

Bull Producer Extraordinaire

Washington producer focuses on genetics, conditioning and customer service.

Story & photos by **Ed Haag**

If Greg Rathbun of Moses Lake, Wash., weren't selling Angus bulls, he would probably be training Olympic athletes. "There is no question about it — Greg knows how to condition bulls," says Sarah Smith, Washington State University Extension educator specializing in livestock. "His knowledge about how to develop quality bulls is remarkable."

Smith believes that Greg's efforts to produce tough, self-reliant bulls, well-suited to the Northwest, has paid off in an extremely loyal customer base. "Greg is not easily distracted from his goals," she says. "He is very focused on his market — supplying commercial beef producers with just the right kind of bull for their operation."

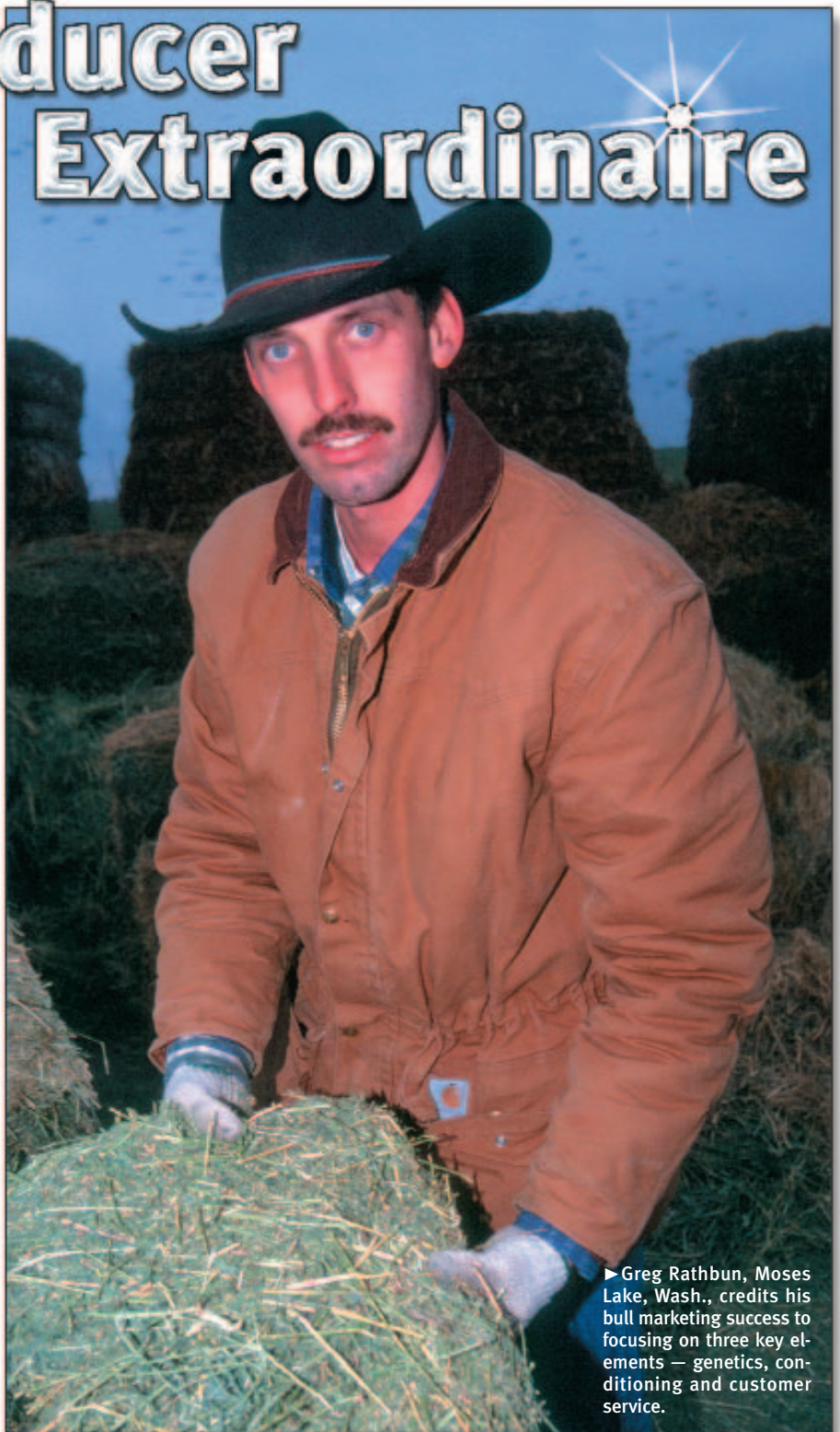
Dick Van de Graaf of Sunnyside, Wash., has been buying bulls from Greg and Greg's father, Corrin, since their first sale 12 years ago. He agrees with Smith. "Their bulls are as good as any you will find anywhere," Van de Graaf says, adding that he now buys most of his bulls from the Rathbuns. "I [have] a lot more important things to do than going around to a bunch of bull sales."

This is no minor compliment coming from a beef producer of Van de Graaf's stature. With more than 45 years in the business, he is one of Washington state's most respected cattlemen. Van de Graaf purchases 20-25 bulls a year for his 2,000-head cow herd, keeping them four to five years before they are replaced.

"We run them on pretty rough ground," he admits. "They [have] to have good feet and legs — that is something we can count on with the Rathbun bulls."

Rod Wesselman, American Angus Association regional manager, notes that Greg's and Corrin's reputations as top bull producers are reflected in the prices they receive at their annual November bull sale. "The Rathbuns averaged \$400 a bull higher this last sale than they did the year before," Wesselman says. "They are now in the top 5% of all the bull sales in my territory."

Greg credits his bull marketing success to



► Greg Rathbun, Moses Lake, Wash., credits his bull marketing success to focusing on three key elements — genetics, conditioning and customer service.

focusing on three key elements — genetics, conditioning and customer service. "You have to have all three to really make it work," he says. "Take away one, and the other two don't mean that much."

Beginning with lineage

Selecting the right genetics for the family herd has been a preoccupation for two generations of Rathbuns. "In the beginning, I

remember dad hauling trailer loads of cows off to the sale because they either had poor bags on them, or they were too big or too small, or they had bad feet," Greg says. "He really had zero tolerance early on."

He notes that today's herd is benefiting from his father's strict adherence to selection. "Our culling rates are now very low," Greg says, adding that using proven sires in their

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artificial insemination (AI) program also enhances the predictability of the offspring.

Both Greg and Corrin spend a great deal of time searching for the right genetics. "All year we are watching the advertisements, attending the bull sales, going to semen collection centers, attending shows and checking out calves on different ranches," Greg says. "We are very firm on what we are looking for."

Specific criteria

At the top of the Rathbuns' list is manageable birth weight for ease of calving, followed by high weaning weight. "An important factor to our customers is performance," Greg says. "Most of our customers are still selling pounds at weaning."

Bob Haase of Edwall, Wash., is one of those bull buyers who sells his calves in the fall. He has been purchasing Rathbun seedstock since he switched to Angus bulls. "With Greg's bulls we have increased our weaning weights," Haase says, noting that the steer calves went from an average of 625

pounds (lb.) to 650 lb., while his heifer calves increased from 600 lb. to 625 lb.

Equally important to the Rathbuns is the quality of the daughters. "Because we use most of our own genetics, we can't be throwing away our daughters," Greg says. "We need bulls that consistently produce good daughters."

The Rathbuns also look at scrotal circumference, carcass traits, disposition and marketability when they are selecting genetics.

At any given time, the Rathbuns are using the semen from a list of approximately eight specifically selected bulls. Every year one or two bulls on their list are replaced by new selections.

The Rathbuns breed more than 350 cows a year, 90% of which are bred by AI. Of those impregnated, about 50 are sold as bred cows. The remainder is calved on site. Last year 130, 13-month-old bulls were sold at their November sale.

"We allow natural selection to take place in our herd," Greg says. "We feed for the average cow, not the skinnier ones. If a cow

does not breed back, we find it is a sign to get rid of her."

Calves are expected to gain 2.5-3.5 lb. a day for their first year. "Once they hit 12 months, we back them down to 2 pounds a day," Greg says.

Timing is important

Throughout the years, the Rathbuns have determined that calving in early fall works best for their bull clients. "Most of our buyers' herds calve in the spring," Greg says. "Our bulls are in top form at 18 months — right when they are expected to go to work."

Haase agrees that the Rathbuns' fall yearling bulls are the ideal age for spring breeding. "These animals are just right," he says. "They will just about do the work of a 2-year-old."

The downside to fall calving is the fact that lactating mother cows must be fed through the winter. But, the Rathbuns have found a way to reduce the strain of feeding for two. In addition to raising seedstock, the Rathbuns grow 1,200 acres of high-quality dairy hay. Greg notes that there is usually

Rathbun participates in YCC

Greg Rathbun, Moses Lake, Wash., represented the American Angus Association at the 2005 National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Young Cattlemen's Conference (YCC) June 2-9. Rathbun was one of 45 young cattle producers selected to participate in the comprehensive program, which included an eight-day, nationwide tour of various industry sectors. Designed to promote future beef industry leaders and sharpen leadership skills, the event took participants from NCBA headquarters in Denver, Colo., to meat processing facilities, a foodservice location, retail stores, a feedlot, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME), a seedstock operation, numerous other stops, and, finally, to Washington, D.C.

The Angus Journal asked Rathbun about his experiences. The following questions and answers detail his YCC travels, which were sponsored by the Angus Foundation.

This trip enabled you to witness a broad view of the industry — from seedstock operation to foodservice provider and retailer. What did you find most revealing?

The most revealing part for me was how large and diversified the beef industry is. We were exposed to areas within the beef industry that I knew existed, but had limited knowledge about. The opportunity to see them firsthand and hear about each

operation was very enlightening. It was also very interesting to tour through all phases during one trip. Instead of just viewing each operation individually, we were also able to see how they worked as a part of the whole industry.

What were some of the key issues discussed during the conference? Were hot topics like trade, animal health and/or identification (ID) addressed?

The hottest topic was trade. The reopening of our exports to Japan and South Korea were discussed by all of the people with whom we met. The Canadian border closure had an equal amount of discussion granted to it (see Editor's Note). There was quite a bit of discussion on animal ID. Everyone was interested in animal ID; however, there were more questions than answers about it and what system we would end up with. There is growing momentum to have our national ID system private and industry-operated. The cost of implementation, overall system flexibility, as well as the failure of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to come up with a workable plan in a timely manner, are contributing to this viewpoint.

Were there any challenges in completing the eight-day tour?

The trip was a marathon, and the challenge was to our bodies and our brains. There were a total of 10 days traveling, 5,000 miles, six planes, five cities, five hotels, more bus rides than I care to count, and even more



► **Right:** Greg Rathbun, Moses Lake, Wash., represented the American Angus Association at NCBA's YCC.

some off-grade product available for feeding the mother cows. This is mixed with cannery byproducts and sometimes bluegrass straw to produce a healthy but inexpensive ration.

Providing another source of early winter feed are the alfalfa fields that weren't profitable enough for a final cutting. Rathbun animals can be seen grazing on 1,700 acres of alfalfa and timothy grass through December. "We try to get everything out the back end of a cow that we can't sell," Greg says.

Tough bulls for tough environment

In March, cow-calf pairs are turned out onto the Rathbuns' native desert range. At an age when most commercial calves are being weaned, Greg prefers leaving them with their mothers another three months. "We believe



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the mothers teach their calves how to forage out for feed on the range," Greg says. "That is a skill our bulls will need when they are working."

It is also an excellent opportunity for the

young bull calves to develop muscle mass. Greg notes that instead of standing still in a pen all day, they are out walking and developing strong feet and legs. "This is a very important step in the development of our bulls," he stresses.

Pete McElligott, a cow-calf operator from Lone, Ore., has noticed that Rathbun bulls adapt well to his toughest range. "When we put them out they are ready to work," he says,

adding that they travel well while remaining in good condition.

The Rathbuns' bull-development program doesn't end when the bull calves are pulled off the desert in mid-June. Weaned from their mothers, the young animals are weighed, ultrasounded and then moved into their bull development center — a rock-strewn obstacle course known as "the hill."

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meetings. However, the tour was organized very well, and remedies were provided for all of our needs.

What do you think Angus producers need to know (based on information gathered from YCC) that they may not already be aware of?

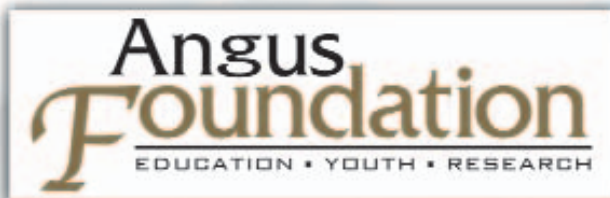
Industry unity was a topic of discussion several times. As members of a large and diversified industry, it is important to remember that we will not always agree with all other segments of our industry. This is a result of each segment wanting to protect its profitability. It is very important that we keep a balanced view between our profitability and industry profitability. We need each for long-term survival and growth.

What was the most interesting thing you learned during the YCC, and how do you plan to apply such findings as a seedstock producer and an integral part of the beef industry?

It is difficult to pick one thing because the tour was full of highlights. The profitability of each segment of the industry is what I found most interesting. As a seedstock supplier, I create genetics that the entire industry uses. As a result, I bear the responsibility of using and producing the type of cattle that can be profitable for both my customers and their customers. The Angus breed has gained its position by producing cattle that excel in all areas of our industry. I want to make sure that I use all of the tools available to me in a responsible manner in order to produce cattle that are profitable for the entire industry.

What do you think is the biggest benefit to participants for attending YCC?

The opportunity to meet, converse, and create relationships with leaders and future leaders from all phases of the beef industry. The



YCC participants were a top-notch group of individuals from all parts of the country and industry. We also met and had discussions with many chief executive officers (CEOs) and high-level managers during our trip. I am sure that we

will understand better in time how many doors this has opened for us.

What do you think is the biggest benefit to the American Angus Association and the Angus Foundation for providing a scholarship to a young Angus producer to attend YCC?

The Angus breed has been privileged to have many good leaders throughout its history. The industry knowledge, relationships and leadership development that result from YCC are good for both current and future leaders of our breed. The YCC is an excellent source for encouraging this development.

Do you encourage others to submit applications in hopes of becoming the 2006 nominee?

I strongly encourage others to apply for the YCC tour. I was apprehensive about it at first due to the time of year and the time commitment, but the tour exceeded my expectations in almost every way. I found the quality of information, access to the decision makers of our industry and friendships that were started to be an unmatched and an unrepeatable experience. It provided a great foundation to build from that will help me for many years.

— by Crystal Albers

Editor's Note: The YCC and this interview took place prior to the July 14 ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, which denied the temporary injunction against Canadian live cattle imports and, therefore, permitted trade.

“It is a long, narrow piece of ground a third of a mile long and up to 300 feet (ft.) wide, with a steep hill at one end,” Greg says, adding that the elevation change from the bottom of the hill to the top is close to 100 ft. “They water at the bottom of one end and feed at the top of the other.”

Greg notes that young bulls will walk the hill seven to 10 times a day when first weaned. “With all those rocks, it is just great for developing their legs and feet,” he says.

In addition to lots of exercise, Greg is careful not to let his young bulls get too fat. Pampering them with high-quality alfalfa is counterproductive to his overall goals.

“Our main market is selling to commercial ranches in eastern Washington and eastern Oregon,” he says. “So, we have to produce the kind of bulls that will survive in the rough country.”

Greg feeds a high-fiber ration by blending 25% bluegrass straw — a product he purchases for around \$40 per ton — with the cannery byproducts. This reduces the moisture content and adds some long fiber to the ration.

Mike Mehren, an independent livestock nutritionist who has worked with the

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Rathbuns for more than a decade, says Greg gets good development out of his bulls in spite of the low-cost feed. “Because he isn’t afraid of using vitamins and supplements, you won’t have any animals leave the Rathbun operation with a nutritional deficiency.”

Service after the sale

For Greg, genetics and development are just two-thirds of the winning equation. “The third thing you need is customer service, because no matter what you do on genetics and development, you are still going to have a problem here and there,” he says. “And that is when you have to be there to back your product.”

Greg remains in contact with his customers after delivering the bulls and does

a follow-up on their performance. “It is very important to listen to your customers and to pay attention to what works for them and what doesn’t work for them,” he says. “And, when there is a problem, we take care of that customer as best as we can.”

Haase has always found that the Rathbuns are easy to work with. “They are some of the most honest people I know,” he says. “They have always been more than fair in our dealings.”

Other customers echo Haase’s opinion. For Greg, doing the right thing is part of doing business. “I’m still young, and I will need to expand my business,” he says. “That means I have to keep the customers I already have, as well as find new ones.”

