



Coal Valley Commencement

Coal Valley Angus got started right with solid genetics and a large dose of discipline.

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It's been said that new seedstock breeders don't make it past five years. Coal Valley Angus made the switch from a commercial herd to a seedstock herd just about five years ago. However, the operation is still on a forward trajectory because the Coltrane family set itself up for success.

Jackie Coltrane, the second of three generations who actively participate in the Cherokee, Kan., operation, humbly says they got started by finding a good genetic program and good mentors, but the repeat bull buyers are a testament to the incredible work ethic, discipline, customer service and foresight in the genetic program.

►All three generations — (from left) Ronda, Jackie, Jace and Don Coltrane — actively participate in all aspects of Coal Valley Angus.



“We’ve been blessed with great guidance. It allows you to move forward and bypass some stumbling blocks.”

— Jackie Coltrane

The beginning

Coal Valley Angus got its name from the area’s coal-mining history. The area is even home to “Big Brutus,” the world’s second-largest coal-digging shovel. A two-car garage could fit inside the scoop.

Jackie’s dad, Don Coltrane, had raised commercial cattle all his life, but Jackie says they wanted to add more pounds to their cattle at weaning. To do so, they decided they needed better genetics and set about raising higher-quality cattle. The goal was not originally to become a seedstock producer, but he says the quality of the genetics they were using and producing offered marketing opportunities that they thought could be beneficial to other commercial producers.

Jackie explains, “We knew we needed to learn to AI (artificially inseminate), and we bought a bull that had Gardiner genetics. We didn’t change the cow or the cow’s nutrition. We saw the calves out of cows that were AIed and bred to Gardiner genetics outperform the other calves. It became very obvious to us that for the same input costs, we were making more pounds at weaning and yearling. This provided us more pounds of beef at market time for no more input cost.

“That’s when we decided to do more of what we were doing. We were looking for a way to create a market for what we had

developed. At that point, we decided to keep some bulls, and discovered that we had a market for them.”

They started using Gardiner genetics more often because they could perform on fescue. The Coltrane family reached out to Mark Gardiner for information. They say he has been a great mentor for the family.

Discipline in breeding

In addition to finding a mentor, they also use many tools available from the American Angus Association. Expected progeny differences (EPDs) and HD50K DNA tests play a large part in their breeding decisions, and 11-year-old Jace Coltrane is a “walking, talking sire summary,” laughs Jackie.

Jace’s eyes light up when he explains one of his breeding sheets. He prints out the pedigree and EPDs of the cows and bulls he’s considering breeding. Then he works out the inbreeding coefficient, which is how much of a relationship the cow has with the bull genetically. Once Jace figures the coefficient, he figures which areas need to be improved and prioritizes certain EPDs and value indexes to do so.

It is obvious that Jace enjoys talking about cattle, and he knows his stuff. He religiously checks the National Cattle Evaluation (NCE) EPD updates every Friday. The new EPDs are released at 7:30 a.m. — after he has already left for school. Jace explains that his teacher this year at school raised cattle and would let Jace check the new EPDs on the teacher’s computer once he finished his work.

Jackie says, “He knows what to look at, and he is learning the why behind it now.” Jace narrows down the bulls, and Jackie and Don will ultimately pick the bull. Jackie says they rarely change from Jace’s suggestion, though. Jace is truly an active part of the operation.

Jackie and Jace add that they have decided to use DNA testing because it increases the accuracy of EPDs. The DNA tests give the accuracies that would normally be needed from data of multiple generations of progeny.

However, the Coltrane family knows that “computer theory” won’t create functional cattle alone — phenotype is still No. 1.

“We’ve got to make highly functional cattle that will go to the pasture and work as they are predicted to do, which takes care of our customers. Whether our customers sell at weaning, sell as feeder cattle or keep as

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replacement stock, our cattle will perform,” says Jackie.

All members of the family share this goal. “There are no more important decisions than those done in mating season. We eat, sleep and breathe cattle,” emphasizes Jackie.

Ronda Coltrane, Jackie’s wife and Jace’s mom, agrees. She keeps track of the cattle on their cattle-management software, works full-time as a teacher and keeps track of the whole family, which also includes two teenage daughters.

Instead of watching TV in the evenings, Don, Jackie and Jace spend hours pouring over sire summaries and cow printouts. “If there’s anything that describes our breeding program, it’s discipline,” says Jackie. “We don’t typically use the new, trendy bulls. However, if there is a new bull who fits our criteria, we will sample him on a few cows. Normally, we use the proven bulls.”

Discipline also describes their breeding regimen. When they first started AIing, they watched for heat manually, and Don says it wore him out. Rick Mix from Select Sires told them about HeatWatch® Estrus Detection System, an electronic method of monitoring and recording heat. They use estrous synchronization, the 14-day protocol on virgin heifers and the seven-day protocol on cows, in addition to HeatWatch. This shortens the amount of time the females are in heat, but they are diligent at breeding 12 hours after standing heat.

“Each female is an individual, so breeding specifically to her standing heat has increased conception rates quite a bit,” Jackie explains.

HeatWatch isn’t widely used, but Jackie assures that if they gain one calf from its use, then it’s worth it.



► **Above:** Jace pores over his breeding sheets for each mating.

► **Right:** The HeatWatch® Estrus Detection System helps the Coltrane family AI females diligently 12 hours after heat is detected.



► Jackie, Jace and Don spend hours studying sire summaries and cow printouts. They can recite an animal’s EPDs even in the pasture.

Embryo transfer is used extensively, too, and the discipline in selecting donors and recipients is just as prevalent. All three generations have input on those decisions. The family concentrates on functional cow families to maintain consistency. Jackie explains the herd is mostly self-contained, and they raise their own recipients. Jackie says most breeders don’t think about how much the mama cow and environment affect the calf’s success, so recipient selection is also stringent.

“Our motto is ‘working for today’s and tomorrow’s cattlemen,’ and hopefully cattlemen can see that in the discipline in our matings and in our donor selections. We are working to bring better genetics to our region because the commercial producer is what it’s about. By selecting better genetics for bulls, it improves the cattle industry in the region and as a whole,” he adds.

Attention to detail has resulted in above-average conception rates and cattle that rank in the top percentiles of the Angus breed.

“We’ve been blessed with great guidance. It allows you to move forward and bypass some stumbling blocks,” he says.



Customer service

The Coltranes are quick to credit their cattle for much of their success — the cattle sell themselves and prove previous good decisions. However, sound management and customer service play a large role in the operation’s success.

Jackie iterates the ingredients to success, “Vaccination, genetic potential, nutrition and disciplinary practices; I’d say these are the recipe to success.”

They have a close relationship with their veterinarian to ensure management strategies are in line with health recommendations. They perform pelvic measurements on their heifers to decrease breeding and calving complications.

By taking a page out of Gardiner’s book, Jackie says they offer a similar customer service guarantee. The Coltranes stand behind their cattle. “We realized that if you take care of your customers, then they will come back. We know our genetics are good, but what separates us? Service,” he explains.

They assure that customer service doesn’t end after the sale; it is just the beginning. This service and the quality of their cattle has resulted in repeat customers and an empty bull pen each year.

Learning from the previous experiences of each generation in the operation and from their mentors, they have gotten off on the right foot. “By using the right genetics, being realistic in expenditures, we let the cattle make and prove past decisions. The cattle move us forward,” he concludes.

