



# The Top End, Naturally

Colorado producer turns to low-stress, high-quality Angus.

Story & photos by **Hannah Johlman & Steve Suther**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**T**here's more than a century of tradition in Hasart's Top End Farm near Stratton, Colo., says Jerry Hasart. The family homesteaded a county to the north in the late 1800s and established the Lazy HJ brand. With few trees, great-grandpa Jacob couldn't support his woodworking trade and took the clan back to northeastern Kansas.

Good help was hard to find out west as many others left, so former neighbors asked oldest son John to come back out to work, and young Jake soon followed. By 1917, Jacob decided to sell out in Kansas and buy the current farm in Colorado for his sons. The Hasarts' mainstay was breaking teams of horses.

Jake's son Jim worked with his and wife Marlyn's sons, Jerry and Lester, to modernize their cattle until they started converting a Gelbvieh-cross "rainbow

herd" to straight Angus in 2000. Their quality focus suggested a name, and Top End Farms' entry in the nationwide Best of the Breed (BoB) contest in 2002 showed 41% qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand.

"That was one of the things that got us started to where we are now," Hasart says. Now, they are producing a fair amount of natural, Prime beef.

Backing up a few years, the family started finishing their own cattle and then signed on as members of U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) in 1997.

"The grid gave us the ability to find out what we didn't have," Hasart says, bright blue eyes lighting up his gray-haired and weathered features. "We bred all our cows to Angus bulls, but that didn't get us where we wanted yet, so we bought Angus

heifers out of Nebraska, calved them out, kept back more and bought more till we turned our herd" into 200 commercial Angus cows.

Those cows produced the 80 steers for BoB, but the best was yet to come. Cementing a relationship with their bull supplier, the Hasarts stepped into that customer network.

## Cow psychology

"I started buying heifers from them, developing and keeping a lot of them," he says. "We switched all out and started growing that pure Angus herd. We liked what we had and just kept doing it, working from all those heifers each year and getting better than 90% Choice."

That fit the natural beef protocol the brothers started after taking in a presentation at a USPB annual meeting.

"I said, 'I think that will work for us,'" Hasart recalls. "So I contacted the representative, and we worked into the program from then on."

It wasn't because of overabundant resources, other than a new generation coming up through high school at the time. Rather, it



fit the natural, low-stress environment at Top End Farm, where the family selected for gentle Angus cattle and adapted more docile ways.

“We learned cow psychology,” Hasart says. “When we sort now, just one of us can peel off what we need for a load. The cattle don’t know any curse words; they do not know Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Spanish or American. All they know is how you react to them.”

Today’s 300-400 cows move across 8,000 acres in several pastures and fields, but they all connect along a 4-mile path.

Each fall, the late-spring-calving pairs take up residence on wheat pastures. In November, they rotate to one adjacent to pens where they get water and a little feed in bunks. After a few days, the moms are locked up while calves get a round of vaccines but keep their freedom, along with one nanny cow.

“They know where Mom is, they know where water is, and they know where feed is,” Hasart says. “So here they are walking out in nice wheat fields. They know how to eat that, too.”

After booster shots, calves get more oriented to the bunks in preconditioning before full feed next to calves purchased from the network with similar Angus genetics.

That low-stress handling is required, you might say. National Beef audits the farm each year.

“You gotta put the cattle down the chute in front of a third party, and they score you,” Hasart says. “No hot shots, get the cattle to walk for them, give them their shots, and out the gate they go.” The family is also scored on how cattle come out of the chute, but that’s no problem for already conscientious cattle handlers.

“We can’t get the highest score,” Hasart notes, “because we don’t use horses.” The tame herd willingly follows their pickups and four-wheelers.

### Additional resources

Drought and other circumstances brought big changes from 2012 to 2014. The government retired a main irrigation well because it was 2 miles from the South Republican River, dry for generations. It still is, but the next generation of Hasarts was ready to bloom and grow.

Jerry and Beth Ellen’s son Josh and wife Addie, and Lester and Dixie’s sons Jacob and Ben are on the Colorado team, while youngest son Daniel and daughter Elle moved with them in 2014 to help run the new ranch in Nebraska.

“We knew we either [had to] liquidate cows or we had to look for more ground,” Hasart says. “We didn’t know if we could count on our resources here.”

Before land prices spiked, they bought an

8,000-acre place south of Valentine, Neb., far from the destructive fingers of drought, but close enough to truck cattle back and forth with minimal stress.

Getting ready for expansion just when their original bull supplier dispersed, the Hasarts bought most of that last calf crop. The purebred Angus heifers formed an even more elite nucleus of genetics, providing the confidence to close the herd and only keep heifers from within, while the 600-cow Nebraska herd expanded through artificial insemination (AI). All calves are developed or finished in the Colorado pens.

“We have a lot of purebred progeny going into this now,” Hasart says. “Before that, we were pretty consistent in our Choice, so we started watching our Primes. We were at 5%, 6% on 200 to 300 head. All of a sudden we were above 10%. Last year we averaged around 23% Prime (some loads went 50% and one this winter made 65% Prime).” Nearly all the rest would qualify for CAB, and volume is growing.

### Natural market

Most of those were bound for National Beef’s NatureSource® line for the last seven years, but the longest running CAB partner with the highest-volume production recently began producing CAB brand Natural, as well.

“All the parts were set. It just made sense for them to take this next step with us after everything else they’ve done with our brand,” says Clint Walenciak, CAB director of packing.

CAB brand Natural is a good fit for an outfit that aims for the top end.

Improvements and adjustments to the two-ranch system continue. This winter, 150 bred heifers were genomically tested with GeneMax (GMX®) Advantage™ to ramp up the percent

Primes and move to where he can supply GMX-tested heifers to his local network.

The Sandhills ranch, lacking a wheat-pasture option, has implemented fenceline weaning and is trying out nose flaps.

“Last year, Les put the plastic flaps in, gave them their shots then. A week or 10 days later, took the flaps out, gave them their booster shots and separated them. The calves didn’t care where Mom was or wasn’t,” he says. “It’s still a big learning process, but we’re always learning how to minimize stress on them.”

Last winter the Colorado ranch built a solar calving barn using greenhouse panels, because getting calves off to a healthy start is the key to success all the way down a natural production chain.

“When the sun comes up in the morning, it warms the barn and stays in the south all day,” Hasart says. “It’s 10 degrees warmer in there, and the sunshine dries things out so the pathogens have less of a chance.”

That means healthier cattle that grow up to keep improving the herd while making CAB Prime Natural to keep consumers happy. Just thinking about their ever-better production chain still makes Hasart’s blue eyes twinkle.

“The most exciting thing about feeding the Angus cattle and watching them grow is when they go on the truck to market. When they fill up the chute, going into the truck, it’s a happy day,” he says.

Patriarch Jim, who bridged across the years from breaking horses to producing Prime beef, passed away in 2015. “He didn’t make it to see our 100 years on this place,” Hasart says, “but I’m sure he’s smiling down now.”

Here’s to another century of happy days.



**Editor’s Note:** Hannah Johlman is intern and Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

