

# WORKING FOR A LIVING

*Managers with a "never give up" attitude and Angus cattle with plenty of performance aptitude punch the clock at Four Sum Cattle Co.*

**THE** beef industry graveyard is full of tombstones that read: Here lies a cattle operation that failed to meet the challenges and continuous changes that come with running a ranch.

Darwin and Sharon Schweitzer have survived because they know what they want and at what price. They met the challenge of improving quality while their herd increased in numbers. Dramatic changes in location and herd management that is focused on performance and marketing helped them beat the odds.

Twenty years ago when they got married they started an Angus herd with 10 cows on shares with Sharon's parents. They moved the cows to Darwin's parents ranch in Montana where once Herefords, then Simmentals roamed the hills. After two years, Darwin, Sharon and their Angus cattle moved to Cave Junction, Ore.

They knew starting a registered herd would be hard but it was what they wanted and were willing to try. Darwin held down a job and took care of a neighbor's cows and irrigation as their herd grew.

The only way to sell cattle in southwest Oregon was to halter break them for consignment sales. No matter how many times Schweitzers won the California or Oregon State Fairs, nobody would go to Cave Junction to buy cattle. There was no market.

So they moved to cattle country — Wilder, Idaho. Their ranch is on the border of Ore-



*Darwin and Sharon Schweitzer, who began their Angus herd 20 years ago, make their living strictly from the cattle.*

gon and Idaho joining the Snake River, 50 miles west of Boise. They own 340 acres and lease 300 acres where they raise corn, silage, hay and pasture on rolling irrigated desert hills.

Schweitzers run 150 large, functional cows with acceptable birth weights averaging 65 to 75 pounds on the heifers and 85 pounds on the cows.

"Some breeders today concentrate on 'calving ease' but that is not necessarily our niche," Sharon says. "Our goal is to combine moderate birth weights with tremendous performance."

They are achieving balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs), including performance and milk which is evidenced by weaning weights of up to 850 pounds. A prime example of their performance-bred program is 4S Blackstone. This bull has been the No. 1 weaning weight and yearling weight bull in the breed. He has also been top in

milk. His pedigree carries their foundation cow, Miss Bess of Fairview, and has seven generations of 4S breeding on the dam side.

Schweitzers artificially inseminate their cows for 35 days then depend on top quality clean-up bulls. Most of their cows calve in the spring but they also have a herd that calves in September and October. Commercial buyers like the fall calves because with six months additional growth they are ready to go to work.

Schweitzers have raised many of their own clean-up bulls. They used Nelson Target 7255 until the number of his daughters in the herd made it prohibitive. Keeping one-third interest, they sold him back to Clyde Nelson in Salmon, Idaho. His low birth weight, high performance and carcass data are reflected throughout the Four Sum herd. Recently they purchased the top gaining

**STORY & PHOTOS BY BARBARA LaBARBARA**

bull in the Northwest Bull Test and an O'Neill's Duke son from Iowa.

These Idaho breeders have used AHIR and EPDs since their inception and have records on their cattle dating back to 1974. They scrutinize EPDs and all available data when selecting bulls and choosing replacement heifers. As a result, performance, structural soundness and thickness have improved.

Eight years ago, they calved 120 embryo transplants in an effort to build cow numbers while maintaining herd quality. In a normal year, 45 females go back into the herd. Although they have not done embryo transplanting for three years, they plan to do it again as a way of gaining numbers to support a female sale.

"We have some really old cows that are still working," says Sharon. "Miss Bess calved right up to the end and died when she was 20 years old. When a cow no longer does her job, she is gone regardless of her age."

Their young cattle are grown out on chopped alfalfa hay and silage. The cows are wintered on alfalfa hay and corn stalks. During the summer all of the animals are on irrigated pasture.

Cows are fed at night which promotes daytime calving and makes Schweitzer's life easier. Sharon recently purchased a calf-catch stick shaped like a cane on a long pole. It means catching a calf when it is starting to get sick versus when it is too weak to run away. She believes that can really make a difference.

"The show ring helped develop our name and reputation," says Darwin. "We have won a class in Denver or Reno every year since 1980 including this year. We haven't had any really big winners but consistently bred and showed useful performance cattle that have gained respect in the Angus World."

Two bulls representative of their progeny are 4S Pioneer, the 1992 National Western reserve senior champion, and 4S Easy Rain, the 1993 National Western Bull Sale top seller at \$21,500. Mark Slagle, Sargent, Neb., purchased this bull. A product of embryo transplant, 4S Ponderosa, won his class at the National Western all three years of his show career. In 1984, at the National Western, three of his full siblings were Champion Pen in the yards.

The Schweitzers have worked hard to improve their herd and pay for the ranch. Yet financial worries are always there. They remember too many bull sales where they had to have the high selling bull because if they didn't, they couldn't make their loan payment.

"We honestly believe we would not be here today if it weren't for the birth of Ponderosa," says



Sharon. "He sold for a lot of money and got us over the hump. His semen sales kept us in business when it was really hard to hang on."

Today their emphasis is less on the show ring and more on performance and bull marketing. They have held five sales; the last two in a new sale barn on their ranch. The barn also serves as shelter for newborn calves during Idaho's unforgiving winter storms.

For the last three years, they have had the highest averaging sale in Idaho. Their 1994 bull sale was one of the highlights of their career. Twelve bulls sold for more than \$4,000, 25 bulls brought \$3,500 and the 70 sale bulls averaged \$3,104. It was the last complete sale that auctioneer Ken Troutt cried before he passed away.

"As for the future we hope to make enough money to put the kids through college and pay for the place," Darwin says. "Cattle are our only source of income. They have been good to us and, in turn, we try to take good care of them. We see ourselves raising Angus forever."

Being a typical family-operated ranch, their biggest problem is not having enough hours in the day. They are active members of the Boise Valley Angus Association and Darwin is past president of the Idaho Angus Association. Sharon is an Idaho and Northwest Junior advisor. Their children, Beau and Wendy, are active in 4-H, FFA and the Idaho Junior Angus Association and keep busy with school activities. Beau is 15, president of Parmas FFA Chapter and has a 4.0 GPA. Wendy, 13, is also an A student, star of her basketball team and won her showmanship division at the Western Regional Junior Angus Show in Reno this past April.

"Some days we complain and get dog tired," Sharon says. "But there isn't one thing in this world that Darwin and I would rather be doing."

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*Four Sum Angus cattle thrive in southwest Idaho's rolling, irrigated, high-desert hills.*

