

# Married to Quality

by Lance Zimmerman

Imagine the effort it would take to get up on the morning of your wedding day to feed more than 1,000 feeder calves. Trent and Jenny Hutchison share that dual passion and commitment every day as operators of 4+ Cattle Feeders, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Lexington, Neb.

The Hutchisons' marriage and their work at 4+ make for "some pretty interesting moments," but Jenny says it is a decision she's glad they made — even if it did mean feeding cattle before saying their vows.

"There are days we get to where we could tell each other off, but I don't envy any other wife who is working and having the 'normal' life in the job market," Jenny says. "I enjoy this. Trent and I get to be together."

They are a young couple with only a couple of years' experience in management, but cattle tradition runs deep on both sides of their pedigrees. Jenny's family was in ranch management in South Dakota and Nebraska. Trent came from a ranching/cattle-feeding family and used to spend extra time during high school and college helping neighbor and longtime family friend, Ted Hanich.

In fact, it was Hanich who convinced Trent's family to move to Nebraska from Kansas when Trent was a small boy. In spring 2000, Hanich called his young friend to say, "Let's go to Lexington; you're not doing anything."

That wasn't quite the case, Trent recalls, adding that he had cows calving. But he agreed to go. "Ted is a guy you like to learn from a lot — really shrewd and sharp, always has something going on."

But as Hanich pulled up to the feedlot,



► CAB licensing was a simple way to increase cattle quality, but the Hutchisons say they had to educate local producers about producing for the CAB target.



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

► Trent and Jenny Hutchison enjoy the opportunity to work together at 4+ Cattle Feeders, a Certified Angus Beef LLC-licensed feedlot near Lexington, Neb.

Trent had his doubts. "They had cattle in this lot, but the place was falling apart."

The day's activities included loading two semitrailers with sick cattle. Afterwards, Hanich sprang his idea: "The place is for sale you know — I think I'll just buy it. If you want in on this deal, we'll partner. You run it, and some day you'll own it." Trent talked to Jenny before saying, "I will," then asked her to join him.

## Setting a foundation

Since September 2000 they have worked to rebuild the once-dismal facility into a 3,000-head feedlot that is a shining example of their standards.

"When we first started this we weren't married yet," Jenny says. "I quit my job to become Trent's hired man. We got married in August of that next year, and ever since then we have been in on this together."

Through the help of come-and-go hired hands, an occasional family member and some good neighbors, capacity has more than tripled. The Hutchisons

decided to make 4+ Feeders a CAB-licensed feedlot partner in May 2001, and they have fed quality Angus cattle ever since. Turk Stovall, CAB assistant director of feeder-packer relations, says a running CAB acceptance rate of 30% is "only one sign of 4+ Feeders' dedication to feeding quality cattle."

"Trent and Jenny care about what they are doing, and they take a tremendous amount of pride in what they do at all levels of the feedlot,"

Stovall says. "They know how to get great cattle into their lot and they know what it takes to make those cattle work." Recently, the feedlot has been a national leader in data-capture efficiency, and 4+ has been honored twice in the monthly CAB Spotlight Awards Program.

The partnership with CAB is a valuable tool in connecting them to more cow-calf producers and packers. "I think it is a wonderful thing to keep everyone involved in the marketing process," Trent says. "As a CAB feedlot, we serve as that middleman between the producer and packer, everyone's point of compromise."

Data provided by CAB opens a lot of doors. "That is where a lot of producers miss out," Trent says. "Some never find out how



CONTINUED ON PAGE 107

their cattle perform, or even if they have the ability to finish out. They're missing out on a great opportunity.

"Cow-calf producers don't get the chance to talk to the packers. The carcass data provided by CAB gives producers the information to build their herds," he says. "It is a process that requires incorporating top-quality Angus genetics over time, but the information can speed it up."

CAB licensing was a simple way to increase cattle quality, but the Hutchisons say

they had to educate local producers about producing for the CAB target. "It was a new deal to a lot of them," Trent says.

Now other producers — and packers — are noticing the quality upgrades. Potential customers are asking where some of the pens of Angus heifers come from as the networking grows. "We also fed Angus cattle that became the focus of a bidding war between our packers. It was a good feeling; those cattle are the easy ones to feed."

Two years has made a world of difference in establishing 4+ Feeders as a quality-oriented feedlot, but the Hutchisons are still getting started on the big picture. "Trent and

I would eventually like to own a ranch," Jenny says. "That is our big dream. A commercial feedlot can easily pay for a ranch, and that would just tie the entire operation together for us."

Meanwhile, the couple's passion and commitment remain strong. "It's an amazing opportunity to just do what we do everyday," Trent says. Of course, there are setbacks, he says, "but you get up, turn the page and keep moving ahead."

Jenny, always at his side, adds, "This is our way of life, our future, our baby, really. And we love it."

