

ANGUS

Enthusiasts



PHOTOS BY BRUCE GORDON

Hard work and determination have helped South Dakota's Koupal family develop a top-notch herd of Angus genetics.

by *Kindra Gordon*

For LaVern and Alice Koupal of Dante, S.D., raising Angus cattle has been a lifelong joy. In fact, the couple can think of few places they'd rather be than at home with their cows.

As an example, Alice tells a story about returning from a five-day vacation. "While driving home from the airport I looked over at the speedometer and LaVern was going 80 miles per hour. I asked, 'Can't you go any faster?'"

It is that true commitment to the Angus breed that has helped the Koupal family develop a reputable herd of Angus genetics over the last 26 years. Today, in addition to LaVern and Alice's herd of about 600 registered Angus, their sons, Bud and David, also maintain herds of Angus cattle.

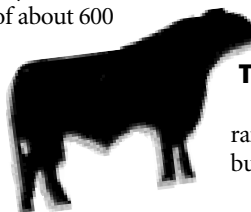
LaVern and his two sons represent the third

and fourth generations involved in the Koupals' family farm in southeastern South Dakota. The small town of Dante is about an hour and a half south of Mitchell in the rolling hills east of the Missouri River.

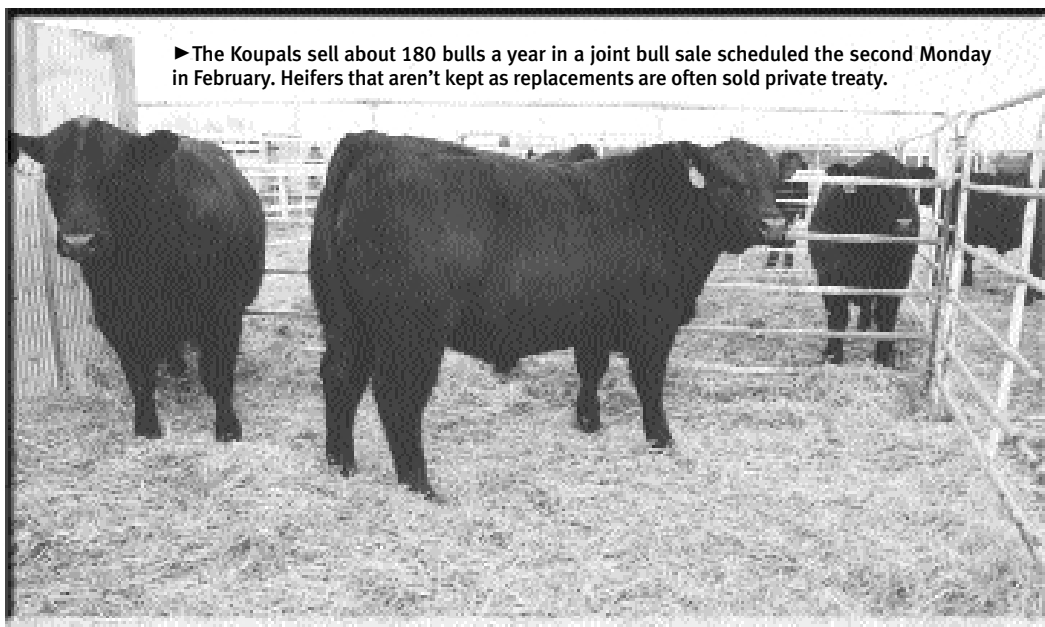
The early years

Both LaVern's father and grandfather raised cattle. His dad got into the Angus business when he bought an Angus-based

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► **Above:** The Koupal family has three distinct Angus herds: Koupal's Angus managed by Alice and LaVern (center); B&B Angus, operated by son Bud (far right) and his family; and Sleepy Hollow Ranch, managed by son David (far left) and his family.



► The Koupals sell about 180 bulls a year in a joint bull sale scheduled the second Monday in February. Heifers that aren't kept as replacements are often sold private treaty.

commercial herd in 1947. When LaVern was just 11, his father passed away, leaving the fate of the family farm in LaVern's hands.

As the oldest boy in his family, LaVern often stayed home from school to help his mother with the farm, which included about 30 commercial beef cows and a herd of dairy cows. During his four years in high school, he missed almost a full year of school to help keep the farm in the family. But he did earn his high school diploma and then spent six months in the National Guard before returning to the family operation full-time. He spent the next eight years working on the farm and serving his two weeks per year in the Guard.

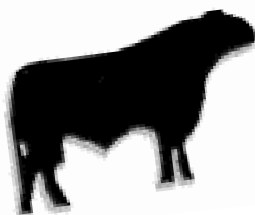
In 1964, LaVern and Alice were married. Although Alice had lived on a farm as a little girl, her family moved to town when she was about 10, so being a farm wife — especially milking cows — was new to her.

"I really hated those cows," she recalls. To help preserve the marriage, LaVern did buy her a milking machine. And soon Alice was doing much of the farm work.

"At that time, LaVern did tons of custom work — baling, windrowing, etc. And 38 years ago women didn't work off the farm," Alice says. "So I did whatever needed to be done on the farm."

Their operation included about 30 beef cows and the dairy cows for "grocery money," LaVern says. "We had 267 acres and rented some ground, and we built everything up from that."

During these early years, the Koupals were also blessed with five children, Brenda, Bud, Becky, David and Jenny.



By the late '70s, the Koupals decided to pursue their dream of being purebred Angus breeders. In 1977 LaVern and Alice purchased their first registered Angus cattle. They sold their first five bulls a year

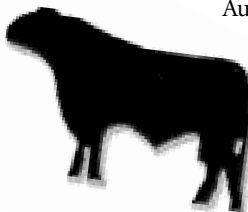
later. And by 1979, their entire dairy herd was sold.

"We always had the goal to have a purebred Angus herd, but I didn't have that background," LaVern says. "When the dairy inspection process became very strict in the late '70s, we considered what it would cost to invest in a milk parlor and all the equipment, and decided we'd enjoy raising registered Angus cattle more," he says.

LaVern credits Vern Kerchberger, their American Angus Association regional manager at that time, for helping them get a solid start in the business. "He helped out a lot with locating good cows to buy and just giving advice," LaVern says.

Thirty years later

Today, the Koupal family has three distinct Angus herds: Koupal's Angus is a herd of about 600 mother cows managed by LaVern and Alice. They operate on about 5,000 acres of leased and owned ground in the river breaks east of the Missouri River. In addition to cattle, they also raise corn, wheat



and oats, and put up alfalfa and prairie grass for hay.

B&B Angus includes just more than 200 cows and is operated by the Koupals' oldest son, Bud; Bud's wife, Bernie; and the couple's four children. Bud says his goal is "to raise efficient cows that don't require a lot of pampering." Thus, he says, he runs his herd much like a commercial operation. He says he likes thick, easy-fleshing cattle like his dad does, but he prefers a little more frame in his herd as well.

The Koupals' other son, David, maintains a herd of about 50 Angus cows, which he and his wife, Peggy, and

their 2-year-old son operate as Sleepy Hollow Ranch. David is also a full-time ag teacher at Wagner, S.D.

David says he aims for consistency in his herd and tries to strike a balance in cows with maternal traits and some thickness. "The boys are very much involved, but we each operate separately, have our own land and register our own cattle," Alice says.

Each family keeps its cattle separate during the summer. At weaning time, calves are commingled and fed out at the home place. A joint bull sale is held the second Monday in February. They sell about 180 bulls annually. Heifers that aren't kept as replacements are often sold private treaty.

The Koupals' calving season extends from early January through about March 1. Weaning typically takes place by the end of August because of the age of the calves. Due to the drought the last few years, LaVern reports that he has been weaning earlier. This year, all of his calves were weaned by Aug. 10.

The Koupals start breeding their cows and heifers in early April. About 140 replacement heifers are kept each year, based on mothering ability, size (not necessarily the biggest) and EPDs. Heifers and about 200 cows are bred by artificial insemination (AI) before bulls are turned out.

In their breeding program, LaVern says his aim is to balance all the traits without

going to one extreme in carcass or performance.

"I have a goal of 700-pound calves without creep feed," LaVern says. Thus he aims for a maternal cow that can produce half of her body weight.

"After this drought, I think we're going to see what's efficient at weaning half her body weight," he says, and adds that, in his opinion, cattle have been getting too big.

"I think everyone needs to cull harder. I believe more in culling the bottom of a herd rather than flushing the cows at the top," LaVern says.

Over the years, LaVern and Alice have focused on building a herd with a very maternal female. They pay close attention to udder quality, teat size, milking ability and overall mothering ability. Their keen attention to the cow earned Koupal Angus the recognition of having numerous cows in the *Pathfinder Report*, as well as several Pathfinder sires.

"We judge a bull by the kind of females he leaves in our herd," LaVern says.

In the future, LaVern says his goal will continue to be breeding cattle that are consistent in birth weight, carcass and maternal traits. "I like to go slowly and bring one trait ahead at a time. Even with the explosion of carcass and ultrasound data now available, I'm not going to give up everything. You have to go slow and get it all to work together," he says.

The things they enjoy

Both LaVern and Alice say they've very much enjoyed raising their kids and their cattle in a ranching lifestyle. Alice also appreciates that it's been an opportunity for the entire family to work together. "We are definitely a family operation," she says, and recounts stories of herself and the Koupal children pitching in to do whatever farmwork needed to be done.

Today, she cherishes those memories. "I enjoy the closeness LaVern and I have from working together. We have so much in common to talk about."

Of course they have also enjoyed the people they've met through the Angus breed. "The people have been one of the most rewarding things — and the love of the cattle," LaVern says. "You can learn so many things from the people you meet."

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— LaVern Koupal

Alice adds that it's been a highlight to sell to ranchers for three generations. "We've sold to the grandpa, the father and then the son. It's been fun to see them come back."

Her advice to others in the cattle business is this: "It's a way of life, but it's also a business, and you've got to run it like a business."

As an example, one of the biggest changes she's seen in the purebred cattle business over the years is the volume of records that need to be kept. "There is so much information we can provide to our customers to help in selection. Technologies have been unreal. But you just have to stay on top of it."

Looking ahead, LaVern says he sees price as the biggest challenge for the beef industry to overcome. "We've got to take our product and be able to merchandise it," he says.

He is optimistic about some of the value-added ventures being proposed around the region, such as the joint ethanol plant and cattle-feeding operation north of Pierre, S.D., that allows producers to be shareholders.

"I believe that's one of the ways we can compete. I think the wave of the future is being able to put some of your cattle in the feedlot and have some profit sharing. We need to have more niche markets. In the future, cattle producers are going to have to pool together more," he says.

And both Alice and LaVern are eager to be part of that future.

Of retiring, Alice says, "I'm not ready to retire. I'm having too much fun. I think I'd be bored if we didn't have Angus cattle."

She adds, "Angus cattle and grandkids are my two favorite things. I'm just not sure in which order."

LaVern's priorities are much the same. He says that in the future his goal is to continue perfecting the cattle and enjoying family. In the next 10 years, he plans to help work their grandsons into the cattle business. And he says if Alice will agree to it, he wouldn't mind driving around the country and looking at cattle.

