

Worth The Squeeze

Frank Ranch's data-driven approach keeps true value on track.

by Laura Nelson, for Certified Angus Beef LLC

Robin Frank

Even the most disciplined managers can be tempted by a flashy appearance.

Despite the hours they've spent deliberating over sale books, studying expected progeny differences (EPDs) and jotting down pages of notes on the yellow legal pad, Robin and Shannon Frank agree on that. If they didn't stick to the data, they'd be easily swayed by the prettiest gal in the lot, too.

The Frank Ranch sign dangles under a bold "EAT BEEF: REAL FOOD FOR REAL PEOPLE" directive in their Hatfield, Mo., office. That's where father and son alternate between finishing each other's sentences in perfect understanding and cutting one another off in good-natured banter between talk of bull numbers and breeding decisions.

On this topic, they're right in sync.

"Generally, the No. 1 criteria any producer of any breed of cattle will see when they go to pick 'em is 'big,'" Robin says. "That's what almost always looks the best on first glance."

That was true when they sorted for their feedlot in Iowa in the previous decade, when buyers would come to pick out bred heifers at their Iowa ranch, and when they picked their own replacement heifers.

"I would most likely do the same thing [now], if it wasn't for this data," Shannon taps on the yellow legal pad. "If you cut all their tags off, I would most likely come out with the biggest set of calves in there. The flesh and the size would sell them."

"They do. They look the best," Robin agrees. "They'll stand out."

Shannon's quick to jump back in, "But that doesn't mean they're going to make you the most money. They'll just be the prettiest and have the eye appeal."

That's nice, they agree. However, nice isn't always profitable.

"Everyone thinks I'm silly out there with my tablet when we're sorting," Shannon says, "but I can't keep all this data in my head and make that decision while they're running by."

Learning in the Show-me State

Robin's goal was always to focus on the cow-calf business.

"It's always easy to do more," he laughs. So, while they had cows all along the way, his journey took him from the hog, seed and trucking business in Ohio to owning a feedlot



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in Iowa to, at last, the perfect spot in Missouri to set up a commercial cow herd.

That was 11 years ago, when Shannon was fairly fresh out of school. They hauled their big, crossbred cows down from Iowa, looked at all the standing forage on the northern Missouri range and thought, this is it.

That abundant grass was nearly all cool-season fescue. Nonnative cows can take time to acclimate to fescue, which made for a challenge.

"They call it the wonder grass," Shannon says, as in, "wonder why they ever planted it."

That first summer was a blur of horseback work, moving cows to keep them on fresh forage at the right times to avoid toxicity and to keep ahead of the hungry mamas.

On top of that, Shannon had taken a good-natured challenge from his buddy Bret Miller, who was managing the ranch for Robin and wife Debbie at the time: "You run your cows, I'll run mine, and we'll run the numbers when it's all done." Bret continued to care for the cows he was managing, while Shannon managed the cows brought from the Iowa ranch.

In the end, their ratio of calf weaning weight to their mothers' weight was a hard pill to

swallow — especially when they stacked up next to Miller's calves that averaged more than 50% of their mother's weight. The time, energy and feed resources they had to put into the cows over the summer brought the point home.

"I was not proud of my product, or what I had to show for what I thought were super cows," Shannon says. He laughs about it now, but being showed up in the Show-Me State marked a serious change in the Franks' production goals.

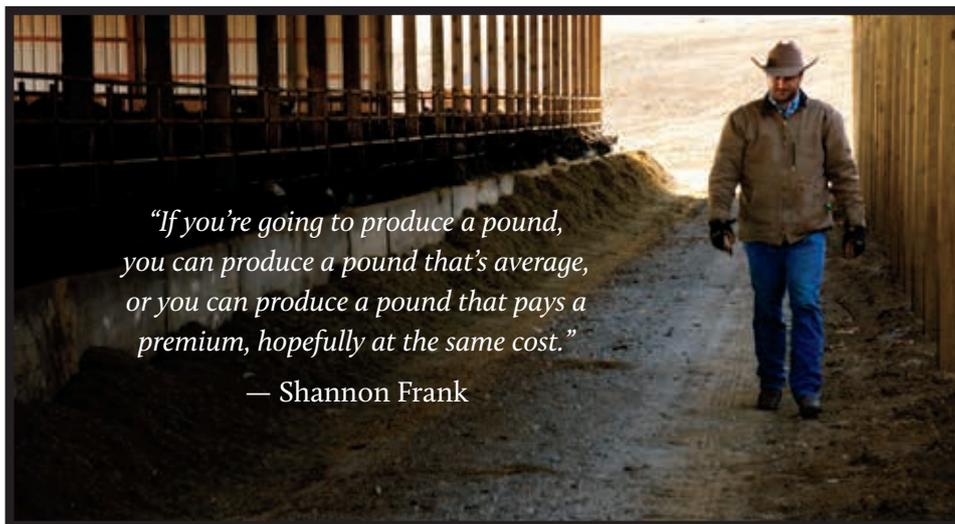
Driven toward efficiency

A decade later, they've nearly caught up to the mark Bret set.

All of the 2017 calves from their spring herd averaged 49% of their dam's weight using their adjusted weaning weights. They moved from an average 1,425-pound (lb.) cow to a 1,217-lb. average in the spring herd, while pushing weaning weights up to fill the gap. With that, they've been able to graze more cows — up to 800 now — on less land and make the most of the forage and nutrition available.

Another data-focused friend, Norman Kanak of Bluestem Cattle Co., led them to an equally data-driven seedstock provider in Green Garden Angus, near Ellsworth, Kan. For the past decade, the Franks

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have looked to the Janssens' longtime quest for efficiency and carcass quality to influence their herd.

Pounds pay, no doubt, they agree.

"But it's about what it costs to produce those pounds," Shannon says. "If you're going to produce a pound, you can produce a pound that's average, or you can produce a pound that pays a premium, hopefully at the same cost."

He pores over those sale books, focusing on a bull's dam's information, body weight, what she's weaned, her progeny's performance and cow energy dollar value (\$EN) numbers that will predict the efficiency of the heifers they retain.

Then, there's the individual feed test.

"That's a big deal for us," Shannon says. He points out two bulls, out of the same sire, where one ate 20 lb. of dry matter and gained 5 lb., while the other ate 30 lb. to gain 5 lb.

"They gained the same, but one's 50% more feed efficient," he says.

His brother, Andy, recently built a 240-head backgrounding barn where they fed their first set of calves last spring to an 850- to 900-lb. marketing point.

"Especially when we're the ones backgrounding them, a bull like that is putting money back in our pocket for every day his calves are eating less and gaining the same," Robin says.



Carcass, too

From marketing hogs to marketing feeder cattle to their commercial cattle herd today, Robin has found one common thread: "Good enough" is never good enough.

"Whatever you do, you better find a way to add some extra value to it," he says. At different phases of his career, that's meant raising cattle for the natural market, the Non-Hormone Treated Cattle (NHTC) market and for the premium branded-beef programs.

In each case, "The juice has to be worth the squeeze," he says.

The only way to truly tell the value of what's leaking out of the bottom line is to study the numbers, they agree.

"Everybody loves having the best of this, that or the other thing. But, forget that for a minute and just know, it's got to pay," Robin says. "It may look like you're losing from the outside, but when we really put the numbers to it, and we're running a smaller cow, with a smaller bull and a smaller calf [than the industry average], we're talking about cost per acre to produce this, and it works."

Looking further down the line on the terminal side, they've found that what they may have given up in carcass weights, they've gained back in carcass premiums. In 2012, a group of their steers finished with 53% Prime carcasses. A couple years later, another group hit 81% Prime.

While cow efficiency dominates their determination of what's "worth the squeeze" on the ranch, they have an eye on what consumers want in the final product to keep them focused on those numbers, too.

"We want to produce the highest-quality beef we can in the most efficient way," Shannon says. "Quality grade is the simplest way to define that at the end."

He flips back through the yellow legal pad, with page after page of individual records and notes, picking out the data points that

now lead to stringent culling when it comes time to sort. He recently finished their first year using the CattleMax data management software, with help from his wife, Nicki.

"We're just getting started, but I think five years down the road, we'll be able to look at this information and ranking system and potentially make a huge difference," he says.

By then, he probably won't get as many jokes about his tablet in the sorting pen — not that it ever bothered him anyway.

"I'm not doing this just because I think it's cool. I'm doing it because I believe in it," he says. "The tools are out there. You've just got to have a goal in mind and decide how to get there. I'm trying to make the most profit a person can make here, so that we can keep doing this for generations." 

Editor's Note: Former industry information specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC, Laura Nelson currently owns LCN Communications, Big Timber, Mont.