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As we sit here and contemplate what to say in the form of a testimonial, or as words of advice or encouragement, it is a daunting task to try and put your finger on the factors most important, when trying to become a successful seedstock producer. We think it is essential to truly take the time to understand what it means to be a seedstock producer. When an operation makes the commitment to produce breeding stock, he actually takes on a responsibility to the beef industry, the breed he has chosen, the other members of the breed's association, and ultimately his customers. He must keep in mind that he has to produce cattle that are worthy of reproducing, and to do so with the goal of improving the breed and the industry.

Forming a set of goals is critical in any undertaking, and having a real honest "heart to heart" with one's self, is an important first step in setting your initial goals. We would love for everyone to have a model in their head of what they think the perfect animal in their herd would look like, both inside and out. We would want them to construct a template for that animal, using the input from successful breeding programs, BCIA, BIF, the breed association, and finally, what he has learned in his own herd and how it performs in it's environment. Then we would ask him to brand it there, have complete confidence in it, and make the commitment to mold his herd to fit that template. We would ask that he be open minded and always learning but to resist the temptation to be caught up in fads or faulty science. Changes should be made to his template only when they are well thought out and proven in his own mind.

Now with this newly instilled confidence, go into your pasture and using the template branded in your head, look at your herd and see how it measures up. Be honest but realistic. How does the saying go? "Rome wasn't built in a day!" Look at each cow and determine if she is worthy of being reproduced. Visualize each cow as a breeding tool and determine what other tool to use in order to make their offspring fit your mold. Now you can do this by trial and error, or you can hit the trail and go look at sire groups and visit other operations that may have done a lot of that for you. Just think about it. It will take you a year until you get that first calf on the ground to know if birth weights are acceptable. It will take you another year until you get the weaning and yearling data, and a good appraisal of how she fits your template. Then it will be the third year before you can get her first calf on the ground and find out if she is the Mama you want her to be. How does hitting the trail sound now? You know there is also another option. You could go and purchase a set of heifers from a reputable breeder whose cattle fit your template. Immediately, you have the basis for a herd that is the same as the one he has worked his whole career to produce.

Alright, when you have the factory in place, you can make the decision to use an AI sire that has proven himself to the industry and yourself. You still will need a herd sire to roam the pasture to ensure a tight calving window. Spend the time and money to locate and own the best bull that you can buy, however, don't get caught up looking for the bull that has everything, and miss out on a bull that would do everything that you need him to do. Make a reasonable commitment to be the best you can be, but please keep in mind that your factory has to be given the opportunity to perform. Without proper health and nutrition, their genetic potential will never be revealed. If after 3 or 4 years you look out at a superior cow and say, "Man I wish I had 10 cows just like her. She nails it every time!", then she could possibly be the first step toward an ET program.

Ok, the product is in the pasture, what do I do with it? It's honesty time again. Examine your product. Have you kept the records absolutely correctly and honestly? If so, report all data, good and bad, and then depend on your association to provide the adjusted data, ratios, and EPDs. Have you compared them in honest contemporary groups against a proven sire? Did they have equal inputs, in an equal environment? Ask yourself the tough questions. Do they have any defects? Are they worthy of being reproduced? Are you willing to stand behind them? Do you want them to represent you? A good seedstock producer should set minimum standards and stick to them. You can always ramp up your expectations as you evolve, but you should always strive to be the best. Use all technology and tools available to identify the superior animals. Make them earn a spot in your pasture!

So, the product is ready for sale, what now? You have to sit down and develop a marketing plan. Do you sell private treaty? Do you take advantage of BCIA or Breed Association sales? Do you align yourself with other breeders to form a sale? These are all tough questions that must ultimately be answered. Keep in mind; it takes time to build a good reputation. It takes very little to produce a bad one. Earn your spot in the industry with quality and service, not by just being the cheapest. Believe me, we know it is hard to put the knife to an ET or AI calf, but it does no one any good to reproduce an unworthy animal. But realize, just because it is not worthy for seedstock, doesn't mean that it would not earn a premium in the feed lot and give you back very valuable data.

In conclusion, you've got to be involved in the industry. Stand with your association and be a part of things. Now here come the clichés. Give back! Be there for someone, like someone was there for you! Look at the big picture! Remember where you came from! Enjoy what you are doing! We can assure you, the following "Alabama BCIA Seedstock Continuing Education Program" is going to be just what the doctor ordered for all of us.

The Gibbs Family