

A Contemporary Cowboy

Ryan Arndt uses an all-around approach for cow herd improvement.

Story and photos by Sarah Moyer

In a corner of the world where cowboys still roam, Ryan Arndt teaches his girls to rope and rodeo. He decides what heifers or cows will be bred and what bulls to buy and use. The work and play run together while he manages a cow-calf herd in the middle of yearling country.

It's all a family affair in these Flint Hills, done with quality in mind and a love for livestock passed down from his father and uncle, Michael and Steven Arndt.

"Dad and Steve fed cattle together in high school," Arndt says. "It just kind of grew from there. Now we run some cows. The main operation is in buying calves, backgrounding them, grazing them and sending them to the feedyards." That's Kinsley (Kan.) Feeders, where their calves are fed and cousin Luke also works.

Their grandfather ran a few cows in the 1960s but focused on farming in the Emporia, Kan., community. As the family grew over time, so has their scope within the beef industry.

"We've all got our different areas we handle," says Arndt, an independent thinker who nonetheless will share the stories of "old timers" until he's one himself.

"I always liked the cow part of it," he says, thinking ahead to the coming calving season. "I enjoy raising them and seeing how they turn out come harvest."

A drought's rainbow

The cows and prairie suit the cowboy who would rather ride his horse than drive a truck. Yet, however tied to tradition he might seem,

Arndt knows forward is the only way to go for his herd.

So how did a family geared to run and feed commodity cattle get back to a breeding herd?

The idea matured as Arndt was finishing his animal science degree at Kansas State University (K-State) just after the turn of the century.

"The drought started in New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado," he says, "We started buying a lot of those drought cows."

Dregs rather than the cream, the cows were "a rainbow of everything — their color, shape, size, breed."

Planning for better, the herd manager kept individual records on weaning weights, carcass data and more from the very start.

"I can go back three or four generations on some of our heifers now, to some of the original herd," he says. "They were someone else's cull cows that we kept a heifer out of, then kept several generations on down the line by buying good bulls."

Arndt won't claim to be an Angus breeder, but he's a fan of the genetics because he can target the traits he wants. This leads him to finding the diamonds in the rough.

Progress shows in the numbers if you imagine how cast-offs might perform. A load of 2016 fall-born calves were all Choice or better with 50% qualifying for the *Certified Angus*



Ryan Arndt sets the goal to keep improving. He says it's easy to take steps backward if improvement is not the focus.

Beef® (CAB®) brand and 10% Prime. Of that group, 93% were Yield Grade 3 or leaner.

Mutual benefits

Recalling the start with drought cows raised concerns when much of Kansas also faced drought and one of the hottest summers on record. Luckily, the herd went right on grazing one of the state's greatest natural resource, grass on the Flint Hills prairie.

Still, even the best native grass year after year requires strategic genetic selection to improve a herd.

From maternal form and function to performance at all stages of growth as well as end-product merit, Angus seedstock producer Matt Perrier says Arndt knows all have a seat at the selection table.

Perrier, of Dalebanks Angus in Eureka, Kan., a county to the south, says, "Owning feedyards like their family does now, Ryan sees the whole picture." The Angus breeder knows that's not universal.

"You've got some guys that are just focused on carcass merit. You've got some other guys that are just focused on raising good mother cows," Perrier says. "Ryan recognizes that to be profitable, you need to focus on both. And with today's genetics, you can do just that."

By his choice at the time, Arndt's K-State degree featured more courses on feeding and nutrition than genetics and reproduction, but he picked up a valuable lesson.

"I learned how to learn and who to

get hold of if you have a question," he says. "People like Matt Perrier are good to have just a phone call away."

Understanding where his strengths and Perrier's strengths lie led to other positive outcomes in the business relationship that began in 2012 with



The Arndt girls sit like three peas in a pod, ready to practice.

the purchase of a bull.

"He talked me into AI-ing (artificially inseminating) our heifers several years ago, and now I've conned him into AI-ing them every year," Arndt says. "We always joke it's a nice warm-up for him, because we're about a week ahead of them in the springtime."

Perrier enjoys his end of the deal, too, not least because he notices the improvement over time.

"It's always good to be able to see customers firsthand and visit with them chute side," he says. "The obvious change I see is in those heifers coming through the chute. They're so much more consistent in size, shape and phenotype."

The stockman also enjoys an update on carcass merit.

"Ryan, as we're visiting, will share what those steer mates or the year

prior's steers have done through the feedyard from both a conversion and a gain standpoint, and a grade standpoint." Perrier says. "It's pretty impressive what he's been able to do investing in some good balanced-trait genetics that excel at the ranch, in the feedlot and on the rail."

Though it's not all business for these two.

"His kids and my kids are similar ages, so we'll see them a couple times a year at 4-H horse events and things like that," says Perrier. "We've become decent friends because of it, not just customers."

Ropin' and ridin'

Arndt is not all business, either. He likes bringing people together

for a fun time.

When they work cattle in the spring, he waits for his girls to get out of school. Other friends come along to join in to rope the calves.

"It's kind of turned into just an annual event," he says. "A lot of our friends come, help and bring their kids. And our kids are all friends, so it turns into more play than it is work for two or three days. It gets our calves worked, and we have a good time doing it."

The same goes for his volunteer work with the Flint Hills Beef Fest committee. The celebration of the ranching community starts with a cattle contest between pens of three head each, grazed out on Flint Hills pasture. Prizes are awarded for best rate of gain, live show and a carcass contest afterwards. The committee helps with weigh-ins and the Beef

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Fest itself.

Arndt helps lead the ranch rodeo efforts. Other participation becomes difficult as the oldest of his four daughters reaches her teenage years, but he enjoys it while he can.

“Beef Fest allows people to come together for competition for their cattle, and there’s lots of home-raised calves represented in there from different seedstock producers,” he says. “It’s a goal for a lot of people around here to make it to the Beef Fest ranch rodeo, it’s a good party.”


Whether in the community or on

the ranch, Arndt thinks about the example and the legacy he and wife Amanda are building for their girls. He hopes they enjoy it, can make a living from it and pass it on. The youngest was born in October 2017, with a 6-year-old and 9-year-old rounding out the bunch. There’s plenty of time yet for them to make their mark.

For now, it’s 4-H bucket calves and other projects.

“It allows them to learn how to take care of them, have responsibilities and see the rewards

of it,” he says. “They make some money, too, and I don’t have to buy them roper calves.”

That’s a win-win for this cowboy. 

Editor’s note: Sarah Moyer is a former Certified Angus Beef LLC intern.

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