



# Factory with a Heart

North Dakota family outfit channels many moving parts toward quality outcomes.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**W**hen it's time to make a choice, Brian Amundson doesn't limit options to either/or. He looks for a third option: both.

Like bookend images for any parent — a daughter's first steps, and later those that bring her down the wedding aisle — there's no picking one over the other.

Four-year-old Sully and almost-2-year-old Rayna Amundson spend more time trekking through the tall grasses of their North Dakota pastures than practicing their wedding walks. Yet, when the time comes for their doting dad to give them away, he'll have set a precedent that a father need not have to choose.

If there's such a place with too much water and too many hills, it could be Jamestown, N.D., set near the center of the state and sharing the rich soil with adjacent farmland. The same topography and climate that proves difficult for growing crops leaves fertile ground for beef cows to thrive.

It's there that Amundson and his wife, Jennifer, do both.

In the land known as the "Pride of the Prairie," the couple own and manage Bar V Ranch and Amundson Land & Cattle. He'll call his life's work, "just a small farmer-feeder

operation," but it takes in 600 commercial-Angus pairs, a 1,500-head feedlot, and grazing 800-1,000 yearlings and breeding heifers in the summer.

There's a lot going on, but Amundson likes that.

"There's something about seeing a baby calf become a weaned calf to becoming one of the best fat steers you have ever seen," he says. "Or watching a heifer that you helped calve have a heifer calf of her own, and all of a sudden you realize four years have gone by and she's a part of your herd, and everything that you bred her to do she has accomplished, and is an improvement on her mother."

That's the reason the 41-year-old, fourth-generation rancher gives for what some may call getting in too deep: "It's the fulfillment of seeing your hard work physically walking in front of you."

## Laying the groundwork

Before it was cattle, Amundson saw hard work lived out by the generations who came before him.

"My great-grandfather actually ran a creamery in Jamestown, and an ice house," he

says of the man who made daily milk and ice deliveries until he sold his interest to buy the family land in 1942.

"He was the ultimate risk-taker," Amundson says, noting the backdrop of war where his son served and the wake of the Great Depression. "After the war he was fortunate in farming, and in a short time could pay for the land and buy a tractor. When my grandfather came back, he got more involved with farming and cattle."

From there, Amundson's own father went off to college to study animal science and returned with the idea to expand.

"My dad went through the interest rates of the '80s and was faced with the responsibility of supporting a young family and a cow herd." To diversify, he started raising potatoes, which ultimately made room for his only son to come home.

"I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for my dad taking that chance," Amundson says.

Together, the two took many more chances during Brian's school years and after he returned home from North Dakota State University in 1997. With his father's

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retirement and blessing, he and Jennifer purchased the land and cattle in 2012.

### Keeping the core

Not too long ago, such an idea was far from the college freshman's mind, at least for a day. Fresh off the farm, Amundson thought he would enjoy the city lights that blurred memories of the hard work he knew as a boy. He set his sights on being an architect.

"I woke up the first morning and there were people all around me," he recalls. "I came to the realization that I did like being on a ranch, and I didn't realize that when you lived in the city, there was always someone right next to you."

In the solitude of home, the young rancher found stillness and space to perfect the core of the Angus herd that roams his land. Acknowledging marketplace trends, Amundson manages with the belief that a consistent, steady core can withstand the ebb and flow of a volatile market.

"The ultimate goal is to produce a cow herd that doesn't swim with the fads," he says. "If you have a strong core, you can make decisions to produce different end products, but if you start swinging your core to go with those [trends], you no longer have a solid platform."

His core cow is moderate-sized and functional, with a good udder, strong leg

structure, longevity and the ability to settle within a 45-day window.

"I enjoy calving, but we have pretty high standards," Amundson says. "I'll dive in the deep end for 60 to 65 days, but not 120. It gets too long."

With the core in place, Amundson puts his "factory" in motion. Not in the buzzword sense — he says every cow has its own personality — but the term fits his precision plan.

"It's my firm belief that I control what my end product is," he explains. "It all starts with me, and I want an efficient factory, one that operates on longevity and doesn't need many repairs. I do that with an Angus cow."

Add in the genomic opportunities and that factory produces consistent, reliable outcomes.

"Cattle are interesting. With proper management you can make them do a lot of different things as far as grading, yielding, so it's kind of fun," Amundson says. "It's like clay; you can sculpt them a little bit."

### An organic growth

Like intricate pottery that never left the hands of the potter, there's a sturdiness in something carefully fostered from start to finish.

"I love feeding to finish cattle, and part of that is because it's a continuation of a cow-

calf operation," Amundson says. "We do all this hard work to bring a calf to weaning, and I'm just taking it a little farther down the chain." Another 30% of cattle in his pens are custom-fed for near and distant neighbors.

He knows his "both" concept is not for everyone, but it suits him to look around and utilize what's available, like the Kentucky bluegrass in the cool seasons.

"We have some great feed resources and forages available at economical prices," he says. "It's pretty conducive to what we're trying to do."

What he's trying to do may seem complex, but Amundson says it's simple: create opportunity. He wants his girls and nephews to have a place they, too, can come home to if they choose.

"It's not going to be something that is demanded or required," he says. "It has to be their decision, but if they want to be involved in our family's operation, then there is a place for them here."

Maybe it's the absence of a firm push toward one specific thing, the chance to step back and consider multiple options that brings freedom and success to the Amundsons. That strong core the rancher believes is crucial to any cow herd is just as important to a family, as it allows each member the chance to add on to a strong foundation instead of being afraid to fail.

"I don't raise cattle like my dad did," he says. "My nephews and my daughters will raise cattle differently than I do, because there is more science, more technology — there's things you have to continue to learn. The same goes for the land and everything we've had the privilege of being given. There's always new data, new research out there to make us better farmers and ranchers. We just have to look for it."

"Plus we have machines to dig postholes," he says with a chuckle. "They relied on their pitchfork and their horses and hands." While Amundson may sometimes curse the old fences that have fewer braces than he'd like, he understands. "I have dug a few by hand and, believe me, I wouldn't want to dig very many of them."

### Output

Four hundred and twenty miles — that's the precise distance from Amundson's feedlot to the unloading dock of the packing plant where his factory gets tested. Sifted through a grid that rewards quality and carcass merit, his Angus models exceed averages by far.

"I've got a customer who knocks it out of the park with 70% to 85% CAB (*Certified Angus Beef*® brand) every time," he says. There's a delicate dance in hitting the market at the right time while limiting the Yield Grade (YG) 4s and 5s. "It's the balance of



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quality — intramuscular fat compared to external fat.”

His own calves from the factory shine nearly as bright, reaching 50% to 70% CAB. That means he’s putting together a “healthy, wholesome, heavily marbled product” for the consumer and reaching his ranch goals in the process.

Amundson knows about consumer demand. He even had his own brand of beef for a time, but he learned quality isn’t just “there” because you want it to be.

“I think ’96 was the first year we finished some cattle, and quite honestly, I thought our cows were phenomenal,” he says. “I remember we fed them in Pen 1 right here. They graded horribly, and I was so disappointed.”

Then the father-son duo decided to buy bulls with better carcass traits that, in a matter of three years, changed the entire dynamic of their herd. Rather than ease up on the quality throttle, a steady pressure over time led to those CAB acceptance rates.

Now there’s overdrive. Amundson recently decided to use the genomic test GeneMax® Advantage™ on his 150 replacement heifers.

The family made use of performance and carcass data, certainly, but phenotype often ruled.

“I look at them once, and if they make me feel good, that’s a pretty expensive feeling,” he says. “I want to be able to use them functionally to make management calls.”

Along with the start of DNA profiling, Amundson decided to artificially inseminate (AI) every female on the place this year.

“It feels a little like I’m jumping off a cliff,” he admits, but there’s optimism and excitement, too.

“I’m trying to get the best quality I can possibly get for the right price, and I see AI as the way to do that. Now I just did 600 CDIR®s in the last two days [last summer], so



ask me that question next year and we’ll see,” he says.

Excitement and optimism are good feelings.

Amundson’s favorite day on the ranch is the morning they drive all the cattle home on horseback. It’s mid-October, and calves will be weaned from their mamas a month later. After preconditioning, he plans a first sort to the finishing pens for steers by early January and then it won’t be long till heifers are out on grass.

The end of April means it’s time for calving season and the chance to start anew.

“You work 365 days up to that point,” he says of that most rewarding time of year. “The day that calf is born is the start of the next generation, the next opportunity. Being handed a blank canvas is a great thing.”

Before the crank of the feed truck and the sound of the phone ringing, Amundson does his best to begin each day with his girls in the same home where he spent many of his own childhood mornings. To end it with a sunset is merely icing on the cake.

“The twilight hours are when you start to hear the little things that have been happening all day, but you didn’t notice over the hustle and bustle of the pickup. When my daughters watch life being born, see brand new goslings on the stock-pond dam, those are the things that make this way of life worth it.”

Amundson spends each day thinking of the next, and even those more distant when he will no longer be making the calls.

“I want to be in an industry that I can say created opportunity and advanced itself,” he says. “Probably the thing I love most about being a rancher is walking in the house and having a steak on the grill and knowing that I raise that every day and people throughout the world have the chance to eat a high-quality product from us, as well.”

Raising the best beef, and also enjoying the meal — it’s an easy decision to have both.



**Editor’s Note:** Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.