

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMANDA SORENSON



► Powder River Angus is operated by fifth-generation ranchers Neal and Amanda Sorenson. Their boys Cole (left), 14, and Chance, 13, help on the ranch and are active at school and 4-H.

Finding Balance

Seedstock operation produces quality bulls by maintaining excellent females.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Neal and Amanda Sorenson are fifth-generation ranchers, raising registered Angus seedstock near Spotted Horse, Wyo.

“In 1884 my great-great-grandparents homesteaded on the confluence of Clear Creek and the Powder River,” says Neal. “For a while they ran a stage stop. Then they sold that homestead and moved to Oregon. My great-granddad came back and homesteaded here again in 1909 on Horse Creek. My

dad’s family still has that ranch today; Amanda and I lease part of that place. My dad bought the place we live on now in 1974, near Spotted Horse. This is where our operation is currently located.”

Amanda’s family is from southeastern Wyoming.

“They have a ranch between Wheatland and Chugwater, and she is a fifth-generation rancher, too,” he says, explaining the two met at the University of Wyoming. In 1994, they bought a herd dispersed in Colorado and

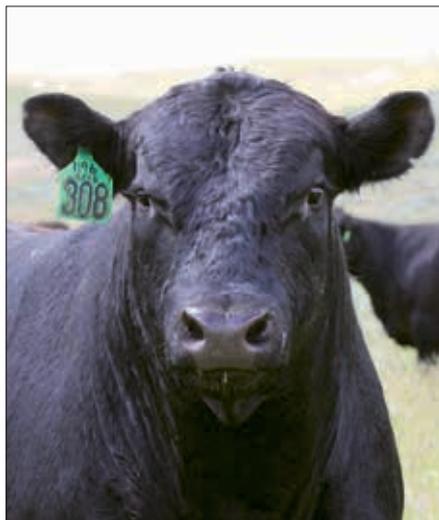
started into the purebred business.

“My wife is good at keeping records and all the books, and my dad told her that if she was going to keep all those records, we might just as well have purebred cows, so that’s what we did,” Neal says. They started their cow business with a pot load of cattle, growing the herd into what it is today.

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our industry, but cattle need to be able to stay sound and travel well,” Neal says. “We also want moderate-size cows with good udders.”

Neal says they try to choose bulls with large scrotal circumference, as it’s been shown to be related to fertility — in the bulls, and in their female offspring.

When selecting bulls to use by artificial insemination (AI), the Sorensons look at calving ease.

“Most outfits in Wyoming calve out on pasture and don’t want any problems,” Neal says. “Calving ease is a big deal in the West in general, but especially on ranches here in Wyoming.”

Still, calving ease needs to be balanced with “traits that make a good female, combining femininity, growth and performance,” Neal says.

The Powder River cow herd consists of about 400 mature cows. Heifers are calved in January-February and the mature cows in February-March.

“The heifers are calved through the barn and the cows calve outside, unless we have really bad weather,” says Neal.

Cows and heifers are bred by AI. All are synchronized and AIed either to their herd bulls or to bulls selected from AI studs. Herd bulls are turned out a few days later.

“We use DNA to test parentage in multi-sire groups out on pasture,” Neal says. “The DNA test is a Godsend for us. Before it became available, we were trying to put one bull with 50 cows and also had to make sure the neighbor’s bull didn’t get in.”

Breeding management is much simpler, being able to use the DNA parentage test.

“I don’t want my neighbor’s bulls getting in, but at least I can identify it when it happens. That calf becomes a commercial steer rather than a registered bull. It’s simple and easy to figure out,” he explains.

The cows are pastured on native grass; the ranch has no irrigated land.

“We do have some dryland farm ground just for raising hay,” he says. “We hay between 1,000 and 1,500 acres of dryland hay each year — a mix of grass and alfalfa.”

Grazing public land

Their cattle graze on private and public Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. Most of the land leased from his grandfather’s estate

is BLM land, though it has some deeded ground on either end.

“We’ve done some cross-fencing on that pasture to be able to utilize it better,” Neal says. “We’ve also incorporated temporary electric fence on some of our pastures, to be able to rotate the grazing better and more effectively.”

“We run large numbers of cattle on small pieces of ground for a shorter time — mainly in the spring as a pasture management tool,” he continues. “It really works well; the grass has done well, and the cattle do really well with this type of management.”

Moving the cattle fairly regularly works nicely during AI season.

“The cows can stay out on pasture. They might be on a certain pasture for three days

and then they are off it,” Neal explains.

“We’ve planned it so we can AI the cows while they are on grass, and they are more calm when we gather them up, pull off the heats and AI them.”

Those that don’t respond within a certain amount of time are mass-mated and given a shot of gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH). Bulls are turned out a few days later.

“When you detect for heat for three days and they are just out grazing, they are much more comfortable and relaxed than if they were in a drylot,” says Neal. “It’s easier on the cattle.”

The short pasture rotations are very good for the land and the grass.

“It’s all working better than I thought it would. It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks, but I learned that one, and it’s been a very good tool,” he says.

The Sorenson cattle graze on 12,000 to 15,000 acres, and much of this is leased from private owners. There is some scattered BLM and state land, but it’s mostly private leases, he says. “We own about 5,000 acres and lease the rest.”

The cattle run on varied terrain, and are managed with horses and 4-wheelers, depending on where they are, and time constraints.

“We have some country that is relatively level, and it’s not hard to handle and move cattle with four-wheelers,” Neal notes. “By contrast my granddad’s place is extremely rough and we have to ride horses up there.”

High-elevation concerns

The home ranch consists of lower flatlands, at about 4,500 feet elevation, but many of their bull customers are at high elevation.

“I wish I could PAP (pulmonary arterial pressure)-test our bulls, but I know that the PAP score is subjective (and doesn’t work very well when bulls are tested at elevations below 7,000 feet) and that’s why we don’t do it,” Neal says.

The PAP test was developed in humans and is designed to determine which animals are most at risk of developing brisket disease, or pulmonary artery hypertension.

“We sell a lot of bulls that run in the Bighorn Mountains, and my wife’s family runs cattle at 7,800 feet on the Laramie plains, and they get along fine with our bulls. I would like to see a DNA test for brisket disease rather than having to depend on the PAP test,” he says.

It would be easier, and more accurate, to be able to use DNA to check cattle for susceptibility to brisket disease anywhere in

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the country. Researchers are still working on a DNA test. Brisket disease does affect a lot of producers' cattle, and he says a DNA test would be a great tool to have, especially for people buying bulls that perform at high elevations.

Thinking down the line

The Sorensons ultrasound their bulls for carcass traits, but emphasize carcass merit is not their No. 1 priority.

"It's a tool, and we scan the bulls just to show they do very well on the carcass side," Neal explains. Steer mates to the bulls are fed at Chappell Feedlot in western Nebraska, where they get individual carcass data to apply back to their dams.

"That's ultimately where cattle end up — at a feedlot — and they need to do well there," he says. The ultrasound and carcass data have been well-received by customers, especially for those retaining the ownership of their calves.

"This is nice information to know, but I think from a rancher's perspective it's much better to have a sound animal that can travel and has a good udder," says Neal, noting that he's much more interested in fertility and female traits, structure and soundness. "The rancher needs a good, fertile, efficient cow herd to produce the calves that later do well in the feedlot. If you don't have a good factory, you can't do it.

"We believe that the female should be the primary focus of any seedstock program," he continues. "A good bull is the byproduct of a great cow. It's been our experience that when we produce a great bull, he came from a really good cow."

His daughters will help improve someone's herd, Neal said, adding that many of their customers retain replacement heifers.

"If the rancher wants to keep his own

heifers as replacements, we should be able to provide the cattle that will do it," says Neal, noting that their cattle have been in desert and many other environments. "They seem to do well in many environmental conditions. They are not propped up here, so they do well wherever they go. If a person feeds cattle extra and puts crutches under them, you don't really know what the cattle will do. We run ours like all the commercial guys around us, and can see how they

actually perform," says Neal. The ranch slogan is "Bulls born and raised where corn don't grow."

The bulls are sold in February. The 2017 sale, hosted 60 miles away at the Buffalo sale barn, sold 135 yearling bulls. Most of the bulls are sold to regional buyers, but some have gone as far away as Wisconsin. Many stay in northeast Wyoming and also go to southeastern Montana and

western South Dakota, says Neal.

Most of the buyers are return customers.

"We market so many bulls regionally that people hear about us mostly by word of mouth. That's the best marketing. A satisfied customer is the best advertising. We don't take our customers for granted, however. We always treat them the way we'd like to be treated," he says.

The bulls are videoed before each sale, so the buyers can have an early preview. This also works well for the customers who are unable to make it to the sale, and this has been a great marketing tool.

They also sell females privately each year. The last few years, they've sent developing heifers to a feedlot to keep them out of their hair in the spring. They have done some embryo transfer (ET) work, but sparingly. Neal says they only flush cows that have proven themselves by producing heifers good enough to stay in their herd; consistently

raise their calves well; and have long-standing good feet, legs and udder.

Their last flush was a 16-year-old who produced four Pathfinder® daughters that remain in the herd. Her bull calves were all good bulls.

"This is what we look for in maternal genetics — a great factory time and time again in our program and in our environment," Neal explains.

Family

He and Amanda used to do everything themselves. Amanda is a crucial part of the team, doing all the records and helping with the cattle.

"I think I'd have to sell out if I had to try to do all the bookwork for our cattle operation," Neal says. "She used to do it all longhand, but now there are software programs that make it somewhat easier."

In recent years they've hired some help, particularly through calving season.

Hiring a full-time person has helped free up time to participate in their kids' activities in school and 4-H, and they contract help with marketing and advertising.

Neal and Amanda have two boys, Cole, 14, and Chance, 13.

"They are very active in 4-H, showing steers and pigs, and most days they are good help on the ranch. They are both enrolled in Twin Spruce Junior High School in Gillette, Wyo., 40 miles south of us. We are glad to be able to raise our boys with the lifestyle and traditions in which we grew up, and hope that someday they will continue ranching and carry on the legacy," he says.

"The boys are interested in the cattle and help us with them," Neal says. "I think it's too early to tell if cattle will be their passion in life or not, but they definitely have an interest."



Editor's Note: Heather Smith Thomas is a cattlewoman and freelance writer from Salmon, Idaho.