

Man's Best Cowboy

In rough conditions and with little man power, Juan and Joni Reyes turn to their Border Collies for help on their Wyoming ranch.

Story and photos by Savanna Simmons



Two working dogs, Poncho and Dollar, leap from the tire tank where they've been told to "get a drink" by Juan Reyes. They've successfully navigated yearlings through a pasture gate with the help of Reyes only to get them started with subtle commands and to open and close the gate for them.

Juan and Joni Reyes have the classic "American dream" story, though Juan credits their success to the democracy of the United States that allows for opportunities. At the age of 11, Juan's parents

brought him and his two sisters out of Cuba and into Florida around 1962. The Catholic Church got them to Washington state with about 70 other Cuban kids. He grew up there and attended Washington State College for one year before transferring to the University of Wyoming (UW) thanks to the allure of the cowboy lifestyle.

Juan and Joni met at UW in Laramie and were married soon after. Joni's 12 head of Eileenmere-bred Angus were added to Juan's 20 head of

commercial cows, and the Reyeses continued growing their operation by joining forces with John and Cara Milnor, of Tie Siding, Wyo. They formed MR Angus — the name they still use today.

They added 483 acres on the Wheatland flats to their growing list of assets. Then in the early 1990s, the Reyeses bought out the Milnors.

By purchasing land adjacent to their own throughout the years, Juan and Joni have come to own 22 center pivots that produce corn silage and alfalfa for their 7,000-head capacity feedyards. It also feeds their 1,000 head of registered cows.

Their children, Jason and Jennifer, along with Jennifer's husband Mick Burr, help manage the operation as a family. Juan and Joni are stepping back as they are able, and the trio is stepping up into management roles.

Jason primarily manages calving and herd health at the ranches and feedlots. Jennifer has taken all the cattle registration and records and also oversees

much of the farming and feedlot operations. Mick, originally from an agricultural background in Australia, oversees the farming and feedyards as well as the mechanics.

Jennifer and Jason both handle the bulk of the bull sale, which will be the 29th annual sale hosted on the ranch Feb. 24, 2020.

"Our kids did it from day one, because they had to," Juan says. "We didn't have any extra money. I thought we would actually run them off, and I tried, but I couldn't. They both love it."

For economic reasons and lack of finding help, Juan has used dogs as his primary cowboy employees since the early 1980s. He purchased the offspring of a Wales Border Collie called Wisp, an international champion working dog twice over.

Griz, the offspring of Wisp, is recognized as the forefather of the females that make up the Reyeses'

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Juan Reyes is generally at the lead when moving cows and his dogs gather and bring them to him or through the gate.

dog program. Juan learned a great deal about working cattle from Griz.

On the top side, J.R. Red, a Border Collie named for their friend and the dog's breeder Red Oliver, has proven to be a great asset throughout the years. Just shy of half of the 80 dogs at the 2018 National Cattledog Association (NCA) Finals had bloodlines returning to Red, and he was the first dog to be inducted into the NCA Hall of Fame.

Zak, a son of Red, has contributed to their dog program as well. His latest contribution is also probably his most outstanding: 2-year-old Poncho.

An import from Ireland, Ruby is the start of a new lineage of Border Collies at the Reyeses' ranch, and she has shown a great deal of promise.

GOOD, RELIABLE HELP

While Juan has trialed his dogs to phenomenal success, he finds more value in a reliable working ranch dog. His dogs don't push but rather gather. He can stand in one spot, or walk or drive in a direction, and his dogs will gather and bring a herd to Juan or through a gate he has opened.

The cattle have been conditioned to move off the dogs easily, so, with spoken or whistled commands, the dogs do the work of several cowboys. Moving cattle this way, once trained, is smooth, easy and less stressful on cattle. Once the dogs have an idea of the task to be done, they often complete the job on their own, with little command from Reyes.

"Several of our ranches are in pretty rough

conditions, so when you send the dog, you have to know they're bringing them all," Juan says. "You often don't see what the dog is doing, but they have that natural ability."

Good working dogs will apply pressure to sensitive points only when necessary, and also relieve that pressure once a cow has moved. In this sense, good dogs will naturally use sound stockmanship. The dogs can also stand their ground against a herd when needed.

"I recommend introducing the dog to your replacement heifers so they get pretty well dog broke," Juan says. "Then, as first calf heifers, they've forgotten all about it, but by the second and third calf, it comes back to them."

When choosing dogs — which at this juncture in life, Juan is rather discerning — he looks for a tough Border Collie that will take a good heel, travels low to the ground, and has a good nose bite. He values a good temperament and presence around livestock.

Juan and Joni sell a few pups, but they don't breed dogs unless they have a need themselves. On the rare occasion, Juan will let a started dog go.



Juan Reyes operates the pivots, feedyard, and two Wyoming ranches that make up MR Angus Ranch in Wheatland, Wyo., and the Tie Siding, Wyo., ranch with help from his daughter Jennifer, pictured; his wife, Joni; son, Jason; and son-in-law Mick Burr.

"I'm to the point that I want great ones," he says. "I'm looking for a very special dog."

Editor's note: Savanna Simmons is a freelance writer from Lusk, Wyo.

Elevated herd

The same care in selection goes into Juan and Joni Reyes's registered Angus herd as does their stock dogs. Early on in their marriage, when they were just building the MR Angus herd, Juan and Joni started losing their cattle to bovine pulmonary hypertension, or brisket disease, caused by an 8,000-foot elevation at Tie Siding.

"It almost broke us," Juan says. "We had bought a lot of Montana-raised cattle, and there was a big death loss, which was all done on borrowed money. It was hurtful."

In 1979, they began pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP) testing with Colorado State University (CSU) and Joe Schamel to find Angus cattle that pose

lower risk of brisket disease at higher elevation.

"PAP testing has allowed us to eliminate certain genetics," Juan says.

In going through the process, the Reyeses and MR Angus have created a herd of practical Angus cattle that have been developed with longevity in mind. The Reyes family believes cattle need to be deep-ribbed, easy-fleshy, good-footed, structurally sound, and good-boned while able to function in tough environments.

These characteristics make a herd that raises calves to work well in a feedyard as well as females that will perform in the pasture without falling out of the herd in the first few years.