

For cattle feeder Larry Carlson, personal attention is part of the fun, and it's critical for consistent results. An important part of Carlson's personal touch is ...

Sorting for **POTENTIAL**

STORY & PHOTOS BY TROY SMITH



It's not that Larry Carlson prefers bovine companionship to that of humans, but the former is more readily available. He spends the majority of his time with the inhabitants of his north-central Nebraska feedlot, where he coaxes calves to the feedbunks and cajoles them toward their performance potential.

"My daughter thinks I'm goofy because I talk to cattle," Carlson says. "But I enjoy cattle, and I like to talk. And we get along just fine because I always get to dominate the conversation."

Carlson is a hands-on manager who develops feed rations, then climbs behind the wheel of a feedtruck and delivers them to the bunks. He monitors the health of his charges and doctors the sick, often alone. This one-man gang also handles maintenance chores and marketing tasks with equal zeal.

"I've got some really good part-time people who help with processing, sorting and load-out. I'm lucky to have such good help when I need it, but I enjoy doing as much as I can by myself,"

Carlson explains. "Of course, you can't approach it with an 8-to-5 mentality. There are plenty of long days, but I enjoy them all. Cattle feeding is fun, and the personal attention pays in the long run."

Carlson's customers appreciate the payoff. Most of them are ranchers, and many gained their first retained ownership experience while placing their calves under Carlson's care. He believes that ranchers with quality genetics can make more money by owning their cattle all the way to harvest. And with

every pen, Carlson strives to prove it.

"My folks farmed near Hordville, and they fed cattle, but I got away from it for a while," Carlson shares. "For several years, I was a housing contractor in Grand Island, but I never lost interest in cattle. I stayed involved by helping with my brother's 500-head cow herd, and I decided that I wanted to ranch. I started looking for a place to run a herd of my own, but what I found was a feedlot in ranching country. It looked to me like a

nearly ideal setup for handling calves.”

Catering to calves

Located in the Sandhills south of Bassett, Carlson’s chosen site offers sandy slopes and protection by several well-established shelterbelts. The solid-sided steel pens are suited to feeding calves, and that is the niche Carlson serves at Sandhills Cattle Feeding Inc.

“Some feedlots really don’t like to take very many calves, but I prefer them. And it’s reached the point where, for the most part, I specialize in fresh-weaned Angus calves,” Carlson states. “Most of the calves we receive are weaned right onto a truck, so we’ve developed a program for them. How you feed them does make a difference. You have to feed for type, so you have to sort them into groups that you can manage for full potential.”

The strongest argument for sorting, Carlson says, is the fact that too many calf-fed cattle are pushed too hard. They gain quickly and get fat, but when fed in large groups of various body types, a portion of the pen goes to slaughter before reaching a desirable quality grade. Producers hoping to claim premiums through a pricing grid geared to reward high-quality carcasses may find that too many fail to grade USDA Choice, and disappointing discounts appear from too many Yield Grade (YG) 4 carcasses.

Happy buyers

As a buyer, Ken Conway hasn’t been disappointed. He frequently purchases Carlson-fed cattle priced on the Angus GeneNet grid for Monfort. Conway says feeding management is key to hitting a grid, even when the genetics for carcass quality are present.

“There is a finishing end point for each animal, and Larry has honed his ability to sort animals into groups with a common end point,” Conway says. “It does take extra time and effort, but the cattle he feeds

grade well, sometimes going 100% Choice and Prime. He takes the time and effort needed to eliminate the ‘out’ cattle, and he’s been very successful at it.”

Focused feeding for finish is just part of the personal approach to eliminating outliers. Also included are plenty of little things that serve to reduce stress and maintain cattle health. To get a good start with a set of newly arrived calves, Carlson tries to process them within 24 hours. An advocate of preconditioning, he says ranch vaccinations administered two to four weeks prior to shipment will enhance the feedlot’s health program.

Past experience with thousands of sale-barn cattle also taught Carlson that, before pushing a ration to calves, their bellies should be full of prairie hay. He spreads an ample amount on the mound of the pen, then unrolls a bale and forks it into the bunks by hand. He’s been most successful with a complete, commercial feed at the start, feeding about 6 pounds (lb.) and plenty of hay for five days, working them up to his own ration within 10 days.

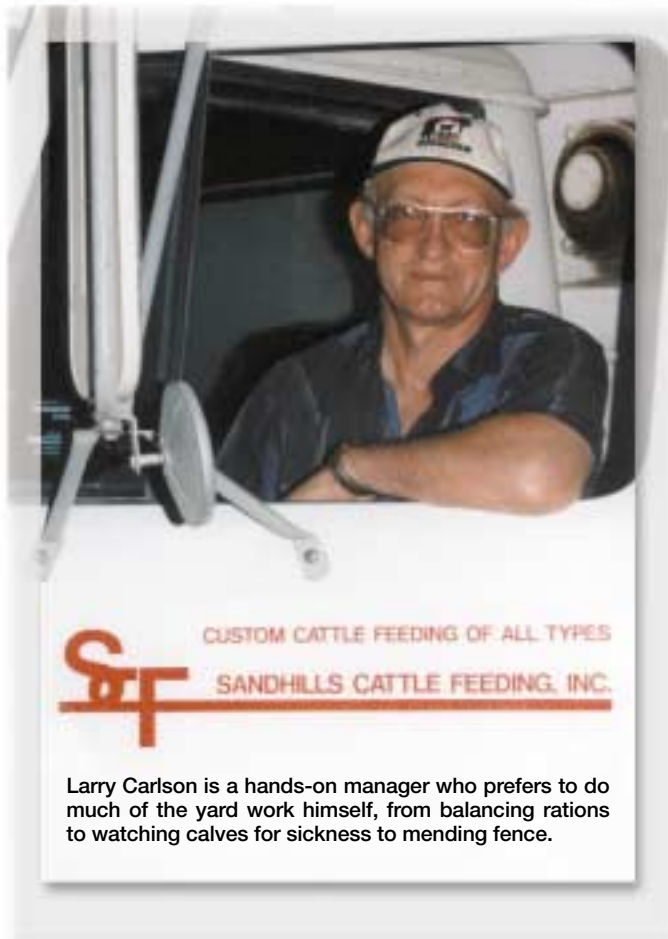
Attention to detail

“I practically live with them from then on,” Carlson says. “I’m no cowboy, so I walk the pens, easing standoffish calves up to the bunk and watching for any that look droopy. You’ve got to catch the sick ones early, but the overall treatment rate is low. Our death loss has been 0.25% on the last 19,000 head through the feedlot.

“I like to sort at the start, but I might do it again when we weigh the cattle after 45 to 60 days. And I sort to market, sending them when they’re ready. When they are, you have to pull the trigger to avoid the Yield Grade 4s. It doesn’t pay to hold cattle for a target weight that doesn’t fit their type,” he adds.

While Carlson won’t try to talk his customers out of using implants, he makes no secret of

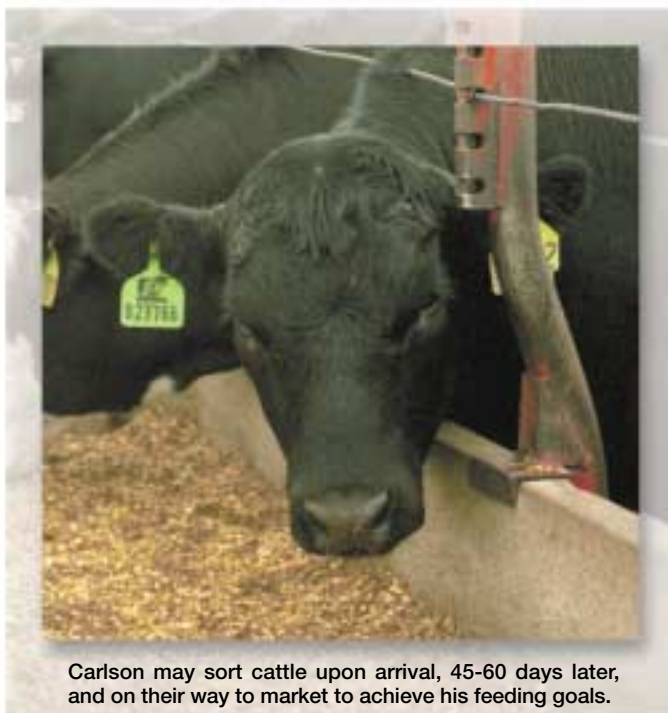
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Larry Carlson is a hands-on manager who prefers to do much of the yard work himself, from balancing rations to watching calves for sickness to mending fence.

“I’ve always stressed quality service, and I don’t want to get so big that I can’t deliver it.”

— Larry Carlson



Carlson may sort cattle upon arrival, 45-60 days later, and on their way to market to achieve his feeding goals.

his preference for feeding cattle without benefit of growth stimulants. The subject stirs some controversy within the industry, with proponents of implants claiming their use can lower costs of gain, while critics say implants can have a detrimental effect on quality grade.

“I think nonimplanted cattle do grade better, and my cost of gain usually comes within 3¢ per pound of implanted cattle,” Carlson explains. “And making the quality grade makes anywhere from \$30 to \$70 (per head) more. I think that offsets a slightly higher cost of gain.”

Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Feeder-Packer Relations Director John Stika praises Carlson for avoiding a cookie-cutter approach, never pushing and always managing different groups of cattle accordingly. Stika says the numbers show

Carlson aims to raise the standard for feeding management.

“As far as facilities, Carlson has some of the best I’ve seen for calves. He’s got room for 6,500 head, but he never packs it so full that he can’t sort cattle to another pen for better results. And he takes the time to do it,” Stika offers. “He targets CAB® with every pen and gets phenomenal results — really consistent closeouts.”

Of all the calves Carlson fed this year, 85% graded Choice or Prime, with about 35% qualifying for CAB. However, a summer closeout showed 90% graded Choice with 10% going Prime; 44% were YG 2, while 56% were YG 3. Nearly 62% qualified for CAB. There were no overweight carcasses, dark cutters or outliers of any kind. The cattle earned a premium of more than \$68/head. Since then,



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comparable closeouts have shown that such results are repeatable — with the right genetics and the right management.

As news about the numbers spreads through the grapevine, Sandhills Cattle Feeding is attracting more higher-quality cattle, often from first-time retained-ownership customers. To accommodate new business, Carlson is adding another 1,000 feet of bunk space, but he doesn’t

want to get so big that he can’t provide the personal touch.

“I’ve always stressed quality service, and I don’t want to get so big that I can’t deliver it,” Carlson adds. “To the rancher who has never retained ownership, I say bring me at least 80 head of calves, so I have enough numbers to sort, and I’ll show you what can be done.

“And who’s to say that talking to those calves won’t do some good, too?”

