

Both Sides of the Fence



PHOTOS BY LANCE ZIMMERMAN

Nebraskan's day job offers a unique outlook for his family's operation.

by *Miranda Reiman*

John Anderson has an observation that guides him when it comes to raising quality cattle. "I've never heard anybody walk away from a restaurant saying they paid too much for a good steak," he says. "But I sure have heard a lot of people complain about a poor steak at any price."

The cow-calf producer and manager of S&A Feedlot near Plainview, Neb., looks at the entire beef system — from seedstock producer to consumer — when making genetic and management decisions.

"I'm probably one of the few feedlot managers that has his own cow-calf operation," Anderson says, noting his two different perspectives.

"Through checkoff dollars and the tremendous strides in Angus genetics, we're putting out a higher-quality, better product that people are more educated about preparing," he says. "I'm conscious about where we need to be. It still comes down to

balance between quality on the plate and profitability."

Anderson knows genetics. He, with the help of son Keylyn, operates a 550-head commercial herd as part of Willow Creek Cattle Co. He also has a registered Quarter horse breeding program that hosted its first production sale this summer.

Sire selection

As manager of a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot, Anderson knows the kind of

cattle that perform well in the feedlot and on the rail. In part, that's thanks to the carcass data he gets through the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP).

"Being involved with CAB has helped me make better sire selection choices," he says.

"Getting carcass data back gives you a chance to see the trends and problem areas. I can address those within my herd — and within the industry — by my bull selection."

Armed with this knowledge, Anderson searches for purebred bulls from Oklahoma to Wyoming.

"I spend a lot of money on bulls," he says. "Lots." Anderson aims for large birth-to-weaning and to-yearling weight spreads. "I figure I can spend a little bit more if I'm going to get 15 more pounds of yearling weight by feeding them out, as opposed to

the guy who's just selling his calves off the cow."

Feeding his own cattle, which typically reach 28%-30% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance, Anderson sees firsthand how successful his selections are.

"I have a customer base that likes to feed the good ones, so that is what I search out,"
John Anderson says.

Network notions

That feedback process is not unique to Anderson's cattle at the yard. He fosters relationships with other producers he meets at bull sales.

"To me, the cattle business is a concentric circle that is based on networking," he says. "I really enjoy those relationships." Several producers whose calves regularly fill the feedlot are producers he met at bull sales.

"I don't want to go looking for those types of cattle every year; I would like to make the relationships," he says. "When you get an overall view of somebody's cattle, it is a little bit easier for me to sit down with the cow-calf guy and say, 'Maybe you want to look at this or that as far as some of your genetic change.'"

Since he also sees things from the cow-calf side of the fence, it makes those conversations more productive.

"I can talk the talk of a rancher," he says. "It also helps me to provide more valuable feedback. I think that gives customers a higher comfort level with the deal."

If given permission from the actual buyer of the calves, Anderson likes to "funnel back information" to the producers. Providing them with carcass data can help lead to herd improvements, he says.

He is responsible for purchasing the majority of the cattle to fill the 12,000-head feedlot, and that's another reason he likes to build relationships.

"It is not advantageous for me to sell cattle to clients if there is going to be a lot of guesswork," he says. "I have a customer base that likes to feed the good ones, so that is what I search out."

Clients turn to S&A Feedlot for other points of differentiation, too.

"It is such a competitive world when you're a custom feedlot," Anderson says. "I always say we do things that guys down the road won't."

In the winter they bed cattle, citing a \$2 return for every dollar spent on bedding. Located five miles from an ethanol plant, S&A has access to byproducts and high-moisture ground ear corn. It also has a 1,200-head beef confinement barn, where cattle typically finish with a percentage point more yield and higher quality grade.

"One year we sent a load of steers out of the barn that graded 100% Choice. They were really high-quality black, but they came from several different sources," he says, noting the barn helps control heat stress. "It's probably just a really good place to put black cattle in the summertime."

Anderson looks beyond next week, next month or next year.

"I am intrigued with the cattle business, and the future of the cattle business," he says. "All the knowledge you can get — you can never get enough. I'm just trying to be progressive."



►Above: A cow-calf producer and a feedlot manager, John Anderson looks at the entire beef system — from seedstock producer to consumer — when making genetic and management decisions.

►Below: Anderson manages a 550-head commercial herd as part of Willow Creek Cattle Co. Feeding his own cattle, which typically reach 28%-30% CAB acceptance, he sees firsthand how successful his genetic selections are.

