

# History of Success



Pitchfork Ranch continues profit legacy by switching to Angus.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

**C**owboys spend weekdays out on the range, camping out and eating meals from a chuck wagon. Working cattle from one side of the 165,000-acre home ranch to the other, horseback is the main mode of transportation until they return to their families for the weekend.

It may sound like a picture of days gone by, but that tradition is still alive and well during branding and weaning on the historic Pitchfork Ranch near Guthrie, Texas. Founded in 1883, it is one of the oldest ranches under continuous ownership by the same family. In addition to the main place, a 9,000-acre ranch in Oklahoma is used primarily for developing replacements.

“One thing we take very seriously is stewardship,” Ron Lane, ranch manager, says. “That’s not just stewardship of the land and resources, but of the histories and traditions we have here. The difference is separating traditions from habits.

“Traditions are cool. Habits cost you a lot of money,” he says.

For many ranchers, it can be hard to decide where breed type fits into that equation. The business-oriented philosophy at Pitchfork won’t let any breed stay

around by either category alone; profit always figures in. The fourth generation of the Williams family owns the ranch and stays in active communication with Lane. Since they’re in business to make money, managers have made a breed change twice. The first was from longhorns to Herefords in 1935 and recently to predominantly Angus.

“We are producing what the market wants now,” Lane says. “The Angus Association has done an outstanding job promoting their product, and ultimately that helped more of us make the switch.”

The previous ranch manager made the decision to crossbreed with Angus nearly 20 years ago, and that share has gradually increased. Lane says ranch records show a correlated improvement in prices paid for their calves.

Plus, he keeps the bigger picture in mind.

“Beef will always be the premium protein,” he says, “and I want to produce a premium within that category.”

## Eye on the dollar

Lane came to Pitchfork with an animal science degree and 10 years experience in the

pharmaceutical business. That taught him to always keep the dollar figures in mind.

“We have tried to get out of the commodity mind-set and not be a price taker,” Lane says. “The market always said we want this, but historically it hasn’t been very good about paying for it. Today, I think we’re finally over that hump where people will pay for it.”

Changing breeds was just part of the equation. Since going to Angus, Lane says weaning weights have increased, but there is still plenty of selection pressure to be placed.

“Adaptability is a key thing,” along with mature size, he says. “We are looking for structurally sound heifers. We want them big, but sometimes we can get them too big.”

The dry climate makes it hard to support heavy eaters. Because bulls have to have the stamina it takes to work in pastures stocked at a rate of 30 acres per cow, they’re typically purchased from local breeders. That way they’re already accustomed to the environment.

“They have to pass the travel test. Then I change things from year-to-year based on the information we are getting back from the feedyard,” he says. Although Pitchfork sells full interest, Lane has had success in

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capturing most of the carcass data, which guides the ranch on traits like marbling and ribeye area.

Cows are bred in a 90-day window, so between them and the heifers, all 4,500 head calve in January through March.

Although they do move cattle often, the cowboys can't see all the females all the time. They have to have good maternal traits for unassisted birthing and caring for a calf.

The pairs are on mesquite pasture until weaning, which starts up in September, but gets into full gear after the "Return to the Remuda" horse sale. The ranch typically sells 30-40 horses in conjunction with the nearby Four Sixes, Beggs and Tongue River ranches.

"The guys will be horseback every day from September to December, getting all the calves weaned, vaccinated and all the cows preg-checked," Lane says.

### Investing in your product

The program consists of vaccinations he set up before coming to the ranch, including a comprehensive respiratory antiviral lineup and boosters. The money spent is well worth it in the long run, he says.

"With their business background, the Williams family has always recognized that you have to invest something in your product," Lane says. "You can't build a superior product out of inferior materials."

The steers are sorted into four different cuts. Some are sold right away, and others graze wheat pasture before marketing.

"When I have a set of steers that are ready to go, I pick up the phone and tell them what I've got," Lane says. Typically that is a lot of 300-500 head of extremely uniform cattle. Off-colored cattle are separated from the group, and then the black-hided calves are divided based on weight, with sometimes as little as 50 pounds (lb.) from the top to the bottom. "When you have good facilities, good guys and good horses, it makes it more efficient"

Usually calves are bound for feedlots from Texas to Oklahoma, often to repeat buyers.

"I have tried to find out what their target weight is, how many days on feed they want these cattle for," he says. "I have tried to find out the optimum weight and condition that they will give the most for."

In response to buyers' requests, cattle are all source- and age-verified, and they aren't given any implants, so they're eligible for European markets.

"Implants are great, but then you have to be able to guarantee your nutrition," Lane says. The weather dictates their grazing options, and he doesn't want to take that chance. Plus, he gets a premium.

"I firmly believe the first implant you give will work better than the ones that come after that," Lane says, noting that gives the

feedyards the gain from that initial dose.

He's constantly analyzing his weaning program and asking customers for feedback.

"We all hear horror stories of health train-wrecks," Lane says. "My goal is to make sure that doesn't happen. When they buy cattle from the Pitchfork Ranch, they're buying with confidence that they come from a good program."

### A numbers guy

Comments are always welcome, but in the end, Lane says he's really "a numbers guy."

"I'm looking for big shifts," he says. "We have seen some especially nice ones on the top end of the steers and heifers both."

This year they got better than 90% Choice and 30% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand on the best loads.

"I look at it on a head-by-head basis and try to find out what is the most profitable," Lane says. "I do that every day."

He crunches numbers using his cell phone calculator, the back of a business card or even a glove. It just depends on where he's at when an idea hits him.

"I look at everything on a dollar basis. I have to," Lane says. "I know my workers' comp cost per person. I have an estimated fuel cost, depreciation on my pickups, on the houses, insurance and utilities."

That helps him decide if he's got the right number and right people on staff. Those individuals are important components of the ranch's success, he says.

"When I came here I knew most of the people, so it made it a lot easier having good people in place that I could count on," Lane

says. After little more than two years at the ranch, he's already established a management style with the 20 full-time employees.

"I believe in keeping good people who believe in what you're doing, so they take ownership in it," he says. "Then I don't have to get after them all the time or wonder where they're at."

Lane's father managed a division of the Four Sixes Ranch, so he grew up in a very similar setting.

"I'm just a student of everything, and I watch people

who are successful," he says. "I have very high standards here, and I hope everybody else has those same high standards."

He admits that everything hasn't been all roses since taking the reins in March 2007.

"Our business environment has changed more in the past 24 months than in the 124 years we were in business before that," Lane says. "We have had to make some big adjustments."

For now, those plans just include small improvements to a program that's been working well.

"Profitability is the first and foremost challenge," he says. "Where we are going to be in 20 years when I am ready to retire and preparing for the next manager is so much different than it was 20 years ago."

The ranch has oil and hunting enterprises, but Lane operates his budget independent of those. Instead, he focuses on how he can keep moving the quality needle — not just for feeders, but for that ultimate buyer.

"Demand for our product is huge," Lane says. "If we don't think about it, we should."

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