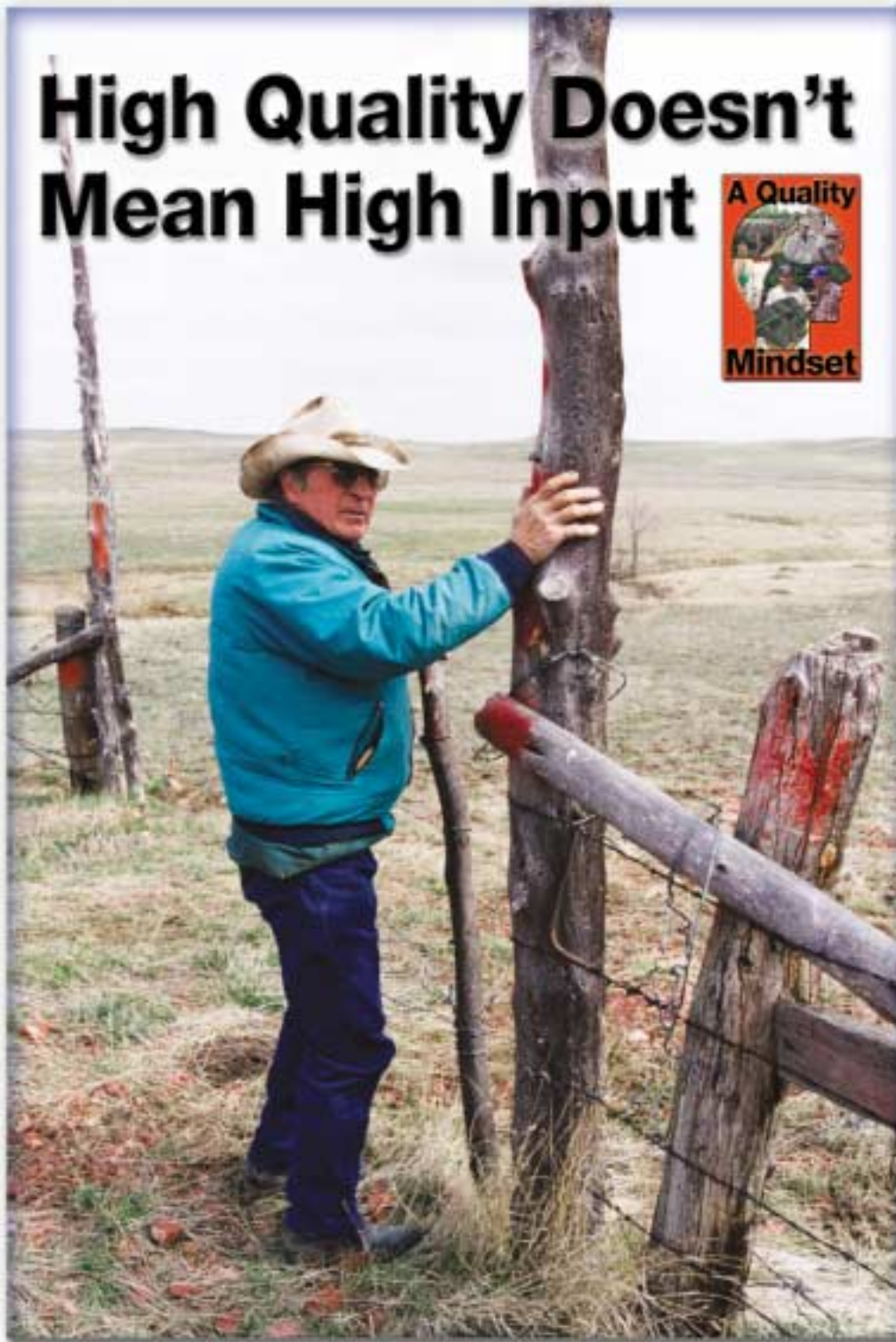


High Quality Doesn't Mean High Input



Les Best is proving that producers don't need high-input management to build a reputation for high-quality cattle.

STORY & PHOTOS BY COLETTE KNUTSON GJERMUNDSON

Above: Best's cattle and management knowledge have built Davidson Cattle Co. into a highly respected, low-input, grass-based outfit that manages 700 Angus cows bred to Angus bulls.

Les Best was involved in the cattle industry back when rough-country ranches still used teams and wagons for fencing, but he is wise enough to understand today's cattle industry and to cater to it.

"You gotta have a marketable product to sell, or you'll get left behind," he says. "It doesn't cost any more to run a good cow than it does to run a bad cow. They eat the same, so you just as well get something in return for your work."

Through the years, Best's cattle and management knowledge have built Montana's Davidson Cattle Co. (DCC) into a highly respected, low-input, grass outfit. With its 700 Angus cows bred to Angus bulls, DCC calves are establishing a reputation for grading well as calf feds slaughtered at 13-15 months of age.

The cattle post an average dry matter conversion of 6.30-to-1. And 67% of steers grade Choice or better with 60% earning premiums, while 77% of heifers grade Choice or better with 67% qualifying for premiums.

Mike Okragly, Okragly Cattle Co., Billings, is familiar with the quality of DCC's calves, having purchased them many times in the past.

"They're good calves that always perform well in the background and feedyards," Okragly says. "He's culled the cattle and takes a lot of pride in his replacement heifers, and the cattle aren't pampered; they are what they are. They will grade and yield as calf feds because they're pure Angus — there's no exotic cross in them."

"Les is a helluva stockman, a fine gentleman and good cowboy," he adds.

For the last three years, DCC

calves have gone to ConAgra Better Beef, Greeley, Colo. “The Davidson cattle have always weaned off smooth because of the excellent nutritional and preconditioning program utilized by Les Best,” says Al Perez, general manager at ConAgra. “Their cattle are ideally suited for all of our black-hided premium programs, such as Armour Black Angus and *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®). The opportunity for improvement would be to increase the muscle and Yield Grade (YG) 1s and 2s while holding quality grade.”



Best takes a lot of pride in choosing replacement heifers that fit DCC. “We have to raise really functional cows that can walk from here to the mountain, and that’s rough,” he says. “They’ll spend the summer there, get a calf jerked off of them, come down here and winter on cake.”

Established efficiency

DCC was managing Hereford cows in North Dakota and moved that herd to the Montana ranch (see “Simply Best” on page 131). However, Best says, “This country is notorious for sun-burned bags in the spring.” One spring, during a visit from owner Tom Davidson, they went through a 500-head herd twice, greasing bags. Best suggested buying some black bulls, and Davidson agreed. “So we covered them up with Angus bulls,” Best says.

Best intended to raise efficient cattle that fit the environment. “Several years ago the N-Bar [Land & Cattle Co., Grass Range, Mont.] had Bob Long give a talk on cattle efficiency and conformation. He stressed a trim underline and length, which made it easier for me to select the kind of cattle I need with a quick look,” Best says. “It was one of the most informative things I’ve ever watched.” Still, efficiency can’t be extreme; the cattle have to pack some flesh so they winter easy.

Best wants cattle with high maternal values, plenty of length and depth, and smooth underlines. “You get your weight across the line on the hind quarter,” he says. He also wants cows with small udders. “Otherwise, when they get to be 7 or 8, they blow up; and you get spoiled bags.”

Conformation also is key. “You want a cow that’s correct,” he says. “I was a Quarter Horse judge for 28 years, and I think that helped me a lot. If you can recognize good conformation in horses, you can recognize it in cattle, too.”

A producer can have it all if he just picks the right bulls because, with the advent of expected progeny differences

(EPDs), there aren’t any secrets anymore, Best says. “As long as you trust the guy who’s raising the bulls, you can go as far as your pocketbook will allow.”

If DCC cows are different than average Angus cows, it’s because of the way they’re raised. “I feel the Angus cow is as good a rustler as there is if she’s brought up that way,” he says. “To me, they’re the most work-

efficient cow you can have. They calve easy and handle well.”

When it comes to choosing bulls, Best wants low birth weights with EPDs of 2.4-3 lb., milk EPDs of 15, a dam ratio of 106-110 and heavy weaning weights. Best turns out his bulls June 15, which translates to calving March 26. However, he says, “With these low-birth-

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Selected for their environment, besides being functional and efficient, the DCC cows are coyote-aware. You hardly ever find a calf by itself, Best says. “These ol’ girls will always have a babysitter around.”

weight cattle, they always start around March 18.”

Managed for efficiency

About 300 cows are calved near the ranch headquarters. That includes the heifers, which are not corralled or checked at night.

“We get up at daylight and check them,” Best says. “That’s the only way these cows can exist. You do that for enough years and you establish a set of cows that are self-sufficient.”

About 400 cows are trailed to the cow camp for calving. The camp is higher, cooler summer country. DCC usually has an 87%-93% calf crop.

During the summer, 400 pairs graze at the cow camp, which receives 14-20 inches (in.) of annual rainfall. The rest graze near the headquarters, which gets 10-14 in. The area’s carrying capacity is 40 acres/cow.

“If you don’t run 40 acres to a

cow and you want to run a grass outfit, you’re going to be in trouble and have to feed a lot of hay,” Best says.

Though more producers are choosing to let cattle graze their hay ground, Best implemented that philosophy many years ago. The operation doesn’t own any haying equipment, and they’ve contracted their haying for years.

“You can buy barley straw off of irrigated fields in this country for \$30 a ton delivered in big square bales, feed some cake with it, and let your own hay ground set,” he says. Comparing costs, he adds, “It makes good sense. The wintering bill starts in June when they start putting up hay, and that’s what eats people up.”

DCC calves are marketed in the country. They’re weaned and shipped around Oct. 20, weighing 530-550 lb.

“I’m not calving in January or February, and I’m doing it on

cake and grass and low-maintenance cows,” he says, adding that he probably could raise 600-lb. calves. “If I had to feed a ton of \$70 hay to get an extra 50 pounds, it wouldn’t make sense.”

DCC gives preconditioning shots at branding and again a month before shipping. “I haven’t doctored a calf for four years,” Best says.

They also manage a year-round mineral program that he says is worth every bit of what it costs. “I think you have a choice; you can buy medicine, or you can buy mineral. But you have to feed it six months or a year before you really see the results.”

Selected for efficiency

Best’s replacement heifers are weaned two weeks after the other calves are sold. He picks his replacements while they’re with their mothers.

“That way I can check the mother’s udder quality and easily see what quality of calf she raised,” he explains.

Replacements are corralled for four days, then let into meadows where they’re fed salt blocks and a little hay. “They learn to rustle right there,” he says. “You can’t buy one as good as the ones you raise yourself — no way — because these cattle are adapted to where they live. A heifer that’s always had her head in the feedbunk isn’t going to work on this place.”

Further explaining his selection process, he says, “I want my cows to have good calves, and they usually do. I attribute that to the fact that I’m really choosy when I pick my heifers. If she’s got milk and length and is bred to the right kind of bull, you should get a merchandisable product. We have to raise really functional cows that can walk from here to the mountain, and that’s rough. They’ll spend the summer there, get a calf jerked off of them, come down here and winter on cake.”

Beginning in mid-November, cows are wintered on 12 wide-open sections that feature springs, wells and shelter along creek banks. “The nice part about this winter pasture is that there’s no waste. It’s all grass. It chinooks off, stays bare, and there isn’t a pine tree in it,” he says, indicating they don’t have to worry about abortions caused by pine needles.

The cows are fed 40% cottonseed cake that is 41% protein and 4% fat. “I’m a firm believer in cottonseed cake. I don’t think there’s a better-wearing feed made. When it gets 20 or 30 below zero, they need that fat. And it’s cheaper in the long run because it takes half as much.” The cows are fed 2 lb. every other day at the rate of 100 lb./cow each winter.

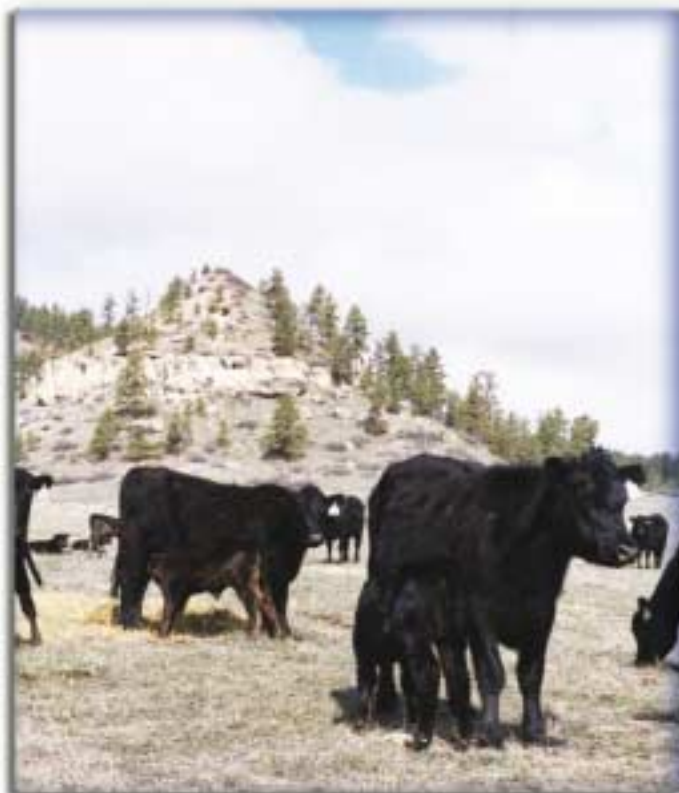
They winter graze when grass is available.

“We feed hay here probably once every 10 winters, and this winter was one of them,” Best says. “On a good year, winter pasture is what really cheapens this operation up.” Many springs, he doesn’t feed any hay during calving. “That cake sets a fire in them, so if there’s anything to eat, they’ll be out on the ridge hunting it up.”

The cows are cared for well, but he’s careful not to overcondition them. “Ya’ know, people aren’t that well off if they’re fat,” he says simply.

“Older guys always said, if you winter your cows too well, it’s going to cost you.” Surveying the operation’s cows, he emphasizes, “These ol’ girls have never been on welfare, that’s for sure.”

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The operation’s 700 cows are self-sufficient. With minimal checking during calving season, DCC usually has an 87%-93% calf crop.

Simply Best

Cowboy artist and author Will James wrote in his fictionalized autobiography that he was born close to the sod in Montana's Judith Basin in 1892. James imagined that if he could have seen far enough his first day, he would have glimpsed ponies through the flap of the tent while listening to the bellowing of cattle and the ringing of his dad's spurs.

If Les Best could have chosen his birthplace, he'd have picked Montana, too, where he might have been born into a low-input ranching outfit that now commands top prices for premium-quality Angus calves. Instead, he was born in Minnesota in 1928 and raised on a dairy farm. He didn't set down permanent roots in Montana until 1965.

"I can blame Will James for all of this cowboy stuff," Best says in a quiet, Western drawl. "I read all of his books and had the cowboy bug really bad."

Since Minnesota didn't offer much opportunity to cure his condition, Best left home at age 16. "I went to New Mexico and worked on the Vermejo Park Ranch," he says. "I was as green as I could get ... When I got there that afternoon, 12 cowboys had just got through moving a bunch of cattle and were riding down the lane. I can remember it like it was yesterday because that was the first time I ever saw the real thing."

That fall, Best returned to Minnesota to work in the South Saint Paul Stockyards where he asked North Dakota rancher Jim Connolly if he needed a hired hand. He worked for Connolly for three years, then he served in the Army from 1946 to 1947. Upon discharge, he spent the next 10 years as a cowboy and cowboss on various ranches in Montana, North Dakota and Arizona.

In July of 1960, Best went to work for Tom Davidson, a banker from Williston, N.D. Davidson Cattle Co. (DCC) had been operating on North Dakota's Fort Berthold Reservation since 1929. The reservation lease was raised to \$1/acre in the fall of 1965. By that time Best also had school-aged kids and wasn't interested in playing bachelor while he sent his wife and children to town, so he scouted for a ranch, and Davidson purchased one at Big Horn in southeastern Montana.



Tom Davidson (left) and Les Best were in business together for more than 40 years. Though Davidson died in November 2000, the management arrangement continues between the Bests and Davidson's wife, daughter and son-in-law.



Les and Lorraine Best live and work at Davidson Cattle Co. ranch headquarters, where miles and miles of grass are interrupted only by pine-covered hills, scoria buttes and sandstone formations.

"I bought 12,000 acres of this place before Tom ever saw it," Best says. Eventually, the operation grew to include 30,000 deeded acres from three different ranches.

Best recalls, "Tom said, 'If you'll stick with me, I'll buy a place.' I've held up my end of the bargain and so has he." Though Davidson died in November 2000, the management arrangement continues with his wife, daughter and son-in-law.

"A lot of people have been nice to me, but the Davidsons were the first people I ever worked for who were good to me," Best says. "They let me run this outfit like it was my own. They've let me run 75 cows of my own, plus my wages and my living expenses. To me, that was a lot better than a straight wage."

Les and his wife, Lorraine, live and work at the ranch headquarters where miles and miles of grass are interrupted only by pine-covered hills, scoria buttes and sandstone formations. The couple's four children were raised there. Today, daughter Debbie Stoltz lives on the nearby Sunlight Ranch; daughter Frances Webb lives on a ranch at Alpine, Texas; and their son, Les, works in the animal health industry at Billings, Mont.

Their daughter Nanette Pennington and her husband, Kent, have worked for DCC for 23 years, along with their two boys — Tyler, 18, and Kyle, 15. "I give a lot of credit to getting things done here to Nanette and Kent. They would be very, very hard to replace," he adds.

If his grandchildren choose to continue the ranching tradition, he'll encourage them. "It's a good way of life, as long as they don't think they've got to make a whole bunch of money," he says. "You're kind of your own boss; you're out in the open; and you're associated

with people in the same line of work."

Over the last half-century, Best has garnered more cattle experience and knowledge than even Will James could have dreamed. However, he casually acknowledges this accomplishment by saying, "If you start as young as I did and work for good cowmen, you're bound to learn."