

# **FIT FOR SURVIVAL**

Marketing only 2-year-olds, Mike Sitz Angus Ranch raises bulls

BY TROY SMITH



Mike Sitz Angus Ranch caters to ranchers wanting pasture-raised, 2-year-old bulls.

**D**espite the widespread practice of marketing breeding bulls as yearlings, some bull buyers harbor a preference for 2-year-olds. Ranchers who fancy 2s often run groups of several bulls to cover big pastures. Those bulls may run with the cows for most or all of the summer grazing season. Each is expected to survive the normal bull battery bickering and remain sound enough to fulfill his mission. And he has to do it without the late-season tender loving care that yearling bulls may require under those conditions.

Some cattle producers want bulls that stand up to the double duty of split calving seasons. Their bulls are pulled from the spring-bred cows, but used again later for the fall-calving herd. Other producers express disappointment in yearlings that were fed hard and grown fast — maybe too hard and too fast to hold up in the real world of harsh environments and least-cost management. Whatever the reasons, some cowmen are adamant about it.

**“I won’t buy a yearling bull,”** says Burwell, Neb., rancher Don Brown. “The yearlings I see are so full of feed that you can’t tell what they really are. But mainly it’s because I can’t get as much use out of a yearling. They seem to want to fight more, and if you run them with older bulls they really get hammered. They’re more likely to get hurt, and it takes more care to hold them together, so I buy 2s. A 2-year-old is worth more to me — at least \$1,000 more.”

Brown expects a lot from his bulls and from his cows. If they don't perform, they are gone. He applies a modern, survival-of-the-fittest management philosophy where "survival" means more than maintaining an existence. It has to include a level of profitability. For his 2-year-old Angus bulls, Brown turns to Mike Sitz Angus Ranch. There, he believes, the cattle are bred and raised to be fit for survival.

**Located north of Burwell, in the Nebraska Sandhills,** Mike Sitz caters to ranchers wanting 2-year-old bulls. That's all he and his wife, Debby, sell through their annual bull sale.

Customers like Brown also like the way Mike applies fundamental cowboy concepts to managing his registered herd. It's not a really big herd — 230 producing females — but it's run pretty much the same way Sandhillers manage their commercial stock.

"The purebred industry has a history of swinging one way and then the other, but I'm not much of a swinger," grins Mike. "I'm more of a fence-straddler, trying to find a spot in the middle. I do believe that optimum, rather than maximum, production is the way to go. That starts with cows that are as maintenance-free as possible."

Consequently, Mike doesn't run big cows. They eat too much. He doesn't calve as early as many seedstock breeders. That takes more labor and creates more stress. He doesn't believe in creep-feeding calves or pushing his bulls for fed-on growth. That requires a lot of costly, purchased concentrate.

Mike does believe in trying to use his ranch resources to the fullest. And that means utilizing grass.

"We've got the best grass in the world from June 1 through July 4," tells Mike. "The rest of the time, well it's not the best quality. We've had above-average moisture for the last few years, but this can be tough country when it gets dry. To stay



**With no full-time hired help and only seasonal help from neighbors, the Sitz family works together on the ranch near Burwell, Neb. Pictured (to r) are: Jesse, Ransom, Debby, Mike, Johanna and Bethany Sitz.**

in the cow business here, you need a cow that can really work for a living. I figure the cattle we raise should work in almost any environment if they can survive here through good and bad."

**Sitz cattle have been surviving** here since 1950.

That's when Mike's father, Bill, came to the area with a group of cows that traced back to the Angus herd Grandpa Will Sitz established in 1926. Bill continued to breed for function and uniformity, encouraging Mike and his brother, Bill Jr., to accumulate a few good cows of their own.

By the time he graduated from the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture, Mike owned 20 registered cows. In 1976, he and his new bride,

Debby, purchased 50 more from his dad. They took in share-cows to fill up their rented range while building their own herd. They established a headquarters on a purchased section of land. With the help of neighbors, Mike tore down a building site on a neighboring ranch and used the materials to build a comfortable home, shop and barn. A center-pivot irrigation system was added to raise extra feed.

Debby confides that none of it happened very fast. She and Mike struggled to cut living expenses to the bone. They wrangled with lenders who discouraged the couple's interest in the seedstock business, suggesting that a commercial crossbred program was a better way to go. The banker also

urged them to find jobs in town to supplement their ranch income. Mike says he and Debby never listened very well, but managed to pay off their loans anyway.

Mike is quick to credit his dad for helping him get started and for helping with the farming yet today. Bill likes it, but Mike is a rancher to the bone. With help from Debby and their four children, Mike handles the haying, feeding and cattle work, especially during breeding season.

**Mike learned how to** artificial inseminate (AI) cows when he was just 15, so AI has been used extensively from the start. Sires exerting a strong influence include CSU Rito 4114 and later, QAS Traveler 23-4. More recently Mike relied heavily on DHD Traveler 6807 and a pair of his sons. One was a home-raised bull, MSAR Traveler 6807-4, that Mike praises for siring a consistent calf from almost every mating.

A share of the credit for consistency and uniformity has to go to the cows. Even now, every female can be traced back to Grandpa Will's original herd. The bottom side of Sitz pedigrees are dominated by cow lines including Marshall Queen, Blackbird, Dora and Emma.

Mike will say he's not picky about a cow's looks if she is a good producer, but Debby calls him a stickler on both counts. The thing he worries about most, however, is keeping cow size suited to the environment.

Local rule-of-thumb calls for about 12 acres of grass to summer a cow-calf pair. During the rest of the year it's winter range, some protein range cubes and as little supplemental hay as possible.

Mike says he can't afford to run cows weighing 1,200 pounds (lb.) or more. The reason is because a big cow that milks well usually won't breed back in time to hit Mike's 60-day calving season. If she can't hit the window, she disappears.

Mike culls hard and maintains numbers through the

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

## FIT FOR SURVIVAL cont.

50-60 replacement heifers saved each year. He synchronizes and inseminates the heifers, starting about June 1. Cows are AI-bred, from June 15 to July 4, then sorted and turned out with clean-up bulls. On the average, about 70% of all calves are AI-sired.

Mike believes his breeding season matches peak forage quality. And except for the occasional short-lived spring storm, March and April calving is easy to manage. He keeps heifers close to the house so he can check them morning and evening, but he seldom gets up in the middle of the night. Cows calve in the hills unless brought in due to exceptionally severe weather. Birth weights of heifers' calves average 75 lb. and calves out of cows usually average 85 lb.

"I don't really 'calve,' I just tag and weigh," says Mike. "I help a heifer now and then, but I haven't touched a cow in a long time. I've never had to milk one out. We've never had much scour trouble, so we just don't have to hover over them."

**After a summer on mother's milk** and grass, bull calves will wean at 550 lb. or so, and heifers weigh nearly 500 lb. To wean, Mike locks up the calves and drives their mothers away to fall range. Feeding the calves ground prairie hay three times per day keeps them a bit more content until they are worked onto a ration of chopped ear-corn and alfalfa hay, mixed with a little sorghum silage.

In February, steers and feeder heifers are marketed through the local auction barn. Bulls and replacement heifers are grown on through the winter, targeting gains of 2.75 lb. and 1.75 lb./day respectively. As yearlings ready to breed, the heifers will weigh 725 lb. or so, and the bulls will go back to grass weighing about 1,000 lb.



**Functional, moderate-sized cows are the basis of the Sitz program. Managed like commercial cows, the registered herd is managed on grass with as little supplemental feeds as possible.**

Mike knows he could feed more and increase those weights, but he prefers to develop the cattle naturally and avoid getting them too fleshy. Even the bulls are kept in true range condition.

"If we pushed the bull calves the first winter, they'd slide back when we went back to grass. And if we feed hard the second winter, they'd have to be backed off before they're turned out with cows," explains Mike. "I'd rather keep them growing steady."

"The second winter, we run them in a winter pasture and feed the equivalent of 10 to 12 pounds of corn per day, plus hay," he continues. "By sale day in February, they'll weigh 1,400 to 1,600 pounds. They aren't fleshy, but I don't want them to be."

**Jim Morris**, Wood Lake, Neb., has been using Mike's bulls for five years, but he admits he was a little bit leery the first time he looked at Mike's offering. There was a lot to like about the bulls and their

expected progeny differences (EPDs) but they weren't as fat as the bulls he had seen at most production sales. Morris bought some anyway and was satisfied.

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"Mike's bulls have added yearling weight to our cattle, while holding down birth weights. We've kept a lot of their heifers and they milk good and have good dispositions," adds Morris. "I like Mike's 2-year-

olds because we use them to breed both spring- and fall-calving cows. We can work the bulls for two breeding seasons and don't have to give them any extra care."

Morris attributes the durability of his Sitz bulls to the fact they were pasture-raised, along with their bred-in survivability. He likes the fact that Mike doesn't pamper his cows, but runs them under real-world conditions in country that can be rather unforgiving.

Mike's real-world approach to the bull business has attracted a customer list of like-minded ranchers. There is reasonably good demand for the 50 bulls he markets each year.

However, Mike doesn't want to get stuck thinking little bitty thoughts. He's trying to develop connections for gathering performance and carcass information on calves sired by his bulls. With more tools he hopes to expand the annual offering to 75 or 80 head. And they'll all be 2-year-olds fit for survival.

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