "The average of these EPDs [expected progeny differences] today will be the average of the proven bulls five years from now – the power is in the average – that is the genetic merit of your cow herd." Increasing the average of your cow herd, Brown explained, can be accomplished through selection of superior breeders – i.e., genetic selection.

As time goes on, beef producers are learning more and more about those genetics. Taught for ages that progeny get half their genetics from Mom and half from Dad, "We know really well now that that's not exactly how genetics works," Pohler explained.

"We can DNA [test] a whole set of full sibs and there'll be a significant amount of difference in those animals," Brown added.

Regardless of test results, a bull's purpose is to deliver the genetic package that was purchased. "I want them to do it all, but I want to use all the tools I have to make sure I do the best I can selecting the right animal," Brown said. "Science will prevail, and the good cattle will rise to the top."

Marketing Calves

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



Post Office Box 1257 | Kingsville, Texas 78364
(o) 361.592.9357 | (f) 361.592.8572
www.santagertrudis.com

DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

The primary reason for establishing a herd where the females fit the environment and the bulls work on the cows is to make a marketable calf. Arnold expressed the need for cattle producers to adapt to what the end user wants.

“Good cattle sell themselves,” Arnold stated. “Pay attention to the markets, pay attention to what the end buyer wants. And the way you get there is [to] develop a marketing plan, not a selling plan.”

One way of marketing the cattle producers have worked so hard to raise is on a grid.

“Cattle sold on a value-based grid – premiums and discounts – the average is the average of the industry or that plant,” Brown explained. “If we’re not at 80 percent Choice or better, those cattle are likely to get discounted in the marketplace, even though they’re so much better than they were 20 years ago. So, we’ve got to move fast to keep up with just where the industry is going.”

It’s no secret that U.S. Quality Grades in the beef industry have improved over the last couple of decades. “I think grade has changed a lot in the last 20 years,” Brown speculated. “We were pretty steady in that 50 to 55 percent Choice as an industry average ... and we were less than 3 percent Prime. And now, 20 years later, the industry average is 80 percent Choice or better and 9 percent Prime.”

Other panelists agreed that continued change is inevitable in the future for beef producers. “Over the next 10 years, we have an opportunity to really grow the industry, probably like we’ve never seen before, in regard to efficiency as the tools become available to make more accurate genetic decisions,” Pohler predicted. He also cautioned attendees to be patient. “Just remember that it takes time for those things to pay off.”

With respect to making genetic changes, “It’s so much easier to sell what the customer wants to buy than it is to simply try to sell what I want to raise,” Brown reiterated.

That being said, we all know change can be hard. “You don’t have to change, but you will have to compete with those who do,” Brown emphasized.

Breeding Systems

Though still only put into effect by fewer than 10 percent of U.S. beef producers, a big change one can make in their herd management is the use of reproductive technology. “I would say people struggle with trying to figure out how to capture value from whatever technology they’re adding to their operation,” Pohler mused. “People really struggle with it from an AI point of view. I think that it really goes into when you’re selling calves.”

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



Post Office Box 1257 | Kingsville, Texas 78364
(o) 361.592.9357 | (f) 361.592.8572
www.santagertrudis.com

DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

According to Brown, "The No. 1 rule: gotta get the cows pregnant. And the earlier I get them pregnant, the more weight I have to sell at market time." He suggested they synchronize their cow herd, AI to a breed-topping bull and then clean up with the best bulls a they can afford. "With synchronization, life is so much easier."

Some producers may be weary of synchronization because of past issues with *Bos indicus* cattle. But as time passes, Pohler assured the audience, synchronization programs are becoming more predictable. "Getting *Bos indicus* cattle to respond to a synchronization program has been a challenge in the U.S., and the reason that challenge has existed is because we don't have the same products available to us that we use in Brazil," Pohler explained.

However, he also said as more is researched and learned about *Bos indicus* cattle in the U.S., there are ways improve response to synchronization protocols. "We know *Bos indicus* cattle are very sensitive to progesterone, so what you have to do with these animals is get their progesterone level down."

That's accomplished by using a CIDR (controlled internal drug release) as the only source of progesterone. Pohler then recommended using a heat detection patch on the back of the female to help indicate which females are in heat, then AI'ing the ones in estrus. Those not in estrus, he said, should either be AI'ed and given a dose of GnRH (gonadotropin-releasing hormone) at the same time, or simply be turned out to let the clean-up bulls handle it.

"The ability to move your herd forward from that estrus synchronization is going to be huge," Pohler said.

Pohler supports this protocol for both seedstock and commercial producers. "Don't discount using estrus synchronization with natural service," he reiterated. "I think that's one of the biggest underutilized approaches in the commercial cow-calf industry."

The panelists agreed that the beef industry is changing faster than ever before and the paradigm of change, Brown explained, says that technology will never move this slowly again.

Santa Gertrudis Breeders International provides progressive leadership, services, programs and technology to promote and broaden the long-term profitability of Santa Gertrudis influence within the beef industry by being member driven and consumer focused.

For more information about Santa Gertrudis Breeders International, please visit www.santagertrudis.com.

SANTA GERTRUDIS BREEDERS INTERNATIONAL



Post Office Box 1257 | Kingsville, Texas 78364
(o) 361.592.9357 | (f) 361.592.8572
www.santagertrudis.com

DATA DRIVEN. PROFIT PROVEN.

Photo: SGBI Cattlemen's Panel

Cutline: The Cattlemen's Panel hosted at the "Celebrating Santas" Field Day included (left to right) Gene Kubecka, Wendt Ranches; Donnell Brown, R.A. Brown Ranch; Mike Arnold, Arnold Land and Cattle; and Ky Pohler, Ph.D., Texas A&M University. The panel was moderated by Santa Gertrudis Breeders International Executive Director Webb Fields (right).