

Why South Devon?

by Lee L. Leachman



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In a beef industry increasingly dominated by Angus cattle – this question could be asked of any of the other breeds. Simply put, why are we relevant? How can we compete? Why would commercial ranchers take a chance on any breed

outside the mainstream – that is outside the Angus breed? Is there any future for seedstock breeders outside of the Angus breed? These are tough questions, but ones that all of us have asked and ones that all of us must answer.

It is often said, that ranching is a by-product of land ownership. For decades, raising cattle has offered a lackluster return on the huge investment in land ownership. While the land was not purchased to run cattle; nonetheless, cattle rearing is still the best use of the land. However, as calf prices have risen sharply over the past decade, this mentality is changing. For the first time, cow/calf producers are making significant returns. Even more interestingly, the outlook is for this to continue. Some beef industry experts even predict landfall profits in the cow/calf sector over the next decade.

This leads me to one of the core underlying questions of our industry: Are ranchers profit driven? My answer is yes. As opportunities expand to make profits in the cow/calf sector, more and more ranchers will attempt to

raise the best cattle they can to make the most profit. Ultimately, not all ranchers will choose this path, but as a producer of seedstock, these are the ranchers I want as customers. Profit driven ranchers will pay for genetics that improve their bottom line. If profit is not their goal, then they are like a flag blowing in the wind – liable to chase any passing fancy or fad available genetically.

**The key question becomes,
“Can South Devon Increase Rancher Profitability?”
To this question, my answer is a resounding, “YES!”**

In today's industry, profitability is driven by several factors. At the cow/calf level fertility, cow feed intake, weaning weight production, and calf market value are the drivers. In the feedlot, feed conversion, gain, carcass weight, and carcass merit are the drivers. In each of these areas, a strong case can be made for the advantages of a planned crossbreeding program that incorporates South Devon.

Create Hybrid Vigor: On the ranch, hybrid vigor is a key driver of profitability. Hybrid vigor increases fertility, cow longevity, calf survival, and calf weight. When summed, these factors increase the pounds weaned per cow exposed by up to 23%! On a ranch weaning an 85% calf crop with a 550 pound average weaning weight, this 23% advantage adds up to an extra 93.5 pounds of calves to sell per cow! Ranchers should crossbreed, but they need to crossbreed with a breed that works on the ranch and does not sacrifice the value of the calves produced.



A South Devon bull with a \$ Profit of \$8,147.



A South Devon bull with a \$ Profit of \$10,263.





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The Best British Cross: The challenge to crossbreeding, is finding the right breed to cross on Angus. Most ranchers fondly recall the black baldy cows that they had in the 70's. This leads them to first consider Hereford. While Hereford x Angus females are great, the resulting F1 feeder calves leave much to be desired. The Hereford x Angus steer lacks Angus levels of marbling, has insufficient muscularity, and does not reach adequate carcass weights before getting too fat. The South Devon breed keeps Angus marbling, adds to muscularity, and increases carcass weight. For these reasons, South Devon is the best British breed crossbreeding option.

More Feed Efficient: Beyond hybrid vigor, the biggest opportunity for improving profitability is by reducing the feed required to produce a pound of beef. This starts with the cow and how much she eats. Then, the feed conversion on the steers is important. Through aggressive selection for performance, the Angus breed has directly selected for increased appetite. The high growth Angus, for the most part, are also high feed intake Angus. In contrast, the South Devon breed has shown itself to be lower on feed intake and more efficient on gain. Both results from the Midland Bull Station and our results from our feed intake testing at Leachman Cattle have shown that the average South Devon ranks very high on feed efficiency. In fact, South Devon might be the most efficient beef breed.

Higher Profitability: In the pork and poultry industries, seedstock companies use multi-trait selection indexes to improve profitability. These indexes balance the effect that each trait has on income and expense. The index allows breeders to identify the genetics that most rapidly improve profitability. At Leachman Cattle, we are applying the same technology to our beef cattle selection. We have three indexes that select for profitability:

\$Ranch: profit for a cow/calf producer who sells calves at weaning

\$Feeder: profit for the feeder that buys your calves

\$Profit: profit from birth through harvest

Using these indexes, we are able to select for improved net profit. The animals that win offer more hybrid vigor, higher fertility, more growth, higher carcass merit, and reduced feed intake. **Having measured large numbers of bulls in many breeds, it is interesting that South Devon ranks higher than every other breed except for Angus on our \$Profit index.**

Conclusions:

The global beef market is in exciting times with increased demand driven by growing population and growing income levels. Growing demand for beef will create historically large profits for cow/calf producers. The smart commercial ranchers will seek genetics that improve the profitability of their herd. The South Devon breed is ideally positioned to establish itself as a key player in profitable beef production.

Today, it is more important than ever for South Devon breeders to measure and identify their best genetics. This includes measuring cow size, carcass merit, and feed efficiency. Good breeders in every breed are improving their cattle. The bar is rising. To compete, the South Devon breed needs to make maximum genetic change on profitability. By using a profit index, like \$Profit, South Devon breeders can ensure the future of the breed.

Why South Devon? Because South Devon cross Angus cattle make more money – that is how to answer the question!



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