

Family Dreams

North Dakota brothers share dream of ranching together.

Story & photos by **Alaina Burt**

Bumps, bruises and grass-stained jeans. Daring each other to touch the electric fence. Pail-feeding calves, driving fast down dirt roads with only a farmer's permit, and fighting for a copy of the *Angus Journal*. These are snapshots of children growing up on a family farm. But what picture comes to mind when those youth have grown up? More importantly, how do those young adults become a part of the family ranch?

Three brothers are finding out at Spickler Ranch, near Glenfield, N.D. The ranch is home to several families. Justin and his wife, Sara, who were married a little more than two years ago, manage the day-to-day operation of the ranch. Nathan, the youngest, is a junior at North Dakota State University (NDSU) and works at home during the summer. David, the middle brother, helps out at the ranch when he can, but he works mainly at a feedlot north of Fargo, N.D.

To get to know the brothers, it's important to examine their diverse experience with cattle, which began with Herefords, thanks to their grandparents.

However, that only lasted until 1983 when Harold, the brothers' father, dispersed the herd because the boys were too young to help out. At that point, the family started raising commercial cattle to ease the workload.

Justin says, "That's where we gained our appreciation for the Angus female." Nathan was responsible for purchasing the first Angus cow because of his desire for a show heifer. That heifer became the foundation for the family's registered Angus seedstock.

Today, the Spicklers operate 3,800 acres of owned and rented land, about three-quarters of which is pasture. It takes about 5 acres to run a cow-calf pair in a good year, but they figure about 6 acres to be safe. Justin and Nathan utilize crossfencing, which encompasses building fences across pastures for better grass utilization.

Their cow herd consists of about 320 spring-calving cows and 80 fall-calving cows, all of which are registered Angus. The cows are expected to do it all on their own. Calves receive no creep feed, just mother's milk and native grass, which gives the family a good idea of which cows are producing, both genetically and maternally. They have their annual bull sale the first Monday of May.

Growing up on a ranch provided the environment for Justin, David and Nathan to become involved in 4-H, livestock judging and showing cattle. Through these events they had opportunities to meet new people and learn about agriculture. Harold saw to it that his kids were utilizing those avenues to their advantage.

Harold taught Justin, Nathan and David how to treat people well. Their honesty, good manners and firm handshakes are products from lessons learned a long time ago. Justin says that everything you do is reflected in what people think of you.

"How you act, how you present your stall, everything," Nathan adds.

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► Nathan (left) and Justin Spickler generally have meetings on horseback.



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Justin and Nathan say their father had the most influence on their lives. "He didn't give any prejudices about people, and he taught us a lot, just by example, about how to act around people and communicate," Justin says.

One of the first things Sara noticed as she was coming into the family was its decision-making process. Harold would ask the boys what they wanted to do, she explains. "He'd give them his advice, but they were still allowed to make the decision." The brothers agree that Harold probably let them do some things wrong, just so they'd realize not to do it a certain way.

With their father playing such a large role in the operation, it was difficult when he passed away from lung cancer a year ago.

"Both Nathan and my's dream was to come back and work with Dad, and that couldn't be the case," Justin

says. "But, we also wanted to continue the operation and continue the land we own and keep things in the family."

Surviving college

Attending NDSU is a family tradition, which all of the brothers are continuing. Harold graduated from there, as did Justin, Sara and David. It was important for the Spicklers to get a college education, but for Justin, going to college wasn't an easy decision — his parents forced him to go.

"At that time I didn't know why," he says, adding that after being at the university four years he had realized its value — to open your mind so you can adjust when the industry changes and to broaden your perspective by meeting people.

It wasn't easy being away from the operation while in school, he says. Justin, like his brothers, spent many weekends traveling back and forth between school and the ranch. In retrospect, Justin says, "Those few harvests I missed were no big deal . . . making me go to college was to realize that we didn't have to be quite so attached."

Helping manage the Little International (Little "I") at NDSU is also a family tradition. The Little I is primarily a livestock show encompassing a variety of livestock. Harold, Justin and David have all been managers, while Nathan will be this year's assistant



► **Above:** Sara, Nathan and Justin Spickler take time to laugh during their busy schedule. Ron Hanson stresses that having fun as a family is key in strong farm families.

► **Right:** BASRAB: Buy A Spickler Ranch Angus Bull.



manager. Nathan hopes to be manager when he's a senior. The desire to manage the Little I stemmed from observing his brother, he says. "I went and watched Justin as a manager and I kind of thought, 'Hey, I wouldn't mind doing that when I am in college.'"

Working off the farm

Each member of the team brings back education and experience to the operation. Justin found his footing managing and developing communication skills at NDSU while working as a herdsman and being a member of the judging team. He learned practical skills and how to manage individuals. When he accepted the herdsman position, he began to supervise other college students.

"It was kind of tough to go from being a co-worker to being in charge of these guys that were my age," Justin says.

For the past two years while at school, Nathan has worked for Goldberg Farms, an Angus operation in Minnesota. Nathan says working off of the family ranch has taught him responsibility and how to take direction from a supervisor, adding that the experience has been good.

For Sara, job opportunities in animal science just weren't available for her in rural North Dakota. She and Justin decided it would be best if she went back to school to obtain another degree, this time in nursing. Sara now works at a hospital in Carrington.

David, although not part of the day-to-day operation of the ranch, is gaining experience managing a feedlot in North Dakota. Justin and Nathan feel it is helpful to have David's experience in feeding cattle because understanding how their cattle perform in a feedlot setting will aid in marketing seedstock to commercial producers.

"David really understands the biology of feeding cattle, and he has a pretty good grasp of the marketing," Justin says.

Farm family communication

Now, without their father, Justin and Nathan are faced with issues familiar to many farm and ranch families, including the challenges of communication and finding success in their family ranch as a career. Ron Hanson, the Neal E. Harlan professor of agribusiness at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), has made several presentations about successful farming strategies for families. He spends much of his personal time counseling families to

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► With two AI technicians, breeding is a breeze for this North Dakota family. Here Nathan and Justin are breeding while Sara is managing the book work.

Strong farm families

Ron Hanson, the Neal E. Harlan professor of agribusiness at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), shares these characteristics of farm families with strong family relationships in his "Keeping a Positive Focus" discussion.

1. Spend time together as a family. Undertake a "team effort" approach to working and getting along together as family members in a farm business operation.
2. Communicate and always listen to each other.
3. Have a sense of commitment to each other. Develop a family loyalty and have a feeling of family pride for the farming operation and what has been accomplished.
4. Have a religious faith together as a family.
5. Know how to deal with a crisis within the family or the farm operation itself. Always be able to focus on the positive elements, even in the most difficult situations.
6. Express appreciation for each other. Show care for others' personal feelings. Make sure no one feels that they are being "taken for granted."
7. Enjoy having fun together as a family. Have a sense of humor. Take personal kidding in stride. Always be willing to share a smile and get along with other family members.
8. Take the time to strengthen family values and reaffirm hopes and dreams as family members farming together. Ensure that these family values and the importance of the family itself are passed on to children.



► It typically takes 5 acres to feed a cow-calf pair during a good year in the Spicklers' locale. Spickler Ranch makes excellent use of pasture resources and utilizes crossfencing to maximize grass production.

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resolve conflicts in a positive manner and to help them better communicate with each other. Hanson provides a humorous glimpse at real-life situations while providing solutions.

According to Hanson, one of the biggest challenges for young people returning to the family operation is a financial one. "The capital investment cost to start farming or ranching is almost prohibitive," Hanson says.

This challenge hits home with the Spicklers. The brothers have always had a few cows around to help put them through college, but to become full-time cattlemen meant more financial responsibility. For Justin and Sara, coming back to the ranch meant more cattle.

"The only way we could come back was if we brought more income with us," Justin says. Now, Sara's nursing job handles the health insurance aspect, while the ranch takes care of itself.

Hanson describes another common problem. "A breakdown in communications only leads to misunderstandings in any farm family relationship," Hanson says. Communication is key. Realizing the need to listen is the first step toward better communication and avoiding potential conflicts.

Communication and decision-making are large factors in any operation, Justin realizes. "It's a definite area that needs continual work," he says. Meetings generally take place on horseback about every day, and the family has a periodical sit-down meeting to keep an eye on cash flow.

Justin understands that the biggest struggle for the operation will be how the decision-making is handled. "Ultimately, I probably will decide, but we discuss everything and every angle, from cutting hay to what bull we're going to buy," he says.

While the youngest sibling may often be left out in many operations, this isn't the case for Nathan. "Everything we do has been discussed. It's not like we get done discussing something and then he (Justin)

goes ahead and does what he originally wants; we work together on our decisions," he says.

Sara adds, "Each issue is discussed as a family."

For a family operation to be successful, it takes a total team effort. "Everyone must feel like a valued stakeholder," Hanson says. "Without that feeling they soon lose interest in the farm."

For the Spicklers, everyone plays a key role in the operation. Justin and Nathan are skilled at many of the same positions, one of which is artificial insemination (AI). It's nice to have a second technician

to do the breeding because if one person can't pass through the cervix, the other usually can, and they can get the job done together.

When it comes to cattle records, the job responsibilities have switched throughout the years. While Nathan says he did more of the records while he was in high school because Justin was at college, the responsibility has fallen on Justin now

that Nathan is away at school, and Sara handles the financial records.

On farming operations, it's easy to get caught up in the demands of everyday life and ignore the needs and feelings of the family. Says Hanson, "A few simple words of appreciation and praise for a job well-done can have a lasting impact in building strong family relationships." He says that these words are always meant, but often enough aren't spoken until it's too late. Keeping a positive focus also helps families in stressful situations.

Hanson urges, "Never lose the ability to smile and enjoy life itself."

At the Spickler Ranch, there is no shortage of care or laughter.

The dreams shared by these brothers are a continual work in progress. Together, they face challenges that would be nearly impossible to survive on their own. The members of Spickler Ranch are working, laughing and loving the time they spend together in agriculture.



► Nathan tries to catch his breath at the North Central Regional Preview show.

Hints for building a team effort approach in a farm family business

► **Do not "run into" any type of family farm business arrangement.** Too many times contracts are signed or loan mortgages are secured and then things don't work out as planned. Be sure that a son or daughter really has the motivation to farm and that everyone has the ability to get along and work together. Give a family farming situation a "trial run" before setting up and signing any formal agreements.

► **Be sure to talk things out ahead of time.** Too many important decisions are made under time pressure or emotional stress. Give everyone a chance to review the situation and think things through before reacting and reaching a final decision.

► **Take the opportunity to talk about the "what if" situations that could arise in a family farming operation.** Build some escape clauses/options into any formal arrangements. Avoid being "locked into a situation" with no way out.

► **Find a way to openly discuss (1) goals, (2) personal feelings and (3) expectations with all family members.** This will help eliminate many of the misunderstandings and conflicts that can arise in family farming operations. This will enable the family to have a directed focus when setting priorities for both the family and the farm business itself.

► **Seek outside help/counseling when needed.** A third-party opinion may help family members to better understand another point of view. This outside influence encourages family members to work out disagreements in a more objective and professional manner.

► **Recognize there will be "moments" in any family farming operation.** Keep a positive attitude and approach to working together. Remember to smile and have fun while working together. Keep business matters and problems separate from family social gatherings. Try to keep problems and conflicts in their proper perspective.

► **Always keep the communication process open between family members.** Take time to listen and understand the feelings of other family members. Even if you disagree, be sure that there is an element of mutual respect between family members. When family members will no longer communicate and withdraw their feelings, there is not much chance of a farming operation surviving to the next generation as a profitable family unit.

Source: Ron Hanson, the Neal E. Harlan professor of agribusiness at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in his "Keeping a Positive Focus" discussion.