



Stocking Up on Information

Good calves make these Colorado producers repeat buyers.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

A focus on weaning weight is not a bad thing, but, by itself, it doesn't mean much. Producers who think it's the only factor that influences price at auction have never met stocker operators Don and Peggy Brown.

For more than three decades, the Yuma, Colo., couple has tracked cattle history and bid accordingly.

"My parents were partnering on the cattle, and my dad had a friend who liked to pick on him at coffee," Don says. "He'd say he'd been at the sale barn the day before and a kid from Yuma paid too much for a set of steers."

Peggy adds, "His dad was always really skeptical about the type of cattle we'd buy or how much we spent. But he was driven by net profit, a good thing."

So they set out to prove their case.

Finding the right calves

"Peggy and I started keeping track of the sets of cattle through individual ear tags,"

Don says. They weighed them individually upon arrival, when they put them on grass in the spring and again when they came off in the fall.

"You found out more often than not, the better-genetics cattle would gain as much as a quarter to three-tenths of a pound more every day you owned them," he says. "That pretty quickly told us there is a lot of difference in cattle, that some cattle are worth more than others."

That was in the late 1970s, when average daily gain (ADG) was the primary concern. Much has changed since then. They've added land, changed management and raised three, now grown,

children: Tyson, Sabrina and Alex.

Efficient gain is still the top profit determinant, but today there's a list of traits to monitor, including carcass quality. Health is the other major variable.

The Browns have their share of horror stories that now keep them attuned to health issues every time. Like the year they got in a

"beautiful" set of cattle that broke hard and fast with sickness.

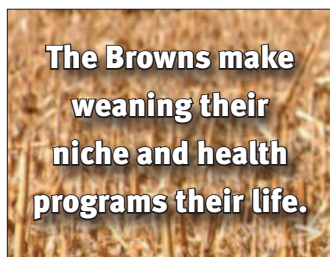
"We had to work really hard to keep those guys alive," Peggy says. "We did all right, but we lived with them. You don't need to repeat that mistake every year."

"We take notes and review them before each sale," says Tyson, who, with wife Lisa, recently moved back to the area to join in the ranching operation.

"It does pay off to have good cattle and make sure you've got healthy ones and ones that fit your program," Peggy says. "If you see somebody that has cattle for sale and you liked them the year before, you'll probably like them again. So maybe you can give an extra dollar or two because you've got that security that they'll be good cattle."

They not only look back at historical records when sourcing cattle, they also do their homework on new buys. "We'll research them about one to two weeks before we buy them," Tyson says.

"Once video sales came along, we could do that to a degree," Don says. "You can see bull lines and you can call the owners or the rep and figure out pretty close what you're going



► **Above:** A little research more than three decades ago taught Don and Peggy Brown that good stocker cattle can gain 0.25 to 0.3 pounds more than the rest. "That pretty quickly told us there is a lot of difference in cattle, that some cattle are worth more than others," says Don Brown.

to get by asking about things like mature cow size and bloodlines.”

Once on the ranch

Finding the right calves is just the start of the work. The Browns make weaning their niche and health programs their life.

Upon receiving, calves are processed, weaned in a corral for three days, and then turned out on irrigated rye pasture.

“We don’t leave them in very long because they need to get out and play, forget about their mamas and start enjoying themselves,” Peggy says. “The rye is always set up in paddocks so we can run them in and take care of them if they’re sick.”

Calves stay there, where they’re easy to monitor, for around six weeks while they get settled in.

“We check them at daylight, and we’ll check them in that hour before dark,” Don says. “The sick ones are usually off by themselves, and that’s probably the key to our low death loss: detecting them early.”

The family keeps calves in very uniform groups of 300-400 head. They’re sorted by 50-lb. increments and given metal ear clips of different colors, according to their weight range.

“They’re easier to compare to each other when they’re grouped like that,” Peggy says.

With the rise of natural programs, the Browns found their attention to health created an opportunity. In conjunction with their conventional yearling program, they market up to 1,000 calves a year for the “never, ever” niche programs — where cattle are not given hormones or antibiotics at any point in their lives.

“We are very successful in our weaning program,” Peggy says. “We don’t doctor many cattle, and we sure don’t lose very



► Brothers Alex (left) and Tyson Brown learned how to add value to stocker cattle from their parents. Tyson and his wife recently returned to the Yuma, Colo., ranch to join the business full-time.

many, so we thought maybe that would be a niche for us. We could obtain a premium for something we were already doing.”

They were keeping all the necessary records and started participating in source verification a couple of years ago.

“We don’t just routinely give antibiotics in the ration, although they’ll get it if they need it,” Don says. “A lot of the larger producers in the feedlot situation have a hard time getting calves in and keeping them healthy. Where we can turn them out, we don’t have near as many fallouts as they do.”

If they do have one that needs treated, it’s simply stripped of its natural tag and status and joins the conventional yearlings.

When it comes to marketing, they like to leave their options open. Cattle are usually sold private treaty, but depending on market conditions, they’ll sometimes retain

ownership through the feeding phase.

“We always like to buy so the cattle have carcass quality that’s good enough that we can feed, because you never know what the market is going to do,” Don says.

Although the Browns had to prove their philosophy to their elders, the next generation seems to be taking hold of it and then some. “We try to buy the nicest cattle that walk,” Tyson says with no hint of apology.

Besides the day-to-day chores, he adds his expertise to the recordkeeping system and is beginning to implement electronic identification (eID).

“We know exactly where all our cattle come from,” Peggy says. “Economically it’s not a good thing to not know.”

In fact, more information means more profit to the Browns.

And to all of those producers who think weaning weight is the only price determinant, they advise thinking again about added value. Weaning weight might be the main feature on lower-end calves, but those fall short in unit price for lack of competing bids.

“I don’t think people realize the higher-end calves are typically not bought by large conglomerates,” Don says. “They’re bought by people like us who have to have that performance and quality to make them work. They know whose cattle do well. They pay attention.”



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