



Prime Plans Pay

Angus became a family tradition in the Larsons' quest for Prime.

by **Meg Drake**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

What do you get after a trip to Sun City, Kan., lands you with a trailer load of Angus females? Ask Dan and Becky Larson, and they'll tell you that trip was the beginning of what is now known as Larson Angus Ranch.

"I actually went to get a show heifer for my oldest son, Beau, but instead bought a whole trailer load," says Dan of that trip to Rusk Ranch.

As a third-generation rancher who helped manage a large commercial feedlot, he's no newcomer to the cattle business. South of Sharon Springs and 25 miles east of the Colorado border, Dan ranches on the same land where his father and grandfather raised commercial baldies and then Continental crossbreds.

The uneven nature of replacement heifers that became even more variable brood cows made them rethink genetics.

It was between Salers and Angus, but the Larsons saw more value and potential in the breed that led to their first registered-Angus enterprise in 1988. As the founding members of U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) began selling all calves on a grid, it became clear they needed not just more Angus, but more focused Angus genetics.

Expansions have resulted in a family operation with 5,000 acres of pasture and access to more cropland, 600 commercial and registered Angus cows and a 1,000-head feedyard. The business includes four sons: Beau, twins Bret and Brady, and Bart.

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PHOTO BY MEG DRAKE

► Following a family tradition of finishing their own cattle, the Larsons aim to make sure their calves and those of their bull customers work well in all segments of the beef industry. Pictured here are Brady, Becky and Dan.

beef industry. Only 28% of cattle born on the place make the cut as seedstock, so the rest must pay their way as commercial cattle.

Satisfying all segments

"We really are a pasture-to-plate kind of operation," says Becky. From birth to finishing, their cattle rarely leave the homestead before the ride to National Packing.

Hard work, family involvement and their ability to oversee all phases of production have allowed them to gain premiums on most pens of cattle.

"We finally got to the point where we've had, for two years in a row, our own home-raised cattle went 100% Choice," Brady says. "We had one Select this year, so we were a little down in the dumps about that."

They can joke about it simply because it's such a rare occurrence, thanks to strict culling.

"About 10 years ago, when I started culling cows that produced Selects," Dan says, "a friend thought that was a bit harsh; they could still be good cows. But if you're using good bulls and saving 150 replacements every year, you've got to make room for them. When you're turning generations to make a product as good as you can, you've got to cull something."

The Larsons have used ultrasound to scan heifers for more than those 10 years, adding that information to sibling carcass data to make sure they keep the right ones. Then, they dial down into specifics for individual breeding decisions.

All females are artificially inseminated (AIed), and the cows are synchronized in 50-head groups.

"When a cow comes into the chute to breed, we try to prioritize everything," says Brady, who's also a representative for ABS Global. "First, they have to be good-uddered, sound and functional. We like a moderate frame, so some that are too small get bred a

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► **Above:** Females with high-marbling pedigrees but poor scan data don't stay in the herd, but those that connect all the dots and prove their functionality will make the "flush team" of 10 or 12 each year.

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"Growth and carcass are very important to what we do, but I wouldn't say every bull we use has to be extremely high for marbling," Brady explains. "If they have enough to offer in every other aspect, we'll just use them on really high-marbling cows."

Females with high-marbling pedigrees but poor scan data don't stay in the herd, but those that connect all the dots and prove their functionality will make the "flush team" of 10 or 12 each year.

"We'll put in 70 to 100 embryos a year, using our own recipient cows," Dan says, noting Brady does most of that technical work after a veterinary specialist flushes the cows.

"If a cow can't raise a \$3,500 bull, I'll put in an embryo instead," Brady says. "We feel that our replacement pen should be a little tighter after 10 years of getting that many embryo calves out of your best calves. You'd expect some progress."

You wouldn't be disappointed, even though a Larson might not be satisfied yet.

Setting the bar high

"One of our goals right now is to ship at least one pen of cattle that go 100% Prime," says Becky. "We've set our goals high, but last year we did have a set of 74 heifers go 60% Prime." Moreover, last year's 231 steers went 97.84% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®), including more than 48% CAB Prime.

That's a high bar by anyone's standards.

Part of the credit for achieving that level goes to the low-stress environment of a small, family-run feedlot.

"We AI cows in the same place so they've already drank from the waterers and sniffed around the bunks before we wean and put them on feed," Brady says.

All the feed comes from Larson fields, and all the silage comes from the same field.

"Getting them up to 100% Choice is a lot of the way we feed them," Brady says. "But then genetics really play more of a factor in the Prime and CAB acceptance."

Approved as a USPB Qualified Seedstock Supplier from the start, the Larsons began hosting an annual production sale in 2005.

"We usually sell around 80 to 100 bulls and 10 of the elite registered heifers," Dan says.

The sales include a little education for customers they hope are increasingly on the same page.

"I really appreciate our progressive breeders because that makes everything we do worthwhile," Becky says. "You know, you hate to put out that much effort just for somebody that wants a cow freshener."

Of course, customers run the range of experience and goals, but they soon learn, "We're very big on the carcass," she continues. "We like to help them understand why we

put so much emphasis on that, as there can be anywhere from \$100 to \$400 difference in carcasses of the same size. If more people were aware of that, they might select more for carcass, even if their train ends at weaning now."

The Larsons prefer to own all the cattle they feed, but those include some from customers who have shown a keen interest in herd improvement. "It takes generations to get where you want to be, but first you have to study the data and learn what you need to do," Becky says.

Market signals help point the way, Brady says: "People may talk about how the Choice-Select spread isn't that big, but you know the Prime-Select spread is huge. CAB pays good, too, but once you hit Prime, that's where the money starts rolling in on your cattle."

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Editor's Note: Meg Drake is an industry information intern with CAB's Supply Development team.



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