



Not Perfect Yet

Marrs Ranch honored with
CAB 2009 Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

**Commitment
to Excellence
Award**

Ask anybody at the Marrs Ranch, Whitewood, S.D., and they'll tell you their cows have a long way to go. They're not just talking about the trip to distant ranges that some of them take each summer, or finding their way to hay in the series of blizzards last fall and spring.

They're talking about imperfections, the kind you could not find just by looking at the herd of 600 commercial Angus cows. You could scarcely find fault in the 19 years of records from feeding their calves. But if you knew every nuance in the herd and measured it against perfection, you might agree there is still work to be done.

It will get done. The cattle already gain and convert at rates often starting with a 5 and grade 95%-100% Choice, with groups of 50 achieving 80% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance. But the Marrs

Ranch will find ways to improve them. That's part of the reason the brand honored the family with the 2009 Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award at the CAB annual conference in Scottsdale, Ariz., Sept. 18.

Dan and Anna Marrs, with their young son Matthew, accepted the award and represent the cattle specialists on the diversified operation northeast of the Black Hills. It includes older brother Paul, the hay and machinery specialist, along with his wife, Linda, and their children, and the wisdom and experience of parents Ray and Alice.

"It's all the boys' ranch now," Ray said from his recliner this summer, health problems no longer permitting him much room to roam. He passed away in August, leaving a legacy of service and leadership

from community to cattle. The foundation Ray helped build included a switch from Hereford to Angus bulls in 1978, and the courage to feed some of the first calves in 1980.

In 1980, the market for yearlings fell all summer and through the fall to barely more than 50¢ per pound. "Our buyers said we might as well try feeding them," Paul says. "So we did, and then turned around and got 70¢ for the fats. That was a good ticket."

Price didn't always work in their favor, but the Marrs family soon noticed their cattle were champion performers.

"We had steers that gained 5 pounds (lb.) a day," Ray recalled. They always bid on top-performing Angus bulls, while keeping a low-input, functional cow herd top of mind. "Our cows get only grass," he noted.

When expected progeny differences

► **Above:** "Crossbreeding may work for some people, but we know what our Angus cattle can do in the feedlot, as replacement heifers and in our herd," says Dan Marrs, shown with his son, Matt. "CAB is really a bonus, and it's a benefit I don't see attached to any other breed," Dan says.



(EPDs) for carcass traits were added to bull sale books, the Marris family took advantage of them.

“We always aimed for the top 10% in everything,” Dan says, admitting that caused a few problems in the early 1990s, before the Angus breed had today’s balance. “I probably bought a few bulls I shouldn’t have because some of the top-marbling bulls then were harder fleshing.”

Records show what works and what doesn’t produce “cows we can live with.” Dan uses that phrase in an absolute way.

“I can point out daughters of daughters just by their ear tags or freeze brands, and I can look up details to find our top 100 cows,” he says. “There’s more longevity and carcass quality in some cow families.”

Experience, more than records, revealed some off-track “bull families,” daughters of certain bulls with problems in common. “We don’t live with them. If a female gives us any trouble, she can’t stay here,” Dan says.

Cows that do stay are in groups of 100 to 150; they also stay with the same bulls across several years, he explains. Cow capabilities are proven, so problems are easy to lay on the sire group, although DNA tests have not been used to fix specific blame, and there have been no real problems for a decade. The ranch keeps about 30 Angus bulls in its battery. Pasture mating is the rule, but heifers are usually synchronized and artificially inseminated (AI), followed by enough bull power as if there had been no AI. That resulted in 97% bred in 2008.

Performance and teamwork

In all the years of custom feeding, the Marris Ranch had not seen much individual carcass data until they began sending yearlings to a standout CAB partner yard, Chappell (Neb.) Feedlot, in 2004. Ultrasound sorting there has been especially helpful in finding outliers, Dan says.

Any good feeder knows the worst genetics



► “We’ve moderated the frame since 2000, too,” Dan says, “so today’s 1,350-lb. cow is not as tall as the earlier models.” The freeze brand means the cow was born in 2002, the 101st replacement branded. Written and computer records can track her extended cow family through generations.

can’t be improved, but the best can be compromised by management. Chappell owner-manager Tom Williams admits to feeling a little pressure to deliver. “But I knew we could feed with anybody, and make more money by sorting for the grid markets,” he says.

After building a successful record doing just that, Williams nominated his customer for the CAB award using just a few words — “Marris cattle excel both in performance and carcass value” — and an added page of data to prove it. The 2007 calf crop of 260 steers posted an average daily gain (ADG) of 4.55 lb. across nearly five months, with a dry-matter (DM) conversion rate of 5.9 lb. of feed per pound of gain, 94% Choice and 51% CAB. The 106 heifers culled from replacements were a couple of points back in performance, but 68.3% CAB.

“There’s no other sorting here at the ranch,” Dan says. “You’re seeing the good, the bad and the ugly; we feed them all.” He credits Williams, along with reputable Angus seedstock suppliers, family, longtime top hand Raymond Riesland and veterinarian Jim Myers for keeping the herd on track.

“This is very much a team effort,” he says, “and I ask for advice. As for Doc Myers, we pretty much do whatever he says because we know he’s not out to spend our money.”

Last winter was not unusual in these rolling plains, but it seemed extra snowy because of the blizzards that bracketed the season and area like an ice-cream sandwich. It

began with a three-footer Nov. 5 and ended with a series of three more storms as March gave way to April. More than 8 level feet of snow fell in all, and, of course, drifts piled up much higher.

“We lost more calves than usual,” Dan says, “but came out all right because we just abandoned everything we would normally do.”

Ranchers can’t do much to prepare for a blizzard, Myers notes. “We just try to deal with what happens. At the Marris Ranch, we agreed that the cattle would be better off spread out, away from the protection of the corral with all its mud,” he says. “Fortunately, we didn’t get hit with yet another blizzard.”

“We stay pretty fluid,” Dan says, aiming to be ready for the unexpected.

Of course, it’s more fun working on Plan A, from genetics to vaccination programs.

“They take it very seriously,” Myers says. “Everybody’s got to be expense-conscious, but they evaluate and if something looks feasible, they will spend money to make money. It’s my job to help them make sure it pays off.”

Profit opportunities go along with more traditional veterinary advice. Last fall, Myers advised giving about 100 of the oldest cows one more chance because the market was down and unsettled. Late this summer, those pairs moved into a corral for three weeks on a grain supplement before the cows met their postponed market date and the started calves moved on to the backgrounding program.

Calves from the heifers were weaned 30 days earlier than usual, or about Sept. 1, to allow them to regain condition after an unusually wet summer.

All calves are backgrounded to about 800 lb. before moving on to Chappell to finish by

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► The Marris Ranch began feeding cattle in 1980 when the market for yearlings fell to barely more than 50¢ per pound. “Our buyers said we might as well try feeding them,” Paul Marris explains. “So we did.”



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early winter at 18-22 months of age. There is an element of compensatory gain in the outstanding performance, Williams says, but it's hard to argue with the results.

Dan has taken a greater interest in carcass traits since touring Cargill plants in Nebraska and Colorado several years ago, and then visiting with the people. "As we talked, I just realized that the packers have always been painted as our enemies, but if you try to get along with them, you can learn a lot," he says.

Dressing percent and yield may be the only grid categories that don't ring bells for the MARRS cattle, but that's to be expected with such a forage-oriented herd selected for deep body capacity, Dan says. "We've moderated the frame since 2000, too, so today's 1,350-lb. cow is not as tall as the earlier models," he adds.

Ranch perspective

Leery of fads, the MARRS Ranch has followed the straightbred Angus route for more than 30 years because of the ability to develop more precisely the kind of cows and performance results desired.

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Always keen to learn how cattle performed and graded, he had mostly group data until 2005. Seeing the individual carcass data brought a new level of perspective to the ranch, where Dan expects "a lot more progress in the next five years."

He's concerned about consumers far from ranch country who have heard enough

fad promotions to think grass-fed beef is the ultimate achievement, but equally apprehensive about producers who make little effort to learn how their product meets consumer demand.

"The good beef for a superior dining experience starts on the ranch. You've got to know what you produce," Dan says. It takes hard work, every day, and all family members pulling together. "But we also have fun out here," he says. "Somehow, God has let us do what we enjoy doing."

