

Shaping the Future

Talon internship program provides real-world experience.

by Riley Reep, American Angus Association intern

As the sun slowly rises above the native grasses of the Nebraska Sandhills, Denny Atchley takes in the sight of the cattle herd grazing contentedly on the rolling hills of TD Angus at Rishel Ranch.

Beside him is his mentor for the summer, Trey Wasserburger of North Platte, Neb., admiring a different sight — the determination of a young cowboy.

The cowboy way of life is all Atchley has ever known and all he's ever wanted to do. Coming from his family's Las Cruces, N.M., ranch, started in 1906, his cattle heritage runs deep. However, as Atchley begins his college career, he wants to learn on his own.

The Angus/Talon Youth Educational Internship program has given him an opportunity to learn a different side of cattle production from Wasserburger, who established the ranch in 2017.

As for Wasserburger, hosting a Talon intern means more than just having an extra set of hands for the summer. Teaching a young person

the tricks of the trade and what it takes to run a successful operation is something he finds rewarding. However, Wasserburger is humbled with the opportunity to give a bright young mind like Atchley the chance to become a future leader in the cattle industry.

A legacy of an Angus enthusiast

The Angus/Talon Youth Educational Internship program was established by the late Camron "Cam" Cooper, a rancher from Talon Ranch in Twin Bridges, Mont. Her love for cattle, specifically the Angus breed, coupled with her passion for promoting the future of the beef industry, sparked her desire to leave a legacy for others.

Before her passing, she set up the Angus/Talon Youth Educational Learning Program Endowment Fund through the Angus Foundation to provide opportunities for younger ranchers to gain real-life educational experiences. Since 2009, it has offered firsthand ranching

experiences to Angus youth.

Through the internship program, a select group of college sophomores, juniors and seniors under the age of 25 have the chance to live on a host ranch over the summer months to grow their knowledge and understanding of the cattle industry through hands-on experiences.

Each year, one Angus breeder and his or her farm/ranch mentors an intern, teaching the young enthusiast different roles of the industry depending on the host's farm/ranch program. In return, the Talon intern is compensated by the Angus Foundation through the endowment fund set up by Cooper.

The experiences a Talon intern encounters over their summer in the program are valuable, but the bond that grows between the intern and their mentor for the summer is a relationship all involved will treasure.

The grit of a young cowboy

Atchley is a junior agricultural economics/business administration major at Texas Tech University. A



Maddy Smith,
University of Tennessee-Martin



Lauren Ziegler,
Washington State University



Denny Atchley,
Texas Tech University



Ben Harman,
Southern Illinois University

past New Mexico State FFA officer, he also is active in on-campus organizations at Tech. Little did Atchley know that his desire to learn more about agriculture would lead him back to his ranching roots.

In November 2020, Atchley attended the Agriculture Future of America (AFA) Leadership conference in Kansas City, Mo., with hopes of connecting with beef industry professionals. There he discovered the Talon internship, which aligned with his desire to stay involved in beef production after college.

“The Talon internship sounded like a great way to learn more about beef cattle production from a different perspective,” Atchley says. “This opportunity would allow me to experience a new side of the industry other than life in New Mexico and West Texas.”

A few months later, Atchley was accepted into the Talon program and paired with Trey and Dayna Wasserburger and their family at TD Angus. In March, Denny attended the ranch’s bull sale to get a glimpse of what life would be like once summer rolled around. Although Denny’s visit was a way for him to meet the people he would spend his internship with, it had a larger meaning to Trey.

“It set the tone of what we expect from him,” Wasserburger says. “He got to see the reason why we do what we do and what the hard work throughout the year accumulates to.”

Beginning his internship in June, Atchley learned fast that life on a cow-calf operation would be different than experiences on a yearling ranch back home. Atchley says he was impressed with the docility of the herd and the operation’s design. His time spent with the TD Angus crew also taught Atchley new management strategies.

“They are incredible in the way they conduct business and care for their cattle,” Atchley says. “There are definitely herd management practices I have learned here that I would like to implement in my herd.”

Leaping from life in the New Mexico mountains and West Texas flatlands to a summer in the southern sandhills of Nebraska took Atchley out of his comfort zone. As a Talon intern, his goal was to learn all he could to take back to his own ranch after his college career.

It’s often difficult for young producers to return their home farm and ranch, and even more rare for a young person ready to make a positive difference in the future of agriculture.

“People like Denny are rare to find today,” Wasserburger says. “That kid will go places. We are pretty proud to have someone like him.”

People who matter

TD Angus at Rishel Ranch began in 2017 when the Wasserburger family bought the ranch from Bill and Barb Rishel. It was the first time the Wasserburgers managed a registered herd, but Bill Rishel gave the Wasserburgers plenty of guidance.

“Bill took me in and mentored me



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for a long time,” Wasserburger says. “He gave the opportunity to me as a younger cattleman to go out and achieve great things. Bill helped mold me into what he thinks the future of the cattle industry needs, which is a beautiful thing.”

Wasserburger is returning the favor by helping Atchley become a future beef cattle industry leader. As a 2021 Talon intern, Atchley is a testament to the program that was founded on the idea of allowing Angus youth to reap the value of real-world education and experiences.

“In the ranching community, everyone you work for becomes a mentor,” Atchley says. “They will do everything they can to help you to make sure you succeed to help future generations to come.” AJ