



O n N e b r a s k a ' s K r a m e r R a n c h

IT'S ALL ABOUT OPTIONS

BY TROY SMITH

Plenty of ranchers still market cattle in a traditional way, selling the fruits of their labor once a year. They sell at the same time every year, hoping the market treats them right. That philosophy is based on the notion that, in the long run, market highs and lows will average out to profitability.

"I don't like the idea of just one payday each year," says Arthur, Neb., rancher Todd Kramer. "You need to put

yourself in a position to work the market—have something to sell when a profit can be made."

Kramer still sells a set of calves in the fall, but now sells some in the spring, too. "We can sell yearlings in the summer, and retaining ownership all the way to finish is an option," he adds. "I like to have options."

Since assuming more management responsibilities of the ranch in 1980, Todd Kramer and his wife, Tammy, have

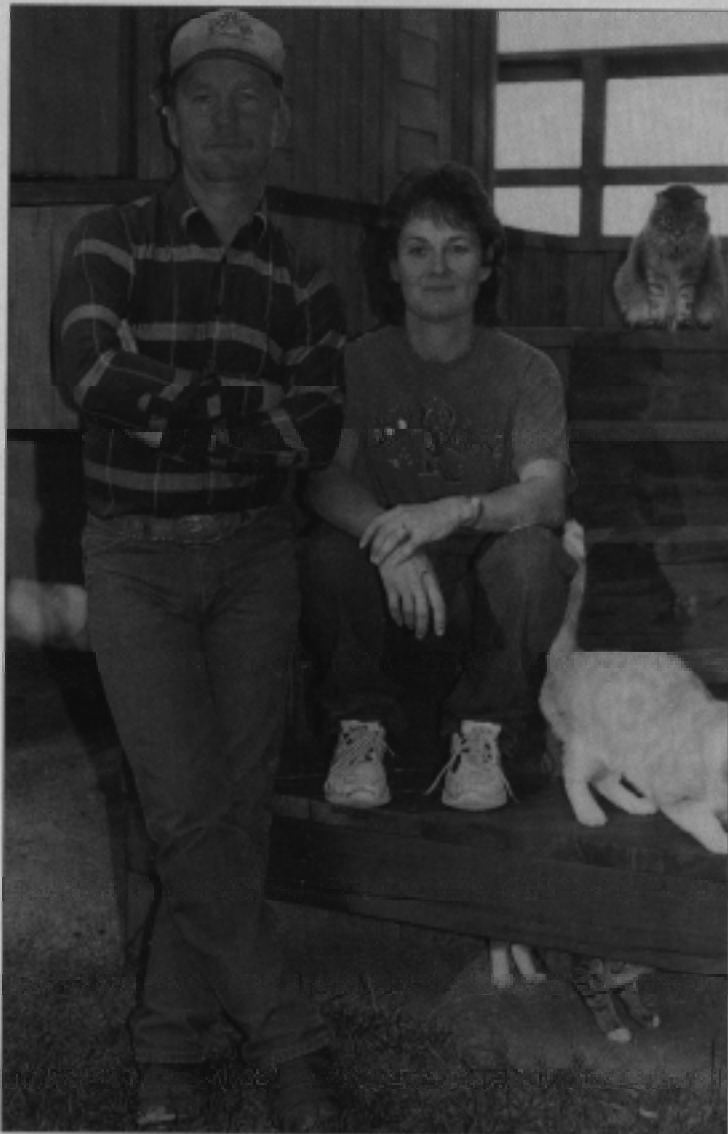
introduced several new management practices to increase those options, including artificial insemination of replacement heifers and development of a feedlot for growing part of their calves. The Kramers have finished a couple sets of cattle on the ranch, too. However, Todd says placement in a commercial feedlot probably suits them better. They will finish cattle when markets make retained ownership look attractive, but Kramers really

prefer to sell feeder cattle and replacement-quality heifers.

Todd says the operation's deeded and leased acreage will now manage about 1,500 cows without being heavily stocked. Kramers like to leave some grass as a cushion for dry years or to pasture a few extra yearlings if that looks like a good option. During recent years, cattle numbers have included cows taken in or leased, but plans call for expanding their own herd to

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S A N D H I L L S T R A D I T I O N



Sandhill ranchers Todd & Tammy Kramer say Angus cattle fit a diversified marketing plan.

Like many families in the Sandhills, Todd Kramer and his wife, Tammy, take pride in their own. Tammy's great-grandfather, A.B. Berry, a former wrangler for Texas' famed Four Sixes,

accompanied a herd of cattle to Nebraska and liked what he saw. He homesteaded near Ogallala, later moving farther north to establish the ranch Tammy's family operates today.

Likewise, Todd's roots run deep in the sandy soil. Kramers have been tending cattle in Arthur County since the days when fences were few and the only roads were narrow wagon tracks. Now,

Nebraska Highway 61 is the main thoroughfare. From Ogallala to Arthur and beyond, the highway snakes its way northward, through ranges of steep hills and around the lush wet meadows that make beef production the area's most significant industry. With only 400-plus residents in Arthur County, cattle outnumber humans by nearly 100 to one.

Along the highway, ranch signs mark turnoffs to the narrow roads trailing back into the hills. The Kramer Ranch sign shows the way to the place Todd's grandfather, Jerry, acquired some 50 years ago. At that time, Herefords dominated many area herds, but Granddad Kramer preferred Angus cattle. He established an Angus tradition that continued when Todd's parents, Norm and Maxine, took over in 1965. They gradually expanded the operation's land base and cattle numbers to accommodate a family partnership including Todd and Tammy. Transfer of more management responsibility to the young couple began in 1980 when Norm and Maxine moved into town.

sufficiently replace the outside cattle.

"I'm planning to keep and breed 400 heifers for spring calving and 100 for fall calving," explains Todd. "The split calving season helps spread out marketing and, by getting double-duty of our bulls, we can justify spending what it takes to get the good ones."

The Kramers' venture into fall calving began last year, with the purchase of 350 pairs. They were good, young cows and priced right. Todd decided to cash in the home-raised heifers he would have saved as replacements, and buy the fall cows.

"I had a few second thoughts about it, considering cattle prices were still pretty low, but I figured we'd have those fall calves to sell in the spring," says Todd. "The market really turned around in April — a lot more than I expected. We sold just the steer calves and got back about three-fourths of the purchase cost of the cows."

The fall program fits Todd's plans for hitting several marketing windows. Born in August and September, the fall steers are weaned in January, moved to the ranch feedlot and grown on a ration of ground hay, shell corn and liquid protein supplement. Most of the steers will weigh close to 550 pounds (lb.) by April, ready for the historically better spring market when buyers are looking for cattle to put on grass.

The fall heifers are supplemented on the meadows until spring and then sent back to grass, just like the lighterfall-born steers. As 650- to 700-lb. feeder calves, they will sell in an August market.

A majority of the spring calves are born in April. The big end of the steers are pulled off the cows and sold in October, weighing 500-525 lb. Right after that, the light steers and all of

the heifers are weaned with steers going into the growing lot. Heifers are managed on meadow after-growth. They'll get maybe 2 lb. of corn per head per day, protein supplement and hay when the weather gets rough.

"The spring steers usually go back to grass for part of the summer before marketing," Todd adds. "After we pick the keeper heifers, the rest are spayed and sent to grass, too. That's a new deal for us, but spaying will make sure heifers that shouldn't be cows, won't be."

Todd hopes that careful genetic selection will leave very few heifers to spay in the future. Replacement-quality females demand a premium, and Kramer Ranch targets that market as well. During recent years, packages of yearling heifers have sold privately and at public auction.

"We're really breeding cattle with replacement heifers in mind. I'd like to get to the point where all of ours are good enough to go into somebody's herd," says Todd.

"Angus heifers are what most buyers want, and there is demand for large drafts— 200 head or more— of uniform, quality heifers," he adds. "I'd like to be able to meet our own replacement needs and still have a couple groups of heifers like that to sell every year?"

Todd says that while some producers think about genetics in terms of the steers they would most like to raise, his first consideration is raising females. He's confident that if the females are good, their steer mates will be pretty good, too.

"We really like high-maternal bulls — nothing under + 10 for milk expected progeny difference (EPD). You need some balance, so we look for at least +40 for weaning and yearling weights," Todd explains, adding they avoid

Remaining true to another Sandhills tradition, the Kramers still work their cattle on horseback. Todd and Tammy believe that well-broke horses still offer the most efficient means of sorting and moving cattle on the ranch, but their interest in horses has grown beyond a strictly practical application. The couple's three children — DaNae, 18; Lindsey, 15; and Christopher, 11— enjoy horseback competition. Weekends often



Horses are important to work and play on the Kramer Ranch. Norman and Todd Kramer ready to sort pairs.

find the Kramers loading their horses and traveling to high school rodeos or play-days where the Kramer kids specialize in cutting.

"High school rodeo is a great family activity, but an expensive one," says Tammy. "When DaNae first started, we wondered if we could afford to trailer horses

all over the state to rodeos. Now, we don't see how we can afford not to."

With the dressing-room compartment of their trailer rigged for camping, the Kramers compete, camp and

care for their horses as a family. Tammy says going down the road together and sleeping five people in the front of a horse trailer results in some real family bonding.

Other rewards include success at their chosen family sport. DaNae has qualified for the National High School Rodeo Finals three times. Last year, in her first year of high school competition, Lindsey also qualified for the national contest.

"It's a lot of fun for all of us, and we've met some great people— other families hauling their kids and horses all over the country," adds Todd. "We do it to have fun with our kids, but there have been some business opportunities come out of it too. Last year, I sold a set of steers to a guy we met through high school rodeo circles. You just never know when an opportunity will come along."

extremes. "When we look for bulls, we look at the numbers first, then we look at the bulls. We don't want them to be too horsy—just moderate for size, good legs and feet, and enough depth and length. I like a lot of length."

"We've bought bulls privately and at auctions in western Nebraska and northeastern Colorado. Angus bulls cost a little more than some others but they're worth more to me," Todd says. "Paying good money for good bulls has never

bothered me. It's not hard to justify paying \$4,000 for better genetics, and it's even easier when you can spread your bull power over two calving seasons," Todd adds.

The Kramer preference for Angus genetics was reinforced after gaining some experience with other breeds. For a few years, some cows were bred to bulls representing three different continental breeds. Todd says there were some disposition problems, but performance comparisons

clinched the decision to return to straight Angus.

"We raised some nice, big crossbred calves, but they weren't much bigger than our calves by Angus bulls. And we lost a few more of the crossbred especially at birth," shares Todd. "We weaned more live pounds with straightbreds, and there's definitely more demand for the straight Angus heifers."