



PHOTOS BY MIKE HEALY

Resourceful Still

Much has changed in 19 years,
but not Mike Healy's commitment to quality.

by **Katie Fisher**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Tucked away at the base of the Absaroka Mountain range, there is a well-seasoned working cattle ranch spanning many thousands of acres. There the annual precipitation reaches 5-7 inches, and cattle graze further up into the foothills at elevations up to 8,500 feet. This scenic backdrop is home to 1,400 mostly commercial-Angus cows and 300 heifers in the backgrounding lots of the LU Ranch, Worland, Wyo.

There have been changes since 1994, when the ranch earned the Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award from Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). Company President Mike Healy says one thing remains: "Meeting the needs of the packers and striving to produce a quality carcass still holds true today."

Creating a herd that will do that and work on the ranch takes emphasis in many areas, including growth, marbling, ribeye size, carcass weights, maternal milk and calving ease.

"In order to focus on those traits, it all begins with breeding," Healy says. "We continue to retain ownership and because of that, it affects the bulls we buy. We watch out for those characteristics that pay better."

He has worked with Leachman Cattle of Colorado for more than a decade.

"As most bull producers will tell you, we have all different kinds of customers, but Mike is one of the most disciplined and studious of the customers that we have ever encountered," says Lee Leachman. "He has a plan and is going to execute it. He is not driven by the whims of the day."

Predictability is key

Healy has been in business a long time because he is looking at the whole cycle — from wanting cattle to work on the ranch to the feedlot to hanging on the rail, Leachman adds.

"A lot of people get caught up in single-trait selection and then they end up changing directions a lot, making a lot of sharp turns



►Wolves are pushing elk and bison herds from the higher, heavily wooded areas down to lower elevations, increasing the threat of brucellosis and making calfhood Bang's vaccinations all the more important.

left and right," he says. "Mike has always been into multiple-trait selection. What changes is how he has weighted the different traits, and because of that his changes haven't been so severe."

► **Left:** Managing 1,400 cows on 150,000 acres comes with its own set of challenges, like finding water and then keeping it from drying out in the summer months and freezing up during the white tundra seasons.

► **Right:** Creating a herd that will meet the needs of packers and consumers and work on the ranch takes emphasis in many areas, including growth, marbling, ribeye size, carcass weights, maternal milk and calving ease, says Mike Healy.

Feedback on genetic decisions and gain data play a huge role in deciphering what to do next.

Recently, Healy has experimented with DNA testing on their bulls, hoping to pull semen from his own bulls to breed back his heifers.

“It is great knowing the predictability Leachman offers with their bulls, and we will continue to use them; I just wanted to try something different since all our heifers are artificially inseminated (AIed),” he says.

A few decades ago that emphasis on consistency was not as intense.

“We were not focusing that much on genetics, although we were certainly seeing what was being tested,” Healy says. “We were AIing our heifers and testing bulls for other purebred breeders, so we were seeing the results, but we weren’t getting paid for it.”

He keenly remembers the days before the grid, before premiums and discounts helped those who retain ownership get what their cattle are worth.

“That’s what I remember most: not having the grid,” Healy says. Once those premiums kicked in, his herd got even better. “Producing cattle that qualify as *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand [now averaging 32%] has made a difference for us. If you can produce more CAB-qualified meat, then that is one way to ensure your cattle are accepted at feedlots.”

His cattle generally go to Decatur County Feedyard near Oberlin, Kan., where Healy appreciates the attention to individual calf management and data.

“This year was our first chance to see data on progeny from heifers that we selected by DNA test,” Healy says. While our average has been 80% Choice, those were 92%. The CAB qualifiers reached 47%, so it will be intriguing to see if that continues.”

So will it be to check on calves in the next couple of years that will carry a DNA-tested legacy on both sides of the pedigree.

Most of the steers are shipped first to a backgrounding lot for 60 days, while heifer mates are held at the ranch.

Halfway through the winter, those heifers will run through the squeeze chute for Bang’s



PHOTO BY KEN HAYE

and other vaccinations, and each gives up a hair-follicle sample for DNA testing. That helps determine which heifers will be sold to feeders and which ones will stay in the herd as replacements, prepped for AI in May.

“We’re always focusing on growth,” Healy says, “and now we have introduced the DNA concept as one of those luxury things we are experimenting with. We don’t know if we will be successful, but we think there is a future there; we just don’t know if we are too early.”

The focus on growth includes a goal of increasing average daily gains each year. Typically, calves taken directly to a feedlot finish at 3.2 pounds (lb.) per day, compared to the backgrounded calves at 3.6 lb. per day. That’s about a pound per day better than in the 1990s.

“You have to keep an eye out for what kind of bulls you buy. I think that improvement is a credit to the whole Angus breed,” Healy says. Carcass weights have also increased. Twenty years ago, finished calves would reach 690 lb. on the rail. This year that number was 862 lb.

Just as he continues to improve his cow herd, Healy develops land resources, too. Managing 1,400 cows on 150,000 acres comes with its own set of challenges, like finding water and then keeping it from drying out in the summer months and freezing up during the white tundra seasons. The ranch has buried a lot of water pipe and developed waterlines to keep it available to the cattle.

Wyoming environment

Healy is also dealing with typical Wyoming wildlife. With the ranch abutting the mountains that connect to Yellowstone National Park, he’s seeing grizzly bear and wolves coming through the pastures. An increasing number of wolves there has

pushed more elk and bison herds from the higher, heavily wooded areas down to lower elevations than in recent years. That brings along the threat of brucellosis and makes those calthood Bang’s vaccinations all the more important for heifers.

Still, he knows it’s all part of operating where the ranch is located.

“We are in a real fragile environment, so conservation is important,” Healy says. “Whatever humans do, we have an impact on wildlife. Sometimes we are slow to respond, but we do and hopefully can clear things up that we have changed and lessen our impact on wildlife.”

Over the years, he’s broken the ranch into smaller grazing units to try to limit the time cattle spend in any particular place.

“We get in and graze an area once for a short period of time and then we leave and allow it time to recover. It is important for the health of the grass plants and the riparian zones around the water,” Healy says.

Cattle have always been his first interest, but growing older has seen the rancher get more involved in church choir and theatrical performances. He also serves on the state’s Game and Wildlife Commission.

“I am trying to figure out how to stay busy and maybe try to back off my duties on the ranch,” he says.

Like his cattle, hardy and able to find grass where grass is not plentiful, Healy has proven he can do much the same. Making the best of producing cattle on a high desert ranch where water is scarce and threatening wildlife is an everyday encounter.



Editor’s Note: Katie Fisher is an intern with CAB.