

Three year mission to sell 'Northern Angus' concludes



David, Jill and Andrew Raff are bidding farewell to show-ring competition, after a three year campaign to showcase the genetic merit in northern Angus cattle.

The Raff family, perhaps Queensland's best-known breeders of Black Angus cattle, on Friday completed a three-year mission to elevate the national awareness of the quality of 'northern' Angus seedstock on a high note.

Their senior and grand champion Angus cow Raff Blackbird DE349 was judged interbreed champion female among 25 competitors.

David and Jill Raff and son Andrew and his wife, Anna attracted a few headlines three years ago when they broke a 20-year abstinence from show-ring competition. Many were surprised at the time, given that the Ruffs are dogged supporters of objective measurement. The notion of subjective assessment by a single judge in a show ring seemed to be at-odds with their broader approach to cattle breeding and selection.

The Ruffs first showed cattle at Brisbane exhibition in 1974, but gave it away in 1993, to focus on more 'contemporary' cattle assessment and measurement.

So why perform a back-flip and re-enter the show ring in 2010? "It's simple," David Raff said. "Most of the Angus breed's seedstock industry is located in southern Australia. We could say what we liked about the quality of our own (Queensland-based) Angus cattle, but we were having trouble getting southern breeders to come up and have a look."

The problem, in the Raffs' minds at least, was about perception. Queensland was being tagged as an insignificant outpost for Angus seedstock production, and that 'all the best bulls were being bred in the south.'

"We decided there was only one way around the problem: to take our cattle back to the breeders, and the best way to do that was to get back into the show-ring again."

The results achieved, as well as the greater impact on southern breeder awareness and recognition, have far exceeded the Raffs' expectations.

Since their return in 2010, they have produced a string of Royal and other major show breed and interbreed champions, led by perhaps the most highly decorated Angus bull of all time, Raff Empire. Empire was decorated Melbourne and Sydney champion in the past 12 months as well as at Rockhampton's Beef 2012, his final showing.

He earned a total of 11 inter-breed supreme beef exhibit titles over the past two years including the Dubbo Beef Spectacular and Melbourne Royal Angus Feature Show.

Empire was described by Melbourne Angus Feature Show judge David Bondfield as "the reason why Australia should be exporting semen to the US, not importing it." He is Raff's highest ranking MVP sire excelling in average daily gain, carcass weight, rib eye, scrotal size, weaning weight and yearling weight. At 32 months he weighed 1222kg, with a hip height of 60 inches.

Another of Raff's senior bulls, R. Dallas, was grand champion in Brisbane three years ago, and last Friday's Brisbane grand champion Angus female and interbreed champion, Raff Blackbird DE349, broke through for her first major win, having been 'bridesmaid' more than once.

"When we gave showing away in 1992, we perhaps felt that the show-ring lacked relevance, but I still believe that it is the only way you can truly benchmark your cattle against others – both within your own breed, and others. Above that, it is the networking achieved among fellow seedstock producers, seeing what each other is doing and why they're doing it," David Raff said.

The past three years' show-ring campaign for the Raffs had cost them a 'substantial six-figure sum,' he admitted.

"But we're in the business of producing a commodity. There is no use doing that if you don't get out there and market it effectively. It's part of the business, and we just have to be professional about it, and try to do it better than anyone else."

So was their show campaign successful? The stud's female production sale in March this year provided a useful barometer. A catalogue of 120 registered cows and heifers sold for an outstanding \$4534 average, with active buyers from every mainland state.

Just as they did back in 1992, the Raffs now feel they have now achieved their mission, and have again withdrawn from showing stud animals.

But is it forever this time? "We'd never say never," David said. "Andrew is still young, and he has his own young family coming through. It's possible we'll be back again. But we went in with a three-year strategy in mind: that cycle is now complete, we think we have met our objective, and we're sticking to it," he said.

The Raffs will offer a number of half-brothers to Raff Empire in their 2012 on-property bull sale on September 24.