



Genetics, Goals and Grids

Every day is 'go time' for South Dakota rancher.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Every person on this earth has a finite amount of time to make a difference.

When Troy Hadrick returned to his family's Faulkton, S.D., ranch, he may have heard a tick-tock in the back of his mind.

"I was thinking at the time, 'Okay, I'm in my late 30s. How many years do I have in this business, and can I get my cow herd where I want to be in that amount of time?'" the commercial cattleman asked himself. "It seemed overwhelming. Can you live long enough to really make a difference?"

Ever a student, with more determination than doubt, Hadrick tackled the challenge head on.

"I think you've got two choices," he says. "You can either be a victim of the market,

and just be willing to take whatever they give you that day. Or, you can put some effort in, change some things and produce cattle year in and year out that will generate more money than the commodity cattle."

Hadrick's use of technology, his ability to make rapid change and willingness to share earned him the 2017 Progressive Partner Award from the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

Joint venture

Competing on the South Dakota State University meats judging team years earlier, the producer thought about improvements when he studied carcasses in the cooler. He came home from college to artificially inseminate (AI) his own small group of cows. When he and wife Stacy got married and moved to her family's operation near Sturgis, he never quit thinking about what might happen when his dad wanted to retire.

They built a life "west river," but leaving behind Stacy's family and her career with extension wasn't a decision they took lightly.

"You know love," Stacy laughs, "it gets you a lot of crazy places."

For both of them, there was the allure of managing a herd their way. Stacy draws on her ag business background to help them set — and stick to — goals. Her husband dives deep into the details.

In 2010, they and their three children — Teigen (now 14), Olivia (11) and Reese (9) — moved to 349th Avenue, just a quarter mile down the road from Hadrick's "home place." Their house overlooks a calving pasture.

"It wasn't necessarily easy, but that was exciting for both of us, and we're pretty happy to be where we're at," Hadrick says.

The operation includes 4,000 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat and forage, but as the older generation transferred the diversified business to the next generation, they each established their own roles. Hadrick's two



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to sires with above-average calving ease and high marbling expected progeny differences (EPDs), high beef dollar value indexes (\$B), and below-average yearling height.

“We made a lot of changes in a hurry,” Hadrick says, but the marketing was the biggest one. Selling feeder calves each winter turned into September weaning and a five-month stay in the family’s grow yard before they shipped the 2013-born calves 600 miles south to Irsik & Doll Feed Yard (IDFY) near Garden City, Kan.

Feeding partner

The rancher found a partner who would treat his animals like they were his own.

“That’s my feeling; Every animal out here is mine. How do I make the most money I possibly can?” asks Mark Sebranek, 20-year manager of IDFY.

Both were excited, but nervous for the first results.

“I always tell customers that I hope they

don’t have a phenomenal experience the first time because if they have such a great experience, then they expect it every year,” the feeder says.

Yet Hadrick isn’t your typical producer. When he saw the group averaged 89% Choice or better, with 32% CAB qualifiers, but no Primes, his first thought was, “That’s a pretty good start.”

“I want to get to where we have everything CAB or Prime, because that’s the way you really see the premiums stack up,” Hadrick says.

He wondered if commercial DNA could speed up progress.

“If I’m going to spend the money, then I’m going to believe the data until it proves me wrong,” Hadrick says. It would be of no use sitting in the file cabinet while continuing on the same path. “I had to commit to using the data to improve.”

The GeneMax® Focus™ results convinced him to send all the steer calves, both AI-sired

and natural service, to the feedyard. He used GeneMax Advantage™ to pick replacement heifers before feeding the rest.

“It became evident very fast that the data we were getting from those tests were really good,” he says.

The percent of cattle grading in the upper two-thirds of Choice or better doubled in the 2015-harvested group, with 13.3% Prime and 52.2% CAB. The AI calves bested the cleanup bulls. He even sorted by sire group to determine which genetics made him the most money.

Getting better, not bigger

“The decisions are getting easier because I’m not having to guess whether it would be a good idea to feed cattle or not,” Hadrick says. “I’m not guessing which heifers I should keep or which ones I should sell.”

Marketing used to keep him up at night, but the more he knows about his cattle, the less it feels like gambling. He’s also added a broker to his team of “experts.” The list already included his vet, AI rep, feeder and Zoetis rep.

“Every time I keep those relationships growing, I think it helps us all improve and do a better job,” the cattleman says.

They helped him confirm plans as he took over when calf, feed and land prices were high.

“The idea of expansion as the key to success didn’t look very promising to me,” he says. “Let’s get bigger” was quickly replaced by “Let’s get better.”

“It doesn’t take much more effort to go CAB and Prime than it does to have ones that don’t, and in the end, we get paid more for it,” he says.

In a down market, those premiums are often the difference between making money and going in the red. Most of the steers harvested in three drafts this summer made 83% CAB, with 35% CAB brand Prime. They gained 3.8 pounds (lb.) per day in 185 days on feed, requiring just 5.7 lb. of feed per 1 lb. of gain. The average grid premium was just shy of \$100 per head.

“People keep asking, ‘What are you sacrificing?’” Hadrick says. Carcass weights, ribeye area and yields have remained fairly steady. Cow size is decreasing.

“Nothing,” is the quick reply.

“Knowing the cattle gives me the opportunity to play the market,” Sebranek says, noting some cattle went to harvest early to get ahead of a price slide. The feeder tried a new grid with one sort. “I could do that because I know the consistency of the cattle.”

Brett McCoy, Zoetis area business manager



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based in Buffalo, Wyo., has known Troy for 20 years or more, first through the AI business and now with animal health and genetics. The area manager brought the cattleman in to share his journey with Zoetis sales reps a few years ago.

Since then, Hadrick has presented from Georgia to Montana with the same message: “We don’t have any magic pixie dust that we sprinkle on anything. We don’t have any super secrets that nobody else knows,” he says. “We’re just implementing some of the technologies that are out there.”

This year, he’s even trying long-range, ultra-high-frequency (UHF) radio frequency identification (RFID) tags, that can be read from up to 25 feet and immediately sync to a “cloud” accessible by any device.

“We know when the data is in good useable form, we’ll make money from that,” Hadrick says.

His ability to make changes in just a few

generational turns motivates others, McCoy says.

“Troy’s story doesn’t have to be unique,” he says. “The American dream in the cattle business is still alive and well. Customers

that put the time and effort into making their cattle better and [that] market them effectively can find premiums in the marketplace.”

Hadrick always believed that, but even he is a bit amazed at the pace.

“What we did in four years’ time when we took over, I thought was going to take us at least 10,” he says. It didn’t require

huge equipment investments or major expenditures outside of the genomics testing. “We started this all with \$13 straws of semen.”

For Hadrick, the biggest shift was investing more time in study.

“You’ve got to make it a conscious effort, because there’s always fence to fix,” he says. Sitting behind the computer isn’t

glamorous, but when there are genetics and economics to analyze, he reminds himself, “What are the jobs that only I can do?”

His cattle feeder says he enjoys seeing the year-end analysis.

“I don’t think there’s anybody who goes through it as deep as Troy does,” Sebranek says. “When they have the passion, it drives me to have the passion also.”

Net profit is a powerful motivator, but Hadrick’s goals look beyond that.

“I marvel at what my grandfather was able to do coming through the Depression and keeping it together. I marvel at what my dad and uncle were able to do in the ’80s, keeping this place together,” he says. “I don’t want to be the generation that screws it up.”

With each improvement, Hadrick may be less inclined to worry about that ration of time vs. making a difference.

“We’ve accomplished a lot in the last couple years, and it’s something we’re really proud of,” he says, “but we’re not done yet.”



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Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*