



Raising the Right Kind, Right

CAB award-winning 2 Bar Angus is about cattle, kids and quality.

by Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It was the perfect sale day, full of energy and buyer enthusiasm. The bulls were selling hot.

The only problem Steve Knoll could see? His genetics weren't up for bid.

"People wanted those cattle," says the Hereford, Texas, rancher.

He went to the auction to buy a few Angus bulls to put on his registered Salers herd.

"I was blown away with what the bulls were bringing. The bulls I thought I would just go and buy and bring home, I couldn't afford," Knoll says. Instead, his trailer carried two registered cow-calf pairs. One nursing a heifer; the other, a bull.

With one flush, he'd start his embryo transfer program. Today, it's still about 75% embryo transfer — so "your good cows have litters" — and

about 25% artificial insemination (AI), "so you can use the best bulls in the breed, instead of the best bulls you can afford."

"When we switched to Angus, I wanted to get my numbers up as quick as possible so my Salers became my recips," Knoll says. "My dad

They sold 117 bulls in this year's auction, many to repeat buyers who depend on that functionality.

"The majority of them aren't out here playing and trying to spend the family fortune. Most of them have been here generation after generation, and they make a living off of these

cattle," Knoll says. "Fertility is first and foremost. They've got to have a calf every year.

"Then if you can add these other bells and whistles, like a little more growth and maybe a little more marbling — that's

more money they can put in their pocket, pay their bills to keep their place," he says.

Steve and Laura Knoll's focus on quality earned their 2 Bar Angus business the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand's 2018 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

A look at their sale book

"We were only able to be where we are today because of the Lord's blessings we've received."

— Steve Knoll

always told me to just make do with what you've got. That's kind of what we've been doing ever since."

The "ever since" is more than two decades and "making do" means growing into a program sought after by large commercial ranchers who want high-performing genetics that work back at the ranch, too.

Above: "We try to raise honest cattle that people can make a living with," says Knoll. He and his wife, Laura, have raised their four children—Wesley, Joe, Anita and Marie—in the Angus business and say they have gotten "great enjoyment" out of that.

shows marbling is more than an afterthought. The 117 bulls in their March catalog had an average marbling expected progeny difference (EPD) of 0.93, compared to a breed average of 0.53.

“Cattle that marble don’t cost any more to have in your herd,” Knoll says.

But he does know they pay, a lesson learned early and often.

Between naps

Born and raised a Texas ranch kid, Knoll took his degree from then-West Texas State University in Canyon to work for Cactus Feeders.

“I was getting to see enough of the information that I knew there was a difference in cattle that would yield and cattle that would grade,” he says. “If you could figure out how to make Yield Grade 1 Primes, you could do very, very well. We’re still chasing that unicorn today.”

That’s information he’d file away until he needed it.

In between the seven years at Cactus and that Angus bull sale, Knoll married wife Laura, moved to Hereford, began running Salers on his in-laws’ land and got a job in maintenance at a local feed plant.

“It was pretty much eight hours of work in town and then eight to ten hours of work at home, then get a nap and go back,” Knoll says.

That is why he and his father-in-law made ideal business partners: “I had the sweat equity and he had the finances.”

It wasn’t a blank check arrangement, however. It needed to support itself, worrisome when

sometimes more Salers bulls headed to the packing plant than to be herd sires. He admits, “It was a hard way to learn.”



“It takes a hundred steps to get to your goal and any one missed step along the way will screw it up,” says Steve Knoll. He’s interested in creating genetics that work for everybody in the beef business.

The couple welcomed firstborn Wesley into the world and Knoll went to full-time ranching all in the same year. They switched to Angus the next breeding season.

“You kiss your income and your insurance good-bye, and my bet was I had to generate stuff to cover that,” Knoll says. “We still had way more to do than we could ever get done.”

Sometimes Laura called her husband just to remind him to come back home.

Betting it all on Angus

The workload hasn’t lessened, but the workforce has increased.

Knoll’s “early hired hand” started out sitting on a briefcase to see over the steering wheel. Creeping along in “low four,” a kindergarten-aged

Wesley drove the pickup down row after row of square bales as his dad loaded them.

Some kids have battery-operated Power Wheels®; for Wesley, there was no need.

At 24, he is still his dad’s right-hand man.

“Summer, spring break, any major project we need done, we’ll run it largely with family,” Laura says. “You’d be surprised how good they are at it.”

Joe, 18, and twin daughters Anita and Marie, 17, fill syringes, gather cattle and record the numbers.

“The Angus herd is 100% of our livelihood,” Knoll says.

A licensed pharmacist, Laura traded her first career in 2005 to become head bookkeeper and a vital

member of day-to-day operations.

“I decided I kind of liked this business better,” she says with a laugh that seemed to acknowledge things like sorting mishaps or Mother Nature’s unpredictable indifference.

In the Texas panhandle, they’re never far from a drought. The area averages 18 inches of rainfall annually, but through mid-August this year had only four.

“Right now survival is the name of the game,” Knoll says, casually noting, “It’s a little dry.”

Both optimistic and realistic, his backup plans include relocating cattle or leasing ground and preserving rangeland.

“It’s just part of living here,” Knoll says. “You either adapt or go away.”

Continued on page 82

That goes for the bulls they're breeding, too. They have to take heat, mesquite brush, traveling long distances and a bitter north wind.

When a new rancher comes looking for one or two bulls, Knoll says, "My goal is to sell them one or two pot loads of bulls over the next 20 years. You can't do that if they're not happy."

The 2 Bar "club"

Part of the draw is in the HD 50K™ DNA-tested bulls. The other part of it is in the people behind that data.

"I believe whenever they bought that bull from me, they paid a membership to get their cows bred. Whatever's got to happen for them to get their cows bred, we're going to try to do," he says. "If you get their trust, you better do things to make sure you're not leading them astray."

Over the years, they've taught customers to look far beyond their ranch gate.

"A lot of these guys when we first started would come

and say, 'I need a bull,'" Laura says. "Through the years, Steve has done a lot of education on which EPDs pay."

Deaf Smith County is one of the top cattle-feeding counties in the world, so it's the ideal place to talk about the next person in line ... even if many customers sell at weaning.

"We're trying to raise cattle that people will come knock on your door and want to buy the second set of calves you sell after you prove

what you're raising," Knoll says. "The numbers on these cattle aren't any better than the people that stand behind them."

Jim McGowan is a neighbor turned friend. He runs cattle between Paducah and Childress, and weans calves on farmground near Hereford.

"I was actually Steve's first customer," McGowan says.

An advertisement caught the commercial producer's attention; then he liked what he saw in the

feeder calf market dips really low. Feedback reassures him all options are available. Last year's calves sold after weaning and the feeder who bought them shared a closeout boasting 41% Prime.

"Steve is good to work with. He works hard at doing a good job," McGowan says.

Tell that to Knoll and he might shrug, or even laugh a little uncomfortably at the idea that he's doing anything more than what

he himself might expect of any quality seedstock producer.

"We haven't found that perfect cow or bull," Laura trails off before Steve finishes, "If you're not improving, then you're backing up, because everyone around you is improving."

Cow lessons seamlessly transfer into life lessons. Knoll often says raising cattle and kids go together.

"We're not a very fancy place, but we believe in hard work," he says. "I hope the kids take away that when you're responsible

for something, you don't walk away from it. Good intentions are one thing, but you've got to figure out a way to make everything work."

The goals for the next 10 years aren't long or complicated.

"I want to get all my kids graduated from high school and college," he says simply. "My job's to raise a family, and that's still my goal. And we will do it with cows. We'll do it with Angus." **A**

Walking the walk

Saying you support the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand is easy, but producing sires that are likely to increase the supply? That takes some intention.

"When I was going into Angus, I don't know that I realized how much Certified Angus Beef really drove the price of bulls and calves," says Steve Knoll, 2 Bar Angus. "Of course now I know it's huge."

Brand demand was building at the same time his registered herd was growing. Carcass quality has always been part of his selection criteria.

"But the truth of the matter is, I don't care how good of bulls you've got, if nobody knows what you have they aren't going to come knocking," the breeder says. "I wanted to use the logo to stir more people to think about how important marbling is. There's a premium to be made there."

Last fall, CAB started a "Targeting the Brand" incentive program to encourage Angus producers to use the special logo to help identify bulls more likely to improve CAB qualifiers in a herd. Cattle must meet minimum requirements for grid value (\$G) and marbling before the mark can appear next to certain animals displayed in the catalog.

Out of 117 bulls in their sale, 97% qualified for the Targeting the Brand logo — the highest of any breeder using it.

"That tells a story," says Kara Lee, CAB production brand manager. "It may be the first year we've been asking them to put a logo in the catalog, but it's not the first year they've been emphasizing quality."

pasture. Nearly two decades later, McGowan continues to add 2 Bar bulls to his battery because they've helped him steadily increase weaning weights, carcass quality and docility.

"We select for dollar B (\$B), but also height of the bull. I go pretty heavy on EPDs, but I like the bull to be good looking also," he says.

Having well-rounded sires allows for marketing flexibility. McGowan retains ownership only when the