

# Playing for Profit

Light-hearted work produces serious quality.

Story & photos by **Laura Nelson**

**A** bad shoulder put his golf swing out of commission years ago. He's never set foot in a casino or cared much for playing cards. A turkey hunt now and then is nice, but the season is only temporary.

Quite frankly, John Helmer says, "Most 'hobbies' just bore me really quickly." Cattle ranching, on the other hand ...

"Now that, that hasn't bored me yet," the Union, Ky., cattleman says with a laugh. "Call me crazy, but cattle ranching is just plain fun."

A herd of more than 100 registered Angus cows is a bit beyond a "hobby" for Helmer, even if it isn't his primary career.

Instead, Helmer often rises at about 4 a.m. to work in the shop, mix feed and check the cows that dot his 600 acres of alternating woods, hills and hay land. Shortly after the sun decides to join him for the day, Helmer is probably on his way to one of his contract plumbing company's job sites. When the sun's on the flip side, he's back at Buck Run Farms with his cattle and farm crew — his wife, four kids and a hired hand — but still at work. Daughter Meghan is his right-hand woman, pitching in nights and weekends while she studies or prepares for college work.

But the 90-plus-hour workweeks aren't just for the sake of avoiding boredom.

"I suppose you could blunder along through the cattle business, and I'm sure there are plenty of people who do just that," Helmer says. "But if I'm going to put this much hard work and effort into it, my goal ultimately is to have the finest herd of cattle possible. I want to be able to put them up against anybody's anywhere."

With the proper management, the commercial cattleman says that's a goal within reach. But he has no need for fancy clubs, gloves or carts to master this art.

## Perfecting the craft

By closely tracking carcass and feedlot



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performance numbers, analyzing profit and loss and tweaking the genetics that affect those stats, Helmer is perfecting his herd's form. Mineral supplements, grazing management, health protocols and breeding mates follow suit, carefully calculated to fit the mold in mind.

"If you are going to look for any kind of success, you are going to have to use every tool that is available to you. You use those tools to make sure these calves will have the carcass values that will make them a little more appealing to feedlots and packers. If they know what kind of income they can get off them, I know my cattle will be more

enticing than run-of-the-mill cattle through a stockyard," he says.

Since 2005, he's been a member of The Beef Connection, an alliance of Kentucky cattlemen and industry partners focused on profit through marketing and data management. With the help of Beef Connection founder and CEO Bob Sand, Helmer began annually culling the bottom 20% of his herd and raising similar standards for the rest, narrowing the variability and increasing the mean of profit in his herd.

"We sell on the grid, so naturally we are looking for carcass value. Prior to joining The Beef Connection, our calves left here and we didn't know what happened to them. Now,



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that data comes back to help us pick out what cows need mated to a bull with a little more marbling; or maybe they're just fine in that area but need a larger ribeye. We know what we need to select for," he says.

In his first year with the Beef Connection, those numbers were already fairly impressive. More than 45% of his calves graded USDA Prime and hit specifications for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand. That left 30% in the lower Choice category and 20% Select, which just wouldn't do. Two years later, the latter category was whittled down to zero, shifting CAB and Prime percentages to 86%.

"Genetics are a major part in getting the premiums that are out there," he says. "That's not done overnight, but I don't know that we have any choice but to keep trying to improve. You have to be able to see your weaknesses and keep moving towards working those out."

Moving toward perfect performance takes more than just carcass numbers. When he looks at bull EPDs (expected progeny differences) for artificial insemination (AI), they had better be able to gain well and create a docile cow that will milk, too. Then it comes down to analyzing exactly why those bottom 20% dropped below par.

Based on feedlot performance data, Helmer now knows the effect that shipping



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southern cattle to a Kansas finishing point can have, regardless of genetic potential.

### Attending to the herd

"We had to make some management decisions in our vaccination program to make sure that these cattle are in the best condition possible so they can handle the climate change and whatever bugs might smack them in the face when they get to the yard," he says.

That means a modified-live virus (MLV) vaccine within the first month and a half

of calving and a booster shot to continue building immunity before shipping. Mineral supplementation and adequate forage is important to prepare calves for finishing and cows for their next calves.

Those decisions play into his game, too. A healthy herd reduces variability and increases his ability to manage effectively. He's pared calving season down to a 60-day window, with 70% of his calves on the ground within 30 days. No need to waste time on the practice field when he could be playing to win.

"It all plays a part," he says. "Ten years ago, I would have never thought I could get calving done in 60 days, but now 30 is within reach." Keeping the calves grouped results in more consistent weights and an empty lot in one fair sale. That means he sees a clear bottom line and is ready to re-analyze for next year.

That's just good business in a game that's good fun.

"It's all a gamble," Helmer laughs again. "But a man's got to do something, and this is what I like to do. Plus, if you can put a super group of cows together, you feel like you have really accomplished something."



**Editor's note:** Laura Nelson is an industry information specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.