

# MUTUAL BENEFITS

*Lease/share arrangement pays off for fledgling producers and established breeder.*

by Troy Smith



*A working partnership. Nebraska Angus breeder, LeRoy Semin, (right) has helped Greg and Tim Nollette get started in the beef business.*

It's been said that the surest ways to acquire a ranch are to inherit it or marry it. Aspiring producers lacking the advantages of birth or dowry often find today's costs of land, livestock and equipment nearly unsurmountable.

But some determined young people, such as Nebraska's Nollette brothers, are finding opportunities to earn their living from ranching and the seedstock business.

Greg and Tim Nollette did receive an inheritance including 10 cows, 40 sows and 30 acres of land. However, it can take up to 15 acres of Cherry County grass to support a cow-calf pair. Parlaying their holdings into a living for two young families proved to be a feat of cooperation, endurance and sacrifice.

The Nollette brothers grew up near the community of Nenzel, Neb., where day-work and summer jobs were found on nearby ranches. These were fairly large commercial outfits running up to 1,500 mother cows. The brothers gained experience from ranchers raising cattle in practical, unpampered fashion. Both Greg and Tim attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and eventually returned to Cherry County as high school ag instructors.

Ranchers at heart, they viewed their inherited hog business as a means to generate dollars for investment in cattle. The farrow-to-finish operation helped buy 20 commercial heifers.

"That was in 1986 when prices were to our advantage," says

Greg. "We paid \$240 apiece for those heifers and should have bought more. We were renting pasture but had a chance to buy 800 acres the following year. We did that and added some more cows, too, bringing our total up to 90 head. Also during '87, we took on 150 leased commercial cows. Rented summer grass was costing \$10 per pair, weaned calves yielded \$400 each, and we made money."

Things were looking pretty good but the brothers, still holding teaching positions, had hired help to care for their expanding operation. Not satisfied with transferring the responsibility, it was decided that Greg would stop teaching and devote all of his time to the cattle and hogs. Then came drought in 1989 which forced the sale of most of their owned cows. They held onto the leased herd and hoped to rebuild.

"It did rain again, but the cattle market sure shot up when it did," says Tim. "It was a lot harder to buy back females, and finding financial backing was difficult and slow. We just limped along for awhile, with help from our two older

brothers. Both are priests and they helped us financially, as they could. Their prayers didn't hurt either."

Tim left his regular job and joined Greg in trying to hold things together by buying and calving bred, short-term cows during the next two years. Hoping to accumulate a base for a purebred herd, they managed to buy seven registered heifers from area Angus breeder, LeRoy Semin. They worried their fu-

ture as seedstock producers might be hampered by a reputation for running put-together cows.

In reality, they had built a reputation for hard work and dedication. Their successful hog venture had not gone unnoticed by LeRoy Semin and he admired what they were trying to do with their cattle.

Semin offered the Nollette brothers the chance to lease his herd, including his 60-plus registered Angus cows. He also offered use of his ranch facilities if they wanted to rent his grass and put up the hay on shares. They settled on a two-year deal.

**From the Nollette point of view**, the offer provided a chance to move more quickly into the purebred business, and as Tim puts it, "a chance to finally get rid of the hogs."

LeRoy Semin and his wife, Carolyn, had been in the registered Angus business for 20 years and while they had not reached "retirement" age, they needed a change.

"Our son is in medical school and won't be joining us on the ranch," says LeRoy. "I didn't have any help during haying season and I hate to hay anyway. I was suffering from a loss of enthusiasm and my cattle program, as a result, wasn't progressing like it should. I saw that Tim and Greg were well educated, had some practical experience and were motivated.

"I figured they could take what we had and get it moving again. With access to our cows, they would have an opportunity to build up their own purebred numbers. It has worked out fine. Some of that motivation has rubbed off on me."

The lease agreement allowed Tim and Greg to make all management decisions, but they relied on LeRoy's experience for guidance. The brothers say he was receptive to their ideas.

They agree that one good move was to a more aggressive program of artificial insemination (AI). On the purebred Angus cows, they took a whole herd approach by synchronizing and AI breeding to proven sires. Then LeRoy's home-raised sons of R&J Taurus and Hi Hand were used in the pasture. Expected progeny differences (EPDs) have been useful in AI sire selection, with heavy emphasis on maternal traits.

Instead of continuous grazing, a more intensive, rotational grazing program has been implemented. Nollettes also like to wean all calves before they reach 180 days of age, believing that will enhance cow longevity by allowing cows plenty of recovery before each winter arrives.

"We're also applying CHAPS — Cow Herd Appraisal System developed by North Dakota State University — to match the cow herds to environment and available resources. Like the closely related IRM (Integrated Resource Management) program, CHAPS strives for optimal production levels from low input. But it also strives to build and maintain uniformity," explains Greg.

Now holding another off-ranch job, Greg serves as an Extension agent in nearby Rosebud, S.D. His work with area producers has reinforced the idea of matching cattle and management to environment and resources.

"In this area for example" he says, "range is the most abundant resource but hay is in short supply. To avoid added feed costs, later calving might be advisable. April calving seems best for commercial herds, but it isn't that simple with a purebred



*Angus cattle managed by the Nollette brothers work well on a rotational grazing system.*

program aimed at marketing yearling bulls each spring. We have, however, backed away from January and early February calves. By shortening the calving season we've delayed calving of our purebreds until late February. We'd like to back it off some more and I think we can."

Nollettes remember their experience with the bigger commercial ranches in the area. They know those ranchers want bulls with performance but they don't want to sacrifice maternal traits, moderate birth weights and fleshing ability. In 1993, they sold 35 bulls strong in those economic traits. About half were sold to past customers of LeRoy Semin and the remainder went to new buyers.

In their effort to increase numbers as rapidly as possible, a large number of heifers have been saved, bred and calved. From this, Nollettes have learned that picking replacements on the basis of dams' records and EPDs certainly isn't foolproof. They say you never really know if she is a fit replacement until she raises a calf.

"Things like mothering ability, temperament and udder scores don't reveal themselves until she is put to the test," says Tim. "You can pick your obvious culls as calves, but we would prefer to make final replacement choices after our heifers have calved once."

**Now that the two years** of their lease agreement have passed, Nollettes will be caring for 120 Semin cows on shares. They will continue to assist with management of 2,200 acres of Semin grass and sharecrop the hay. They have 80 cows and 30 replacement heifers of their own, plus 100 leased commercial cows to keep on their own place and additional rented pasture.

Calving those 300 females will be a little easier with use of the new calving barn LeRoy is building. Access to that and his other good facilities has been very beneficial and Nollettes are grateful for that kind of cooperation. A shared cooperative spirit has made the Nollette-Semin partnership mutually beneficial. All parties are looking forward to a projected joint production sale in 1996.

As for the 30-acre plot where Nollettes made their start, it promises to be useful in marketing their Angus cattle. Lying adjacent to the main highway, like it does, it just may be the ideal place for show pens displaying seedstock for sale by Nollettes Diamond Lazy J Angus Ranch.

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