



TRUDY SMITH PHOTO

**“Honesty and willingness
to stand behind your
product is important.”**

— Duane & Nancy Pelster



Pelster Ranch Produces Market Topping Heifers

by Troy Smith

You'll need a critical eye to sort Duane Pelster's heifers. Uniformity runs deep in this commercial Angus herd and the Pelster Ranch has earned their reputation as a source of replacement quality females.

You might prefer the five percent from the top end and cull as many from the bottom, but the remainder of Pelster's heifer crop will look like proverbial peas in a pod. It's that combination of quality and uniformity which generates the market-topping prices Pelster Ranch receives.

Duane and Nancy Pelster, along with daughter, Tara, and son-in-law, Steve McKay, run some 650 cows on a ranch near Ericson, Neb. The headquarters place, located just a few miles from that little Sandhills town features 290 irrigated acres producing corn and alfalfa. Those crops fuel the calf growing lots also located at Pelster headquarters. But it's to the north about 18 miles up the Cedar River, where the Pelster cows make a living on Sandhills range.

About 50 head are black-baldies, but the majority of the Duane Pelster cows are straightbred Angus. Pelster grew up on a commercial Angus outfit and in 1961 began ranching with his father-in-law who ran both Angus and Herefords. Pelster

eventually bought the cow herd and it grew blacker as the years passed. His preference for Angus cows is justified through practical experience.

"Angus cows have worked well for us and I'm convinced that Angus make the best, most efficient brood cows," says Pelster.

Over the years, Pelster has implemented crossbreeding programs, using Hereford and Charolais bulls. But when weaning and yearling weights were compared, the crossbred calves never outweighed the straightbred Angus.

Pelster's cows calve during March and April, and by the time fall rolls around October weaning weights will range from 550 to 575 pounds for steers, and 475 to 525 for heifer calves. The calves are weaned on prairie hay and two pounds per head daily of a corn/oats mix. After 10 days, the ration is switched to silage and ground alfalfa. Sorted by sex as soon as they are eating well, heifer calves are fed for daily gains of 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 pounds, while steers are expected to gain 2 to 2 1/2 pounds.

Steers, weighing an average of 800 pounds, are sold in February. Pelster is proud that buyers have been satisfied with his steers. In fact, the same cattle feeding firm purchased and fed Pelster Ranch steers for 32 out of 34 years.

Pelster prefers to spread out

his heifer marketing, so after the steers have been sold, the heifer calves are weighed again. From the light end, about one third are selected for sale in early March as open heifers. The remainder are grown in the lots until May when they go back to grass and are bred by natural service.

The heifers are bred to light birthweight bulls but Pelster is not an advocate of 65-pound calves. He prefers calves weighing 75 to 80 pounds.

"We use EPDs (expected progeny differences) and visual appraisal to pick bulls," says Pelster. "We want a balance of performance and maternal traits, but we watch birthweight and milk values closely. Birthweight EPD of +3 is about right for heifer bulls, but +6 or +7 will work for mature cows. For milk, we want a respectable plus value, but not something that will cause us trouble. EPD ranging from +8 to 14 will work. Considering our resources, if heifers milk too heavily, they might not breed back quickly. And too much milk usually leads to udder problems."

By the end of September, the heifers are gathered for pregnancy check and pelvic measurement. At that time, Pelster selects his own replacements. The remainder are destined for a December market date. Selling occasionally at private treaty,

but more often through the local auction market, Pelster has enjoyed an upward price trend over the past several years.

"We've never sold bred heifers that didn't bring within \$10 per hundredweight of that day's market top. And we have received as much as \$100 per head over anything else selling that same day. The heifers sold last December brought the most ever. Weighing an average of 1,035 pounds they sold for \$1,040 per head," says Pelster.

Pelster believes his cows, weighing an average of 1,150 pounds at maturity, are of optimum size. They possess sufficient frame to raise a big calf utilizing sandhills resources. No creep feed is provided.

"We've tried to avoid extremes," adds Pelster. "We've got our cows as big as we want them, but haven't sacrificed efficiency. We've tried to raise replacements that were feminine, pleasing to the eye, fertile and sound. Uniformity has improved every year and that sure has helped generate interest in the bred heifers we sell."

"Honesty and willingness to stand behind your product is important and we've tried to do that. It definitely has paid off."

