

Total Commitment



Dedication to performance earns
BIF Seedstock Producer of the Year honor.

Story & photos by *Troy Smith*

Have you ever wondered how some farms and ranches came by their names? It might be obvious for operations bearing the names of individuals or families in ownership. The same is true for outfits named for the brands used to mark their herds. Other names are rooted in history, paying tribute to pioneering founders. Still others are related to local geography, derived from the names of nearby rivers, mountains or distinctive landmarks. Sometimes, however, you just have to ask about the inspiration for a name.

Such is the case for TC Ranch, located in south-central Nebraska, near Franklin. A 700-head registered Angus cow herd is the centerpiece for this diversified cattle and farming operation owned and operated by Vance and Connie Uden and their son, Dru. TC Ranch grew out of a partnership begun more than 50 years ago, with Connie's late father, T.L. Sterner. Today, the ranch's 8,000 acres span the Republican River Valley, with irrigated crops grown in the fertile bottom and native pastures reaching into the adjacent hills.

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— Vance Uden

But nothing in that description offers a clue to the title given to the Uden family business. In this case, the chosen name reflects an attitude.

"When we partnered with my father-in-law, we adopted the name, TC Ranch. It stood for 'total commitment,'" Uden explains. "Call it a motto or whatever, but it's something we've always tried to live up to."

Earlier this year, that commitment was recognized as TC Ranch was named Seedstock Producer of the Year by the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF). Called one of the most progressive seedstock operations in the country, TC Ranch was noted for

breeding Angus sires ranking among the breed's leaders for both performance and carcass merit. Uden says it was gratifying to receive the award, along with the congratulatory letters received since the July award ceremony in Calgary, Alta., Canada.

"We really appreciated hearing from people from across the country — people we've come to know over the years we've been in this business. And we've done business with quite a few of them, too," Uden says.

Achieving a level of prominence in the seedstock business means TC Ranch can count a growing number of Angus breeders among its customers. However, Uden says the focus of the TC Ranch program has always been the commercial cow-calf producer.

So it was, back in the mid-1960s, when the ranch's cow herd included just 40 registered cows. Like most breeders in those days, TC Ranch marketed 2-year-old bulls, mostly through various consignment sales. Uden says his performance-minded father-in-law began collecting birth and weaning

► **Above:** Dru, Connie and Vance Uden own and operate TC Ranch of Franklin, Neb., winner of the 2008 BIF Seedstock Producer of the Year award.

weights early. Performance data collection increased over time through the Nebraska Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA). When it became available in 1976, the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) system was adopted.

“The hardest thing, in the early days, was selling bulls to your neighbors. We had to attract buyers from outside the local area. We did a fair amount of showing for several years to promote the cattle and our name. Exhibiting carload bulls in Denver gave us exposure to commercial cattlemen across a much wider area, and it helped. It drew attention to our program,” Uden recalls.

The total package

Over time, the ranch expanded its land base, both pasture and crop acres, and the cow numbers grew at a modest but steady rate. While marketing bulls and heifers at private treaty and through consignment sales, including the Kansas-Nebraska regional sale that Uden managed for several years, the customer base grew as well. In 1975, TC Ranch invited buyers to the ranch for its first annual production sale. The

offering of 2-year-olds and a handful of yearling bulls averaged \$993.

“That was a pretty good sale back then,” Uden grins. “We’ve been fortunate enough to enjoy some continued success with our sales — even during the ’80s, which were tough for everyone in agriculture.”

In truth, demand for TC Ranch seedstock has only increased. The key to attracting buyers, Uden believes, is offering a product that represents a total package — a blend of practical performance and eye-appeal. That requires a good factory in the form of functional, fertile females — cows with good udders that can calve by themselves and wean a respectable coupon. Uden has looked for the same things in herds from which to buy herd sires.

“We’ve sampled a variety of reputable programs for proven genetics, but we’re not afraid to buy young bulls and prove them ourselves. And we’ve kept some bulls of our own raising and proved them. We’ve donated semen for progeny testing of sires. We also feed out the bottom end of our bull and heifer calves, and we’ve finished customer cattle, too, to collect

the performance and carcass data,” Uden explains.

Now sharing responsibility for herd improvement through sire selection, Dru has followed his father’s lead. That includes a willingness to take a chance on a promising yet unproven young sire.

“Using proven genetics is important, but you’ve got to introduce some new blood, too,” Dru offers.

His father emphasizes an appreciation for doing business with reputable, trustworthy breeders. He believes TC Ranch customers should expect no less from their seedstock source.

“It’s really important to stand behind your cattle. If we’re focused on breeding cattle that will work in a commercial environment, under real-world conditions, it’s not a problem,” the older Uden states.

Many customers turn to Uden for advice in selecting bulls to complement their commercial herds and production goals. And, at each production sale, he usually purchases 20 to 30 bulls on behalf of customers who aren’t present for the auction.

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► TC Ranch cattle graze native pastures in the hills above the Republican River valley.

He's happy to do it, he says, because it's a service seedstock suppliers should provide. Seedstock producers should be prepared to counsel customers in ways to improve profitability.

"You can't preach to them. You can't do that," Uden warns. "But we do try to keep up with management research and product development, so we can offer advice when asked. And we'll share from our own experience."

Uden encourages customers to implement a comprehensive cow herd vaccination program. He also encourages them to precondition their calves, explaining how those management steps can help protect the producer's investment and add value to a calf crop. In the long run, they help a producer build a reputation for quality cattle.

As a marketing aid, TC Ranch has offered to provide AngusSource® ear tags to customers. With that comes the opportunity to list calves among those promoted to cattle feeders and order buyers seeking feeder cattle backed by reputable genetics and histories of good management. Uden says age-, source- and process-verification will become increasingly important to marketing cattle in the future, particularly as a growing share of U.S. beef is channeled toward international markets.

"I think all of us, whether we're seedstock breeders or commercial producers, have to look at the big picture. It's a global market. Our advantage in the United States is our production of high-quality beef. We can't afford to sacrifice the quality we're known for," Uden states.

Giving back

A strong advocate for the beef industry, Uden says anyone who has enjoyed a measure of success in the business ought to feel an obligation to give something back. Through the years, the family has been active in the Nebraska Angus Association, and Uden is a past director and president of the state organization. He also served two terms on the American Angus Association's Board of Directors.

"I came on the national Board during the trying times of the '80s. Interest rates were high, input costs were high, and producer returns were low. Angus registrations were down, and the Board struggled to keep Association programs running," Uden remembers.

"But it was the best as well as the worst of times. I was privileged to see real leadership

TC Ranch has hastened genetic progress through early adoption of artificial insemination (AI), embryo transfer (ET) and ultrasound technologies.

in action and contribute in some small way. Board members came together to prioritize performance programs and take a more targeted approach to advertising. The use of EPDs (expected progeny differences) grew. The junior program grew. Certified Angus Beef [LLC, (CAB)] started to progress. And Dick Spader came on staff as our executive, which strengthened Association leadership, too. All of those things combined to turn things around," Uden says.

Additionally, he and Connie have been longtime supporters of junior Angus activities. Dru was an active participant and held leadership positions in the state and national junior organizations. In addition to the hands-on experience with showing cattle, the experience cultivated his reason-based decision-making ability. It provided opportunities for the young cattleman to hone public speaking and salesmanship skills.

"But then, I've always liked to talk," Dru admits. "The best part is the people I met from all across the country — from California to Maine. It gave me the opportunity to network with so many people in the industry."

His father agrees that expanding a network of acquaintances is invaluable and probably is the greatest personal benefit gained from industry involvement.

"You get involved to do your part for the industry, but you learn a lot in the process. You learn how other producers do things. And I'm not afraid to copy someone that's smarter than I am," Uden says.

Never stop learning

Asked what he sees ahead for the cattle business, Uden says technology will likely play an even greater role. TC Ranch has hastened genetic progress through early adoption of artificial insemination (AI), embryo transfer (ET) and ultrasound technologies. Uden advises producers to embrace proven tools, but reserves a healthy dose of skepticism for others.

"DNA testing has merit for some genetic traits. Tenderness probably is one of them. But that technology needs further improvement for other traits, such as marbling," Uden states.

"We don't know how many genes or combinations of genes may affect marbling, or other traits. I'd guess that is coming, but it's not here yet," he adds. "We'll be watching and listening. I'm a big believer in continuing education. Never stop learning and never say 'never.'"

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► Vance Uden checks the moisture of recently windrowed alfalfa. Irrigated crops include corn, soybeans and forages for the TC Ranch herd.