

The Competitive Drive

An athletic mindset earns Wyoming family Certified Angus Beef Commercial Commitment to Excellence honors.

Story and photos by Laura Nelson, freelancer for Certified Angus Beef

Whether it's in the curved panels of an auction ring or the arch of a boundary line on a wrestling mat, the members of the Wasserburger family of Lusk, Wyo., know what it takes to enter an arena, eager to compete.

The Bootheel 7 brand that marks the hips of their herd could stand for the seven state wrestling titles held between three boys in the fourth generation, but that mark far predates their competitive drive. It's been the brand carried by Wasserburgers looking for the "W" since the homesteading era.

In September, their hands were raised in the winners circle again, in Phoenix, Ariz., as recipients of the 2022 Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award. The honor marks years of channeling such athletic intensity into success on the ranch.

Cousin Trey Wasserburger wrote the nomination. He and wife, Dayna, own and operate TD Angus at Rishel Ranch, North Platte, Neb. The Bootheel 7 steers handily won their TD Angus Feed Test "Highest CAB Percentage" category two years in a row with pens at 64% and 65% CAB and 100% Choice or higher.

Those moves are the work of JD and Laurie Wasserburger, with their sons Eric and Andrew and his wife,



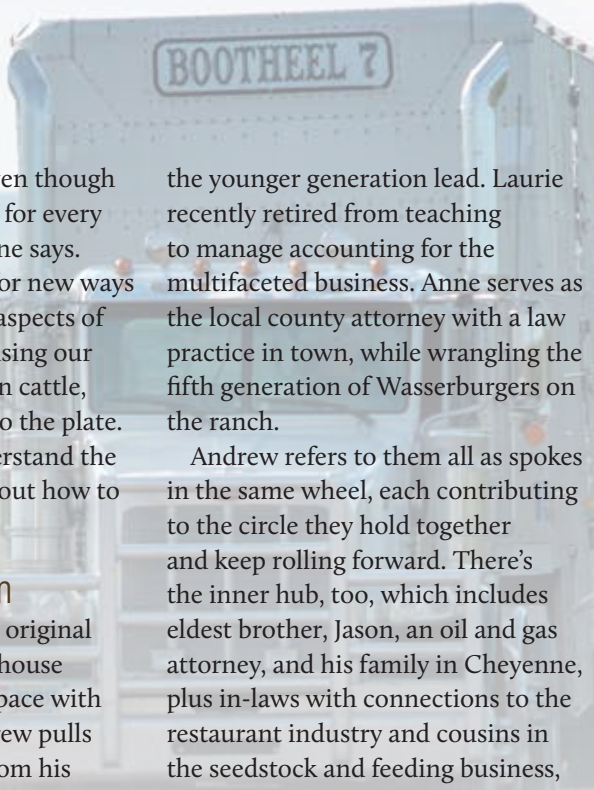
Anne, built on family legacies of pioneer great-grandfather, Henry, and his son, Henry Jr.

The 1916 homestead title started it all, but Henry felled cedar fenceposts in the Buck Creek Hills for neighboring ranches before he could claim one of his own. He spent those first years in a "soddy" of stacked native prairie adorned with a cowhide door flap, but then established a ranch and passed the Bootheel 7 brand down to the son who began buying other area homesteads and grasslands.

BOOTHEEL 7
(from left, back row) JD and Laurie Wasserburger, Eric Wasserburger, Andrew and Anne Wasserburger, (center) grandfather Henry and wife Bonnie Wasserburger, (front) Andrew and Anne's children Henry, Francis, and Grace Wasserburger.

Henry Jr. built up the modern ranch with sheep and cattle that JD further diversified with new businesses to support the next generation. After the sheep were sold, JD started a freight company to serve the area's oil and gas industry. His foresight paid off and two sons came back to the ranch, proudly carrying the Bootheel 7 brand into its second century.

"There's no such thing as being



OK with where we are, even though we are extremely grateful for every single thing we have,” Anne says. “We’re growing, looking for new ways every day to integrate all aspects of farming and ranching: raising our own feed, feeding our own cattle, following them through to the plate. Whatever it takes to understand the whole process and figure out how to be the best at it.”

Building the program

Around the table in the original homestead’s kitchen of a house grown and modernized apace with the ranch around it, Andrew pulls out a three-ring binder from his range management class at North Dakota’s Dickinson State University. Nestled inside is a snapshot of the Bootheel 7 Ranch before he joined his older brother in the business.

Eric bought his first farmland in 2005 while at Chadron State College in Nebraska, setting the pace for “can’t wait” expansion. In 2010 when Andrew’s final college project had him mapping the main ranch for soil types and grazing capacity, he planned new ways to build and manage grazing inventory. The brothers were staged to move the ranch into a new weight class.

That notebook tracked the grazing plan for three herds totaling 500 mother cows. A dozen years later, they’ve more than tripled that capacity, building quality in every gain. Today, Eric takes the lead at Buck Creek Freight and all farming enterprises, as Andrew leads on the ranch.

“I just get out of the way and let them work,” JD says with a laugh. “They’ve got what it takes to be bossing me around now.”

He’s active on all fronts, but both he and his father are proud to let

the younger generation lead. Laurie recently retired from teaching to manage accounting for the multifaceted business. Anne serves as the local county attorney with a law practice in town, while wrangling the fifth generation of Wasserburgers on the ranch.

Andrew refers to them all as spokes in the same wheel, each contributing to the circle they hold together and keep rolling forward. There’s the inner hub, too, which includes eldest brother, Jason, an oil and gas attorney, and his family in Cheyenne, plus in-laws with connections to the restaurant industry and cousins in the seedstock and feeding business, all contributing with unique insight.

Like generations before, Eric and Andrew looked for every opportunity to build and buy, now selling high-quality alfalfa and most recently building a grow yard for another element of control in cattle marketing. They can background their calves for the off-peak-season sale in February and develop bred heifers for sale in November. They planted their first crop of silage corn this year while penciling the numbers on holding steers into yearlings when the timing is right.

The only way to keep tradition alive, they figure, is to allow it to change and evolve.

It’s the echo of a sentiment grandfather Henry shared earlier in the day, “You’re either making progress or you regress. There’s no standing still in this business.”

Driven by a competitive spirit

“If you’re not competitive, you might not be a Wasserburger,” Eric smiles.

Others in the family joke: “Wasserburgers? Competitive?! Good grief, we can’t play cards without it

getting heated!” — “Those boys can’t walk up the stairs at the same time without making it a race.” Still, they know the hearts of true competitors beat to better themselves.

“If we don’t top the sale one day,” Andrew explains, “it’s not that we’re wishing the other guys’ cattle were worse; we just want to know, how can we make ours better? How do we get ourselves where he is?”

Of course, they have topped plenty of sales over the years, more frequently as the years go by. It’s competition that drove Henry and JD to move the cow herd to an Angus base decades ago, and competition that still drives Andrew and Eric’s selections today.

“It didn’t take sitting in many sale barns to see the black-hided calves were bringing more money,” JD says, looking back to when he returned to the ranch.

Still, it was maternal traits rather than color that drove bull selection.

“In this country, you just have to have cows that can do it themselves,” Andrew says, nodding across the wide, Wyoming prairie of big grasslands cut by deep coulees and rocky enclaves. “If she has bad feet, she’s not going to travel to water, she’s not going to travel to cake or mineral, which means she’s more likely to slough a calf, or short him on nutrition. It just doesn’t work.”

He studies their performance records, willing the cows into a competition with one another. Is there room for second chances in the Bootheel 7 herd?

“No. There’s a thousand other cows out there that aren’t lame, why do you need to be lame? There’s a thousand other cows that kept their calves alive during that storm, why did you lose yours? There’s a

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thousand other cows I didn't have to spend \$350 to sew up, why would I spend it on you?" Andrew says. "If we keep cows like that around, we're just asking for more of the same next year."

The fertility window keeps getting more competitive, too. They recently moved to a 42-day breeding target and use that scorecard as another opportunity to cut the least competitive mothers.

This exacting race to the top drives buyers, too. The last load of heifers through the TD Angus sale ring earned \$200 per head over the day's market average.

"Those buyers come back every year because they understand what we've done to produce females here," Andrew says. "We feel like if you do that job right, raising cows that will raise heifers that will raise the next generation, the steer calves will fall in right behind."

Tech takes training to the next level

Andrew points to one definitive training tool that helped the ranch grow to support multiple families.

"The use of technology is really what inspires me to keep moving forward, because you can actually measure progress on ranches now," Andrew says. "Any way you can imagine, you can measure your range, your grass, your breeding, your carcass, everything. You have a marker so you can know when you're getting better. It's your scoreboard."

About six years ago, the family



got curious about how competitive their beef could be on the plate, too. They started ultrasounding potential replacement heifers to gain a clearer picture of marbling ability and ribeye size. They soon moved to scanning every heifer on the place, sorting to ensure every keeper had the targeted 1.1 square inches of ribeye for every 100 pounds (lb.) of body weight and an intramuscular fat (IMF) score over 3.5 — the threshold for Choice marbling.

This year, they invested in genomic testing for each heifer, with an even more detailed analysis of maternal, carcass and performance traits. Now they know exactly what the scorecard will show before their cattle step into the ring.

"That's the fine-tuning," Andrew says.

Again, the competition is stiff.

They tested all 690 heifers this year, all earning composite scores in the upper half of the

Igenity® database. After sorting phenotypically for the top 500, they used the genetic data to sort by ribeye size, IMF score and weight.

"So we've got 500 heifers in there we'd be proud to breed on our place," he says, "but we only need 300. You can watch five, 600-pound, nice-looking heifers go by that look identical on the outside, and now we can narrow them down to the ones with that ideal ribeye inside, too."

In the 2021 and 2022 TD Angus Feed Tests, they not only won the Highest CAB Percentage category, they came out on top of the Percentage Prime category, too. Topping two out of five categories was an honor, it was a brief moment to glance at the scoreboard and be proud to see their name in lights.

"But we didn't win 'em all; that means we still have a lot of work to do," Eric says.



The real winner's circle

As much as they learn and lean on technology and the wisdom of past generations, the most valuable tool is still the skill as old as the ancient sport of wrestling or that of tending livestock: a strong social network.

Among others, JD points to the late western Nebraska feeder Dallas Larson, who got him started feeding his own cattle and taught him how to evaluate their potential for performance and profitability beyond the ranch gate.

"This is a tough business — it always has been," JD says. "But you can't let it get you down. I never saw Dallas Larson have a bad day; that's probably the most important thing I learned from him."

Eric shakes his head, remembering that first purchase of farm ground.

"I tell you, it was some tough love for a few years. We had one old tractor, no experience running a pivot, and that thing was breaking down, flat tires, stuck in the mud, all the time ... it was just terrible. But we stuck with it. Asked for a lot of advice. Got better."

They've learned how to utilize their resources better, too.

"It helps if you talk to someone smarter than you every day," Andrew says.

They each point to good neighbors, growing business partners and a strong community as inspiration to keep learning, growing and helping the next generation.

"We all help each other out, make

each other better," JD says, driving across the same ranch trails his father and grandfather before traveled. His grandkids clamor in the back. "We want kids to be proud of where they came from, proud of what we're doing here. We want the chef to know when he's serving a steak that came from here, it's something he can be proud of, too."


Now in his second decade as a coach on the mat, JD knows that, like wrestling, ranching is not necessarily a test of brute strength. Rather, it's a trial of endurance and control in the face of adversity.

"Wrestling's a terrible sport to lose at. I don't know why, but some kids are just devastated when they're beat," he says.

The only way to overcome the heartache and bounce back to get better, he figures, is to help a kid feel proud of himself. It can't be a pride of arrogance, but it must include an earned confidence that comes from knowing they've worked hard and used every tool and training to be



their best that day.

"If you can make a kid feel proud of himself like that, you've got it whipped. And boy, I tell you what, when the kids are proud of themselves, the parents are prouder," he smiles into the rear-view mirror. "That's what makes it all worthwhile." 

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