



INVEST

in What Matters

The strong, five-string barbed wire fences corral the equity J.C. “Joe” Heiken finds most precious. The cows the family business was built around were purchased with virtually nothing, preserving history is a driving force behind J.C. Heiken Angus & Sons.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

More than 100 years ago, granddad Heiken moved to Broadview, Mont., right after the homesteading days, to the home place just over the ridge from where Joe and his wife, Jeralee, now live.

“We are the fifth generation to live in Broadview, and we still have no idea why Grandpa picked it,” says Joe Heiken, third generation of Heiken Angus and first generation of J.C. Heiken Angus & Sons. “This is very tough country. It is windy and our annual rainfall is just over 14 inches.”

Running an average of 40 acres per cow when the rain is abundant, in drought years the cows get a whopping 70 acres per head. But this year there was plenty of rain and melting snow to go around, leading to a record hay crop.

“Normally we put up 6,000 round bales, but this year we got 10,000,” Joe explains. “On average, this country will produce a ton an acre. It is all dryland, so it is only one cutting. We try to have at least 1,000 tons of hay left over at the end of each year because

some years we will get almost no hay out of the field.”

Harvesting roughly 3,000 acres of hay each year keeps the 700 cows and 350 yearling heifers and bulls fed through the winter. With calving and a bull sale in February, spring is easily the busiest time of year.

Luckily, the “& Sons” brings six pairs of hands and a group of grandchildren into the work lineup. John and Kendra; Brian and Janna; and Ben and Lynsey are the boots on the ground year round for the family operation.

YESTERYEAR

“In 1993, Jeralee and I bought out my four siblings,” Joe says. “Until then we had commercial cattle — all Angus.”

The family is built on good Angus cattle and land, the only two things Joe says he knows how to make money on. They started with cattle from Circle Oak Angus out of Pennsylvania. Those can be traced back to Van Dyke genetics.

“We leased those cows in 1995,” Joe says. “John and Chriss Rapasky were good enough to lease them to us for five years until we could afford to buy them. A couple years later we bought 40 more. Those were the last females we ever bought.”

In the early years, neighbors would help brand calves and pick out their own calf to save as a bull. It was when their steer buyer started asking for a pot load of bull calves each year that Joe realized he had something of true quality on his hands.

Today, for every bull they buy, thousands of others were sifted through to find the perfect fit for their program.

“When we go to a sale we have one bull picked out. There is no second choice,” Joe says. “There is either that one or we find a different one later on.”

This is the key to their program — investing in the bulls fitting their needs perfectly. It is not uncommon for the Heikens to spend six figures on the right bull. Since the very beginning, investment is the foundation of their success.

“When we find something we like, we give a lot of money for herd bulls and we buy land every chance we get,” Joe says. “We are not into fancy white fences or sale barns.”

TOUGH CATTLE TRAMPLE ON

“We try to keep our cattle as thick and as deep as possible, because we know they will handle this environment,” Joe says. “If they get too narrow or shallow-bodied, they will not work here.”

These cattle run thick from hip to hip and deep through the flank. Though they are not tall cattle,

their depth makes up for their stature.

Serving the Heikens well, this mentality is the reason their animals perform in a variety of tough climates. Some go to the high deserts of Wyoming, but most go to work in eastern Montana.

Genetically, they breed for lower birth weights because that is what their customers want.

“We don’t chase the high numbers, but we do keep them in mind when we make breeding decisions,” Joe explains in reference to expected progeny differences (EPDs). “Though we don’t base everything on the numbers, we have to keep them positive. Things go south pretty quick when you have negative EPDs.”

The Heikens are not fans of “back to the future genetics,” leaving those behind in pursuit of the next great bull. Their philosophy: Angus is all about moving forward. The older genetics simply will not perform with the new ones.

“The boys started feeding cattle when they were this tall,” Joe says motioning with his hand about three feet high. “You can’t have wild cattle if you are going to AI [artificially inseminate] and work with kids and wives around. Disposition is everything.”

Keeping 200 replacement heifers each year allows the family to cull deep for phenotype and temperament. John, the oldest son, takes the lead with the bulls, walking through them for at least an hour each morning.

“It would drive me crazy that he was taking so long just to check health but it is probably the best hour spent around here,” Joe says. “The bulls just get quieter and quieter, you can touch some of them.”



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If John sees anything get remotely high-headed, he takes them on a long ride to town.

Their docility is something to write home about. The family remembers one of their sales where a buyer proved this.

“We had our bulls at Miles City and a kid had his hand in one of the bulls’ mouths,” John reminisces on the testament to the work they put in at home.

CUSTOMER CARE

“It is not our job to educate our customers, it is our job to provide them what they want,” Joe says about how they make breeding and bull-buying decisions. “They are all excellent cattlemen and know what they need.”

Joe’s customers want lower birth weight cattle. And that is exactly what they get.

“We won’t buy a herd sire without seeing the 50K profile, even if his EPDs are not quite right, the 50K will give us a good idea of where he is going to head,” Joe says. “We think the genomic testing is necessary for giving our customers an extra tool. But we do it for them just as much as we do it for our own benefit.”

For the Heikens, the birth weight and calving-ease traits are almost fool proof.

“We study the cow side and grandmother as much as anything, everyone has their top cows that are always predictable,” Joe explains. “If you buy herd sires off those top cows, that seems to help more than anything else.”

This is how Joe gets predictable bulls breeding

exactly the way he needs them to on his herd of cows and heifers. In fact, almost two-thirds of his bulls can breed heifers.

Cattle can travel up to five miles when they are moving pastures and during drought years. Hoof quality is of the utmost importance to the Heikens and their buyers.

“In a clay soil environment you cannot get away with anything, you have to be careful,” John says, noting that culling for hoof quality is a major part of every year. “We have had 50 daughters out of one stud and we had to cull 48 of them for bad feet. It is quite a financial loss but you can’t pass that on.”

Each breeding decision is ultimately made for the cow, because making better cows is what Joe and his family do for the improvement of their herd and the Angus breed.

KITCHEN-TABLE RAPPORT

February in Montana is by no means predictable. It might be feet deep in snow or even deeper in mud. Though a sale that early in the year was necessary 11 years ago when the family first started selling bulls by more than private treaty.

Situated 170 miles to the east of home, the Heikens host their annual sale in Miles City, Mont.

“We were selling a lot of private-treaty bulls around Miles City anyways,” Joe says. “It is much easier to take the sale to the customers than to make them come up here.”

Ranchers can now buy from the comforts of home through the video service provided by



For J.C. Heiken Angus & Sons, it takes the whole family to provide “the golden rule” kind of customer care. John, left, is the oldest son of Jeralee and Joe, center, with Ben, the youngest, followed by Brian, right.

Guard What Matters

Each son and his wife have a herd of their own, creating a business model very different from the typical family cattle operation seen today.

“We all have our own land, home place and herd, but we run all the cattle together and then have the sale together,” says Brian Heiken, the second oldest of the three Heiken brothers. “We all have our own numbers and on paper you can tell the animals apart.”

Contrary to the typical family entity, this allows each individual family the option and equity to get out of the business if they ever choose to do so. Brian says this prevents the situation where one person decides to leave and is left with nothing until the entire operation liquidates.

This safeguard keeps the peace when times get tough, though it is unlikely any of the boys would ever choose to sell out anyways. This has been their livelihood since birth.



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Superior Livestock. This saves them the hassle of traipsing through the snow to get to the sale. It effectively evades disaster, mostly weather related, when it comes to selling cattle.

The Heikens also offer free wintering and delivery on the bulls they sell each February. It's yet another way they cater to the needs of their customers.

"Most of the ranchers are calving and don't have a place to keep the bulls through the rest of the winter," Joe explains. "So, we deliver them in April or May. That is very important because then we know the bulls are ready, plus we get to know our customers personally."

Equipped with a money-back guarantee, Joe will replace a bull if he gets hurt before or after they deliver him.

"If we can replace the bull we try to do that, but if we don't have the right one when the customer needs it, then we give them their money back so they can get what they need," Joe says about the service he has yet to get burned by.

John and Brian, the middle son, act as the family regional managers for their buyers. John delivers all the bulls south of Miles City while Brian takes care of the customers up north.

"We focus on the relationship with our buyers. We are a family business and we want to be treated a certain way so we treat our customers

that same way," John says with a laugh as he adds that knowing the roads in his area is a big plus since cell phone service is limited.

Each son has their own set of customers, so if a problem comes up they don't call Joe who doesn't have the table rapport the boys do. Though Ben, the youngest son, is more of a homebody, he still makes some deliveries closer to home.

Almost all private treaty buyers are repeat customers who trust Joe and the boys to decide

which bulls will work best for them. They hand-select nearly 100 bulls a year and send them to the buyer sight unseen.

"You have to be careful which bulls you send where and provide a guarantee that if they don't like them coming off the truck that you will take them back," Joe adds.

This customer-first strategy is what keeps cattlemen coming back year after year, and is something Joe strives for today and has instilled in his children for the future.

"You cannot build these deals in one generation, but you do hope they will last," Joe says with a smile as he eyes his kids gathered around the table and listens to the laughter of his grandchildren down the hall. "It is not just our ranch, it is everyone's ranch and future." 

