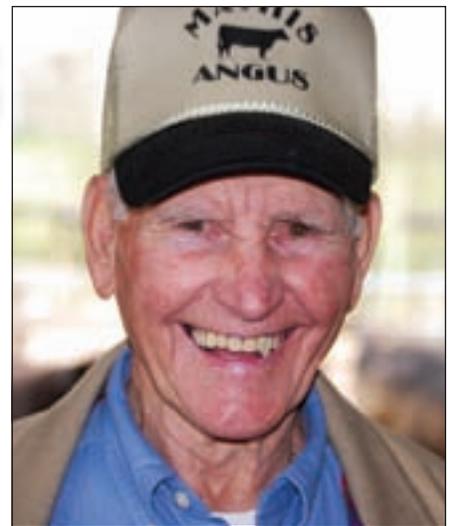


Bulls, cattle producers prove mettle at sale



LOOKING AT BULLS: David Kirkpatrick (left), sale manager, and Alek Williams, Gray, Tenn., visit before the bull test sale.



TOUGH AS NAILS: Jimmy Mathis, 84, raises top bulls with his sons in Duck River, Tenn.

By **CECIL H. YANCY JR.**

JIMMY Mathis is a spry 84-year-old cattleman who could work you under the table and beat you across the fence any day.

The Angus bulls he raises benefit from his boots-on-the-ground management and “put pounds on the ground” in the calves they sire. They’ve proved their mettle consistently at the Middle Tennessee Bull Test Sale.

Mathis raises cattle with his sons, Gary, 58, and Tim, 53, at Duck River, Tenn.

Mathis brings his young bulls to Spring Hill, Tenn., to prove they’ve got the genetic ability to put on weight fast and translate that to future offspring. Mathis Angus Farm

Key Points

- Middle Tennessee Bull Test Sale provides a yardstick for cattle producers.
- The sale provides a marketing opportunity for the seller.
- The buyer can purchase a healthy bull with superior genetics.

has had the top daily weight gain bull two out of the past three years at the annual junior bull sale. A junior sale describes bulls born in the spring; a senior sale, the fall.

At the March 8 junior sale, a Mathis-raised bull put on 5.68 pounds per day for 84 days to claim the prize for the top average daily weight gain.

Events such as the Middle Tennessee Bull Test Sale provide cattle producers with a yardstick of how they’re doing on nutrition and management, and are the best advertisement they could buy for the bulls they raise.

“This sale helps both the buyer and the seller,” says Chuck Grove of American Angus, based in Forest, Va.

“The buyer is getting superior genetics and a healthy bull,” Grove says. “From the producer’s standpoint, it’s a great marketing opportunity and gives them a sense of how they’re doing.”

Beef producers from across Tennessee delivered 84 bulls to the Middle Tennessee Research and Education Center in Spring Hill last fall. By the time of the sale in early March, only 55 remained.

A bull test is the proving ground for the best bulls in the state. The bulls jump through weight-gain hoops for 84 days, says David Kirkpatrick, University of Tennessee animal science department professor, who manages the sale.

Following a two-week warm-up period, the bulls are put through an 84-day test that shows how they’d perform in a feedlot environment. Years ago, the bulls would have faced 140 days of rigor. With the price of corn, however, experts have found that the numbers are just as solid after 84 days, and the bulls are leaner.

The bulls are put on a pelleted ration of 12% crude protein. They’re poked, prodded, weighed and measured for daily weight gain, carcass, rib-eye area and final fat thickness. When they come out of this test, they’ve been thoroughly evaluated. Those numbers tell the likelihood

‘What’ll ya give me?’

THE young bulls moving into the sale ring at the Middle Tennessee Bull Test Sale had all passed the test. All that remained was to see how much they’d bring at sale.

Auctioneer Tommy Barnes opened up the bull test sale with the proclamation, “He’s a herd bull.”

A few minutes later, the first bull out of the chute had brought a whopping \$4,949. “They’re going to get higher, ya’ll,” Barnes predicted.

Throughout the two-hour sale, however, the prices yo-yoed from the \$4,000s to a low of \$1,700 — more of a function of “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” than anything else.

“If you want your calves to be in the Choice grade, there’s your bull,” Barnes said. There was a lot of talk from the stand about qualifying for the Tennessee Ag Enhancement, a popular program that helps beef producers with cost-share items.

“You’re not looking at the bull,” Barnes chided the crowd as the prices went lower. “He’s the kind that will put pounds on the ground. You’ll have carcass quality with your calves.”

These sales remain the backbone of the small cow-calf operations in Tennessee, providing the smaller producer with access to the best genetics and potential profits with their calves.

that they’ll sire calves with greater birth-, weaning- and yearling weights, as well as calving ease to first-calf heifers.

The truth lies in the numbers, says Kirkpatrick, but it depends on what a cattle producer is looking for to improve the herd. The bulls are DNA tested to assure no genetic defects.

Cattle producers look at the numbers, of course, but also rely on their eye to buy or sell a bull, says producer Alek Williams, who had several bulls on the auction block.

To even get in the program, a producer has to be invited. And even then, it’s not guaranteed that the producer’s bull will make the cut. But if it does make it into the program, it gives the “average cattleman the avenue to buy quality bulls in the state,” Williams says. “We use figures a lot, but the eye still sells you on a bull.”

“This sale is the best advertisement you can get if your bulls do well,” Mathis says.



SELLING BULLS: Auctioneer Tommy Barnes opens the bidding at the Middle Tennessee Bull Test Sale.