

Elevated



PHOTO BY SHALUNA ROSE HERMEL

Quality

Circle L Angus, a life-long dream for Cory and Kari Lamey, is now their everyday reality. Nestled in the Big Hole Valley of southwestern Montana, the Angus ranch faces every challenge head on with innovation.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

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Circle L Angus is a family affair, employing (from left) daughter Cierra, Cory and Kari, granddaughter Kezlee Mae and son Cooper.

Their progressive mindedness, combined with their resilient work ethic, has led them to the reputation their name now carries in the valley, with the buzz escalating to encompass the nation.

“At 23, right out of college, Cory got his first management job for a commercial operation in Big Timber. It has just gone from there,” says Kari Lamey, Cory’s wife and the business brains behind Circle L.

Cory’s management skills were targeted by a Ranch Real Estate and Ranch Management Company from that first ranch job. Every time they called, he got an offer he could not refuse until it was his turn to build his ranching legacy. That was in 2002.

“A new owner bought the property the Circle

L now sits on and he asked us to come back and manage it. We ended up leasing it a few years after that so we could start our own purebred operation,” recounts Cory Lamey.

Both Cory and Kari were raised on cattle ranches in Montana; however, Cory grew up with Herefords while Kari was in the Angus business from the beginning. They attended Montana State University where Cory majored in animal science and Kari got a business degree. They met, fell in love and married in 1987.

“Everyone kept asking us what kind of cattle we would be raising once we got married,” Kari jokes. “I would like to say we chose Angus because that is what I grew up with, but it has a lot more to do



with the promotion the Association has done for the breed that producers can capitalize on before they even start their business.”

A no-brainer decision

Cory says when he was in college, purebred Hereford ranches were dying out around their area. “I knew that if we wanted to get into the purebred business we needed to raise something that people wanted,” he adds. “The marketing of black Angus was so far ahead of everyone else that it was a no-brainer for us.”

A phone call from Harold and Billy Hawkins from Virginia began the foundation of the ranch’s genetics. They partnered on a proven Angus female: 595L from Paws Up Angus and flushed her.

“The rest is history,” Cory jokes. “It seemed like everything we did with that donor cow worked, no matter the mating. She always gave ample embryos. She is our foundation donor cow; her influence is abundantly evident in our herd today.”

The history of 595L’s lineage gave the Lameys confidence in her ability to produce the high-quality Angus cattle they aspired to raise. It is this foundation that has propelled their cattle through the tribulations dealt out by the harsh Montana environment.

Triumph over tribulation

“We did not know until we moved here how high the valley actually is in elevation. Brisket disease (High Mountain Disease) is pretty common around here,” Cory says. “We started having several issues with that so we built our entire program around

pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP) testing.”

The Lamey’s overall goal remains to raise high-quality Angus cattle that would not only survive in high altitude situations, but thrive. With some of the best grass land in the country, the trials the valley throws at the ranch are well worth the fight.

“The rewarding part is our summers and falls, but the winters can hit 40 below sometimes and we are snowed in,” Cory says. “Between the brisket issue

and the short growing season, there are a lot of obstacles out here.”

Many of their problems come from the climate. Cory jokes that you have to work with Mother Nature not against her. Feeding hay is one of their main winter tasks simply because there is nothing



to eat under all the snow.

They are also beginning to see a rapid influx of wolves in the area, as well as grizzly bears.

“The wolf population is growing every year,” Cory says. “We doctored a calf with what looked like an infected wolf bite on his leg. A lot of times they either kill the calf entirely or mangle it up so much that we have to put it down anyways.”

With increased grizzly bear sightings, the Lameys are preparing for increased predator loss in the future. Something they can manage, though, is animal loss from brisket disease, a major value-added contributor from their cattle.

Show me the brisket

“I would say 75% of our bulls go into high-altitude situations in the west, from New Mexico and

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Colorado to Wyoming, Utah and Nevada,” Cory says.

With the help of Tim Holt, Colorado State University assistant professor of veterinary medicine and biomedical science, the Lameys have managed to build an empire of Angus bulls and females that perform in high altitudes.

“Cory has revolutionized our herd through his breeding selections based on the PAP results from Dr. Holt,” Kari adds. “Dr. Holt is the only one we use to PAP test, he is the king of it.”

Many other ranches have asked for the Lamey’s assistance with starting their own programs with similar goals and challenges.

“It is pretty special when someone asks you to help build their program from the ground up, especially since that is where we were just 18 years ago when we first started,” Cory says. “We have moved along pretty rapidly and become recognized for our quality and PAP-tested genetics.”

Several small colleges out west and breeders recognize the success of Lamey’s herd, adding his ideas into their own cattle. One breeder in the valley was losing 40-50 calves each year to brisket disease.

With the help of Circle L genetics, that same rancher reported one calf death as a result of brisket disease in a season.

“There are a lot of cattle on the Rocky Mountain front range,” Cory says. “If Angus wants to be the front runner up here, they need to concentrate on

developing lineages that work in high altitudes. We are always trying to find new lines of cattle that will work here. That is the only way to move forward.”

Mother Nature has a knack for letting producers know what animals do not work in their environment.

Though the cattle are hand-picked for their PAP test scores, the Lameys refuse to sacrifice quality exclusively for high-altitude traits.

Peak quality

“We are big on producing quality animals and for our commercial breeders that is weaning weights,”

Cory explains. “We want to maximize their weaning weight without getting their cow herd too big.”

Calving out the fast growers is just one of the perks of being a seedstock producer. The phone calls from commercial cattlemen boasting increased weaning weights of 30-50 lb. keeps the Lameys working hard year after year.

“That is huge. That is their income,” Cory says.

Their reputation is built on proven PAP-tested bulls who contributed to their 11th annual bull sale this past February — traditionally hosted the fourth Monday of February.

“Our business was just growing so that it was not conducive to market our bulls private treaty anymore,” Kari says. “We found our niche with the PAP testing and the quality progeny our bulls were throwing along with that.”

About 120 bulls sell to almost 50 buyers both in-person and online. However, the buyers were not always busting down the door for Circle L cattle.

“Our first sale was bleak, it was painful to watch and scary from a business standpoint,” Kari explains. “It was a highly competitive market to break into.

The hardest part about being in the bull business is getting people to try your product.”

Cory compares bringing in new bull buyers to forcing a Ford man to drive a Chevy. The self-made producers knew that if they could simply get producers

to give their bulls a chance, they would not be disappointed. They were right.

Ground zero and beyond

With no family money or property to fall back on, the Circle L is made up of deeded and leased ground. They recently bought the land they use for hay and calving season, situated at a slightly lower elevation.

“We have grown from ground zero, when you learn how to survive there the only place to go is up,” Cory says as he remembers how his faith and family pushed the Circle L to be the success it is today.

Pastures up and down the mountains and hills of



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

the valley hold Lamey's 400 registered cows who adhere to two different calving programs: spring and fall. As well as 250 commercial cows on the side and the bulls building the reputation of the ranch.

"There have been a lot of growing pains over the years, but we have no regrets, that's for sure," Cory says proudly. "We love what we are doing and feel fortunate to be where we are today."

Aside from building superior genetics, customer service is a big player in the quality of Circle L cattle.

"We do everything we can to help our customers," Kari says. "If someone needs a bull last minute, we drop everything to make that happen for them."

Delivering bulls to customers is part of the fun for Kari. The interactions and relationships built with customers is what the Lameys love about the business most.

"It is all family-oriented, that is part of why we are doing it: we all love it," Kari adds.

The Lamey legacy

The ranch operates exclusively by the hands bearing the Lamey name: son, Cooper, and daughter, Cierra.

"They have both worked for us technically their whole lives, but Cooper came back about three years ago after giving college a try," Kari says. "He did not enjoy college — all he wanted to do was work. He has been a good addition here full-time."

Cooper is the "multi-purpose" worker, doing everything from putting up hay and processing cattle to helping his dad AI (artificial insemination) during breeding season.

"Cierra has the breeding talent like Cory. She is at the University of Montana Western playing basketball and finishing her senior year," Kari explains. "She works for us in the summer of course, but she is thinking about getting certified under Dr. Holt for PAP testing."

Until a DNA marker is identified for brisket disease, PAP testing is the only tool breeders have.

This elevates the demand for certified PAP testers.

"Dr. Holt has let her stick the jugular and check the rating, it seems to be what interests her," Cory says.

A small herd of Quarter Horses are evidence of the legacy Cory's dad left behind as a rancher. Cutting lines crossed with top-notch ranch horses are helping the Lameys dive into the horse market.

"Our family has always been well mounted," Kari gushes. "I don't think about it nearly enough, but the horses we ride are an invaluable asset. If we are spoiled in any way, that is it."

Typically, Cory and Cierra ride the colts and then pass them to Cooper and Kari. The terrain of

their land demands the use of horses, but that is how Cory and Kari were raised.

Though everyone has their specialty on the ranch, they all end up doing just about everything at one point or another. Although, Cooper and Cory are in charge of AI, they enlist Cierra's help.

"We do as much as we can to AI everything, but we have clean up bulls also," Cory explains. "Heifers are on a CIDR program before we AI them and then cover with bulls."

One of their prized bulls is 4-year-old Circle L Gus, sold to Bobcat Angus three years ago. The Chisum son is turning heads across the nation.

"He PAP tests really well and he is the best multi-trait bull we use," Cory says. "He is probably our biggest success story as far as raising a bull goes. We plan to send about 25 of his sons through our sale this coming February."

A bull throwing high-performing progeny well suited for higher elevations is the goal the Lameys set out to reach from the very beginning.

"We are starting to reap the benefits of all our hard work over the years," Cory says. "Our bulls are helping breeders accomplish their goals. When people want to use your genetics to enhance their own herd, or start a whole new one, that is when you know you are doing something right." **AJ**

