

A Tale of Two Cattle Guys

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For someone who has been around cattle as long as I have, I should know a lot more about them than I do. That's probably what makes me really take notice when I come across individuals who can accurately size up a cow or bull and tell you just how good that animal is, or if it's a young animal, how good it will be when it matures.

One of the best I've ever seen is Teddy Gentry, the founder of the South Poll breed. Another is Johann Zietsmann, a noted cattle breeder from Zimbabwe who worked under the legendary Professor Jan Bonsma of South Africa.



In this photo taken in August 2013, noted cattle expert Johann Zietsman of Zimbabwe is shown taking a picture of Cow 425.

I met Teddy Gentry 15 years ago when we bought our first South Poll cattle - five cows and two bulls. The Alabama band was still going strong and the day we got to Fort Payne, Teddy was about to leave his beloved Bent Tree Farms to hop on a bus for Alabama's next performance. It wasn't until about five years later that I was to gain an appreciation for Teddy's knack of judging cattle for their ability to perform.

In 2008 an opportunity came along to buy a large group of South Poll cows located near Macon, Missouri, that were being dispersed by two men who had partnered on the cattle - Martin Turner and Steve Radakovich. The cattle had originally come from Bent Tree, but Turner and Radakovich had handled them well. They were truly an outstanding set of cows. What made the purchase tough was that the owners wanted to sell the entire herd for \$1500 a pop. Some were worth that. Some were probably worth double or triple that amount. Some probably weren't worth half that. But it was all or nothing.

What also made the deal a little more challenging was that a substantial portion of the cows weren't even purebreds. Almost half of the 150 cows were a cross between Barzonas and

Herefords. When Teddy developed the South Poll breed, he tried a number of different breeds before he settled on Hereford, Angus, Barzona and Senepol. The way he came up with large numbers of the final four-way cross was to create a large group of Barzona-Hereford females and breed them to Senepol-Angus bulls. That match produced a full-blood South Poll that is referred to as a first-generation animal.

Teddy used a few other combinations. For example, we have a cow that is out of a Barzona-Red Angus bull and Hereford-Senepol cow. But she is an exception. I don't know that she performs differently, but she is not stacked like the rest. But the foundation female for the South Poll breed is the Barzona-Hereford cow. If you wanted a great commercial cow, you couldn't do any better. The Barzona-Hereford cross is testimony to Teddy's understanding of cattle and his ingenuity. Hereford cattle are among the most gentle on the planet. That's one of the reasons Teddy chose Herefords, using primarily polled cattle, but some horned. The Barzonas on the other hand are what Teddy refers to as "spirited." They weren't wild or mean. They were developed in the high desert of Arizona and were range animals. They didn't see people all that often. Teddy almost always bred the old, extremely gentle Hereford cow to Barzona bulls. The Barzona-Hereford calf not only received its mother's genes for good temperament, its Barzona genes that at times may have shown a little too much "spirit," may have gotten "switched off" by the environment in which it was raised. The study of how this occurs is called epigenetics and is dealt with in an article in this special section.

Going with a foundation animal such as the Barzona-Hereford was probably not an option. Can you imagine what it would have been like to have not only Barzona-Hereford cows, but Barzona-Senepols and Barzona-Angus and then have to develop an Angus-Hereford bull to use on the Barzona-Senepols and Senepol-Hereford to use on the Barzona-Angus? I get confused just writing about it.

Also consider the economy of bull development. If your primary bull was a Senepol-Angus, then you go out and buy some of the best Senepol cows you could find and breed them to the best Angus bulls available. You could focus on the one cross. In Teddy's case, however, focus didn't mean he was lacking in numbers. He purchased two plane-loads of Senepols from the Virgin Islands and at one time had 1300 head of cows.

Getting back to the cows in Macon County. Approximately half were Barzona-Hereford. The South Poll Association was just getting started. We had very few members and it was going to be tough to find a home for 150 cows, much less these half breeds that most of us didn't understand. But the purchase of that herd was a learning process. Once we understood the quality of the Barzona-Hereford cows, the deal became doable.

The Barzona-Herefords went to a knowledgeable cattleman from Arkansas and Teddy went through the remainder of the herd and evaluated them and put a price on each animal. The price obviously \$1500 and members could buy what they wanted at the price Teddy had set. Those 75 cows got snapped up by the members. Six of the cows purchased in 2008 form the nucleus for our herd today and the same is true for many other members.

This story really centers around cow 425. Of all the cows that were for sale, this was the one Teddy thought was the best. He put a price on her and ended up buying her himself. I really didn't think much more about that situation until 2013. By that time Teddy had experienced a serious drought and got rid of a lot of cows. We agreed to buy a load and one of the cows we got was 425. I still didn't think too much about it until sometime later.



When 425 had her first calf for us in 2011, it turned out to be a bull. He was the 34th calf born that year, and under our numbering system, he became calf 341. The sire of 341 was a bull named Broadway, who was to later become one of the most popular bulls in the breed. When Broadway was just a young bull, Teddy said he was the best bull he had ever raised. Later Teddy tried to sell Broadway to us. Jerry thought we should buy him. I nixed that deal. Jerry obviously knows more about cattle than I.

In the fall of 2012, the year of the dreadful drought, we sold 341 and two other young bulls to Scott Frescoln, a cattleman from Mountain View, Missouri. In August of 2013, I attended a three-day grazing and livestock breeding school in Newtown, Missouri, and one of the people attending the school was Scott. One of the presenters was Johann Zietsman, the famous livestock breeder I referred to above. I was impressed with Johann and after the conference

was over, had him come to the farm to evaluate our cattle herd. Scott was likewise impressed with Johann and also had him come to Mountain View to evaluate his herd.

When Johann got to our farm he found a 2013 bull calf (Calf No. 283) that he really liked. He actually raved about the calf. He was also highly impressed with the Broadway bull that we had leased from Steve Stephenson, a man who raises South Polls near Houston, Texas. The dam of the 283 calf was the 425 cow that Teddy had selected as the top cow in the Turner herd five years earlier.

When Johann got to Scott's farm later that day, Johann saw the 341 bull and marveled at him, saying, "I can't believe Ralph Voss sold you that bull." Scott was obviously pleased that someone like Johann would like his bull so much. He immediately gave me a call and told me what Johann had said. He also gave me the bull's number and his dam. Naturally, the dam was 425 and the sire was Broadway.



Bull VLCC 8401 Broadway 425 341.

Note how the experts work. Teddy picked the 425 cow as the best cow out of a herd of 150 cows. Johann picked 425's 2013 calf as being a real keeper. The 2013 calf (283) was not out of Broadway. Breed Broadway, a superior bull, to the 425 cow and you come up with a bull that Johann likes even better than 425's 2013 calf. That's her 2011 calf, the 341 bull.

Very few people have the ability to know precisely what it is that a cow or bull needs to be superior. It would be great to have that skill, but I don't even come close, or 341 would have been used on this farm. The good thing is Scott and I have remained friends and have stayed in contact. He collected 341, which means I still have an opportunity to use his genetics in our herd, which I will do in June.

There is more to the story. We still have 425. At 14 she acts and looks like a 7-year-old. Last June we bred her AI to Broadway and it appears she has settled. If so, she should calve between March 10 and 31. Redemption may be just around the corner.

Teddy has another quality worth noting. He can walk into our herd or your herd or anyone else's herd today and pick what he thinks is the top cow. Usually she will be the top cow. He can come back a year from now and if you ask him to pick the best cow, he will select the same cow he picked the year before. He will do that, not from memory, because he can't remember numbers. He will pick that cow because he knows precisely what he wants in an animal. I would assume Johann can do the same.

Oh, to have that kind of ability!

(This story was written in February 2018. This footnote was written in August 2019. To bring you up to date, 425 did not settle to the AI breeding in 2017 that is referred to above. She settled in natural service, but her calf came in the last quarter of the calving season and didn't do as well as some of her other calves. In 2019 she bounced right back and currently has a nice bull calf on the ground. We bred her AI to Broadway on June 20. The other 36 cows bred AI that day were bred to 341, the great 425/Broadway son of Scott Frescoln's that Johann liked so much.

Last year I made the mistake of turning in Cow 4400 with three bulls, one of whom was her son. This spring 4400—one of the best cows in the breed and a cow we own in partners with Teddy—had a badly deformed calf that was apparently born dead. I assume the problem was the dam/son mating. I'm a little slow, but I didn't make that same mistake this spring. The 4400 cow was put in a separate spot with two other cows that had given birth to the other two bulls we used this year. No dam/son matings. On August 22, we pre-tested all three cows and the vet thinks all settled as the result of the AI mating. I certainly hope that's the case.

I certainly don't claim to have the ability to pick the great cows. Most of us don't. If you fall in that category, make sure you listen to all the good cattle guys. 😊