

Adding Value All the Way Around

Dakota father and son target the brand, from start to finish.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*



► Maternal traits are important to Brandon (left) and Mike (right) Peterson, although they don't place too much emphasis on calving ease since it's a natural advantage of the Angus breed.

The first time Brandon Peterson heard “value-added” applied to agriculture he was just starting his college career at South Dakota State University (SDSU). It was the fall of 1995 and he decided an Angus seedstock operation was one way to do just that on his family farm near Alcester, S.D.

Today he and his dad, Mike, manage registered and commercial Angus cows in addition to a small feedlot and alfalfa enterprise. On paper, the registered herd is Brandon's and the rest belongs to Mike, but they share the workload and divvy up tasks based on their respective areas of expertise. They weaned around 250 purebred calves this fall.

Brandon bought his first five registered heifers while completing his animal science degree and built the seedstock business from there. Upon graduation he began working as a nutritionist for a feed company, adding to the depth of industry knowledge he and his father possess.

The opening line on the Peterson Angus web site is one brought on by experience: “A bull is a bull, right?” it asks, then answers. “Wrong! Not by a long shot. Bulls and the calves they produce vary a great deal.”

For more than 30 years, Mike has fed a range of cattle from all different regions, including Holsteins and their own home-raised calves. They still take all kinds to keep the pens full, but have learned the value of genetics in the production equation.

“One of the frustrations I had as I got more into the registered business was the disconnect between the seedstock side and the feedlot side, and then what the packer wanted,” Brandon says. “That is one of our strong points. We are able to produce cattle that can work in a lot of places.”

Traits of importance

Maternal traits are important, although they don't place too much emphasis on calving ease since it's a natural advantage of the Angus breed.

“Then they have to really grow,” Brandon says. “We want them to hit the mark as *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®). We also try to focus a little more on yield than we see in the industry.”

By feeding out progeny from the commercial herd, along with customers' calves, they know if their selection is working. They also help foster relationships between bull buyers and local feeders, often helping place a couple thousand head of cattle on feed.

Last year, Mike tried grid marketing with his own calves for the first time.

“It turned out fantastic. I did not realize I could pick up that much more premium,” he



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said. One 40-head harvest group went 67.5% CAB and Prime, with just 7% Yield Grade 4s.

"I just wanted to know we were on the right track with the bulls we were raising for people who want carcass-type bulls," Mike says.

Of course the end isn't the first point of data collection. In addition to all the standard production information, cattle are DNA-tested, and females have been ultrasound scanned for the past seven years. That gives them a sneak peek at their progress while they wait on feeding results.

"It's a long turnaround time from birth to the end point," Brandon notes.

Mike has artificially inseminated (AIed) for the past 25 years, and that's one tool they use to help shorten up the production lag.

"We will take commercial heifers and AI them at the same time as the registered heifers," Brandon says. "That gives us a chance to try a new sire that we might want to use. We will sample them real lightly in the registered herd, but breed all the commercial heifers to them."

Commercial females are used as carriers for embryo transfer (ET) work, too.

"This year we have almost as many embryos as we have registered cows," he says.

The embryo recipients calve first, in January and February, and the registered herd follows. The yearling production sale is

in March and most of the buyers come from within a 100-mile radius. The local customer base has built up steadily, beginning with relationships Brandon forged in college and in his current position.

Team effort

"I am very lucky because Dad does a great job," he says. "He does 99% of the work, and I get to travel and work with people."

Mike is quick to point out that Brandon makes all of the background calls and farm visits, learning people's goals and building rapport. He even helps steer customers to Mike's feedlot. Brandon's wife Becky also chips in making phone calls and helping where needed.

"It is a team approach, because I couldn't do what I do without Dad doing chores, but everybody does their part," Brandon says.

Their main goal in every aspect of the business is pretty simple.

"The mark in the end is profitability," he says. "From year to year it can be hard to compare because of markets, weather and management decisions, but the more history we have, then we've got powerful data instead of just a few numbers."

And those figures say they're on the right track to adding value, both for themselves and their customers.

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