



Way Beyond Just Black

Nebraska couple capitalizes on the difference.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

On the dance floor or sorting cattle, as in life, having a reliable partner can make it a whole lot easier. Joe and Brenda Anderjaska of Hayes Center, Neb., have learned anticipation and a bit of mind reading go a long way.

While courting, weekends would often find them on the dance floor. Although they'll still polka or two-step now and then, that early rhythm may have set the stage for a place you're more likely to see them today — the corral.

"There's nobody I'd rather sort cattle with than Brenda," says Joe, with one eye on his wife of 25 years. "Not that she does it absolutely perfect, but she knows how I do it ... because I taught her."

Brenda grew up in nearby McCook, Neb., but adopted the ranching lifestyle after the couple decided they didn't want to raise a family in the city.

"We joke about it a lot, but there's probably some truth to this. The first thing we bought when we came back was a working tub and an alleyway, and that probably saved our marriage," Joe says.

Quality pays for itself

They've been raising straightbred Angus

cattle since 1988, upon returning to rural roots after a short stint in Omaha. The herd of registered and commercial cattle is built on the base that Joe's parents — darn good dancers in their own right — Roland and Marilyn Anderjaska took over from the previous generation here.

"I concentrate on making the best cow

I possibly can," the cattleman says.

Although his parents retired in the early 1990s, he continued the tradition of selling replacement heifers, now under the Rocking Lazy J Ranch banner.

That means a focus on low-birth-weight,

high-calving-ease, moderate-framed females. Cows get both genetic and environmental pressure toward those goals.

"You've got to use proven genetics. That takes all the guesswork out of it," he says. "If a bull is good when he's young, he'll still be good when he's older and has daughters in production."

Since 1993, the Anderjaskas have procured embryo transfer (ET) full-brother sires from Fink Beef Genetics, Randolph, Kan.

"That helps uniformity a lot," he says. They

no longer use artificial insemination (AI) due to labor and one overriding fact: the calves sired by purchased bulls were outperforming the AI-sired calves.

"My dad always told me that he'd never bought a bull that was too expensive," Joe says. "He said, 'Go pick out the bulls that you want and buy them. Years later when you look at your cow herd, you'll see they've paid for themselves.' And that's the truth."

Joe still traces cows back to a high-dollar Traveler son his dad bought, recalling, "He paid for himself time and time again."

Calving runs from April 1 to May 15, in time for the two large groups to get split into smaller herds for summer grazing. They sort cows by the sex of their calves, making fall marketing easier. Cows winter on pasture and cornstalks, without any "really good rations hauled out to them," he says. "If a cow can go out there and do it for herself, I'm not going to do it for her."

Finding good help is a challenge. Often the couple's main source of backup comes in the form of weekend work from two grown children, Erik and Jessica, and their two school-aged sons, Joey and Jakob.

Even if they did have time to haul feed to cows, they probably wouldn't.

"We've worked really hard to get cows that can convert grass and roughage to pounds as easy as they can. I think that's why our calves

"We've worked really hard to get cows that can convert grass and roughage to pounds as easy as they can."

— Joe Anderjaska

in the feedyard convert really, really good,” Joe says.

When the market is right he retains ownership, but more often than not he sells outright through Superior Livestock Auction. Even then, he tries to follow the cattle through harvest.

Attracted first by the AngusSource® ear tags, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Beller Feedlot, Lindsay, Neb., purchased the steer calves several years in a row.

They routinely hit 98%-100% Choice and 50%-65% Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand acceptance.

Focus on females

“We’ve always paid a lot of attention to that but have really worked the hardest on the female,” Joe says. “We always sell our heifer calves for more than our steers.”

With the exception of 20-some cows bought early in their marriage, it’s been a closed herd since 1958.

“We keep our own females back so we know what we’ve got,” he says.

This year has tempted that philosophy. Lack of rain has stretched pastures to the limit.

“With this drought a lot of people are saying, ‘Sell your cows off and buy them back later. I’ve got a lot, a lot of years of history and genetics that I’m not going to just haul to the salebarn and get rid of,’” Joe says. “I’ll figure out some way; I don’t care what it is.”

They’ll cull a little harder, but have also considered hauling cows to some heifer customers’ grass in the Southeast.

It’d be hard to introduce new females, given all they know about those that have earned their place in the herd.

“From the time they’re born until the time they’re sold, we’ve got them on a spreadsheet,” Brenda says. She harnesses a little of that mind reading learned over the years to decipher Joe’s “chicken scratch” notes from calving books or summer observations, and then inputs all the data.

“Everybody knows: Don’t use Mom’s computer downstairs and *do not* connect it to the Internet,” she says.

The records are valuable to them as they sort, but also to customers who get a printout of just what their purchased heifers are made of.

Staying with Angus has kept that known makeup easy to manage in their own herd.

“I know about crossbreeding, but our heifer deal is our bread and butter,” Joe says. “I look at the cow herd, and that’s where it’s at. When you have really good Angus cattle like we do, I don’t know why you’d do anything different.”

Over the years, marketing that value has become increasingly important.

“People will ask me, ‘Do you have black cattle?’ And I’ll say, ‘No, I have Angus cattle.’ There’s a huge difference,” he says.

The Anderjaskas don’t like to hear anybody griping about how “black” cattle perform.

“You’ve got to feed Angus cattle if you’re putting them on the grid,” he says.

That no-complaints philosophy extends beyond the cattle arena and is the reason Joe serves as president of the local school board and the Nebraska Association of Resource Districts.

“If you’re going to complain about something, have a remedy for it, try to solve it, but don’t just complain,” he says.

The best route to solving problems is cooperation — whether that’s with your wife or stakeholders in the greater industry.

“That’s the thing about good cattlemen,” Joe says. “They learn to work together and become friends.”



Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



► “My dad always told me that he’d never bought a bull that was too expensive,” Joe Anderjaska says. “He said, ‘Go pick out the bulls that you want and buy them. Years later when you look at your cow herd, you’ll see they’ve paid for themselves.’ And that’s the truth.”