



Black Hills, Black Cattle, Black Ink

Commercial insights: South Dakota ranchers say profit points to Angus.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It's not what most would call "ag land." The Snyder family's Piedmont, S.D., ranch hugs I-90 to the east and the Black Hills National Forest to the west.

It would make a beautiful campground. "Our opportunities for expansion are sure limited because of where we live," says Ken Snyder, who earned an animal science degree from South Dakota State University before he came back to the ranch his grandfather started in the 1940s. "We have some neighbors who rent to us, and we don't take it for granted. We treat their land like our own."

There are no plans to build a lodge or subdivide.

"We're at 500 cows; that's barely big enough for three families," Snyder says. They used to have a ranch employee, and then his wife Ronda took over feeding duties — until recently.

In the last five years, two of three sons, Andrew and Daniel, have joined the operation. Ken's dad still lives on the home place, too.

"That's another reason we feed calves," says Ken. "We want to capture all the income we can on our cattle."

Using available tools

The Snyders have retained ownership since 1987.

"We had some neighbors that were successful and some other ranchers that were feeding their own cattle, and so my dad was open to it," Ken says.

They've had good relationships with several feeders, so they were seasoned in terminology and logistics when they started going to Chappell (Neb.) Feedlot more than a decade ago.

"Ken and his boys are really into the data. They're very inquisitive, and they like to learn," says Tom Williams, owner-manager of the feedyard.

Many years, finishing helps generate more income on the same land base, but the

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information they get back is equally valuable.

“That is what turned us more and more Angus,” Ken says. They get individual carcass data, sorted by sire group, so they know what makes up the difference in final value per head. Last year, it varied by \$177 from the top to the bottom. The data help them make breeding decisions and switch course if needed.

“That is the beauty of AI (artificial insemination). If you don’t like the direction, you don’t own a bull,” Ken says.

Twenty-one years ago, they began an AI program the same year longtime Select Sires representative Tim Olson started in western South Dakota.

“We were one of his first customers,” Ken says, noting their use of the technology has grown from a small group of heifers to nearly three-fourths of their cow herd.

For a week to 10 days in the spring, “instead of getting fences fixed,” they focus on AI breeding, Ken explains. The producers don’t mourn the lost time — it has changed their herd.

“You look at not only what AI has done for us, but the people we buy bulls from

and what AI has done for their programs,” Andrew adds. It’s moved the whole Angus breed. “I’m looking for good ribeye and good marbling, high dollar-beef (\$B), because our end game is making cows and hanging on the rail,” he continues.

Cow focus

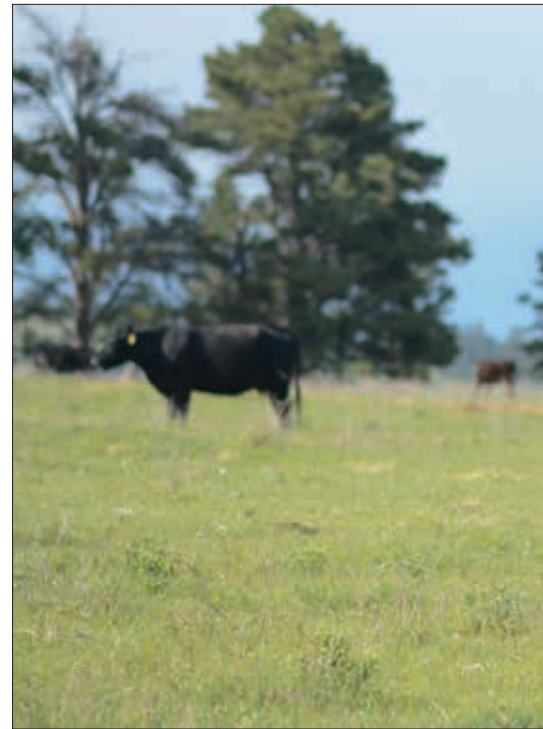
They want to keep mature cow size steady, and they want a cow that uses her resources wisely.

“Shouldn’t it make sense that if your cattle are getting efficient in the feedyard that the cows have some of that efficiency in their genetics, too?” Ken asks.

That’s a lot for a wish list, but the family credits Olson with helping make it happen.

“He knows our herd and knows the direction we are going,” Ken says, noting an emphasis on proven bulls. “We don’t need to find the next up-and-coming great one. We are going to use what somebody else found was pretty doggone good.”

Working backward from a forest grazing permit that opens in June, all females spend their last trimester in pastures where they’re fenced out of the pine trees, or low branches



are trimmed in the name of preventing pine-needle abortions.

“We just have to keep them out of them. Sometimes it’s like they crave them,” Daniel says.

The cows calve the beginning of February,



► Brothers Andrew (left) and Daniel each bring their own strengths back to the ranch they manage with their dad Ken. Before returning, they completed internships and summer jobs that provided outside experience such as agronomy, construction and landscaping.



and the heifers start a few weeks later.

“All the cows are out of the way and then you work on heifers,” Andrew says. “You can keep them closer here, not rushing them out to make space.”

Generations of focus on calving ease means they rarely help a laboring female, however.

Fast forward to June: pregnant cows head for the hills, and cleanup bulls stay home with

the remainder of the herd.

“That’s nice, because they all spread out,” Ken says.

Grazing is open through Oct. 15, so weaning is just ahead of that. Steer calves averaging 700 pounds (lb.) head to Chappell after a 40-day preconditioning program. They retain some heifers and sell others as bred females.

Any given year these decisions, or what to do with the 300 to 400 head of stocker cattle they manage as their “flex option,” might be up for discussion. Weather, prices and resources factor in.

Stopping by the ranch at noon, you might find the family digging into a lunch of meatloaf and homegrown vegetables while weighing such matters. “Pop,” (Ken’s dad, Dean) comes next door to join them and share his advice.

That’s about as formal as the meetings get. It doesn’t have to be more businesslike than that when they all know they’re focused on the same thing: getting better.

All indications show they’re doing it.

“I’d say they’ve been one of our best customers



Baptism by blizzard

The regular hum of the interstate ... silent. Plows didn’t run and people just didn’t leave their houses — unless they were South Dakota ranchers looking for pairs that winter storm Atlas left helpless or worse.

It was Andrew Snyder’s first year back on his family’s Piedmont, S.D., ranch, and he’ll always remember weaning the first set of calves Oct. 2. The very next day, the temperature dropped quickly, rain changed to snow and, in the time it took to can tomatoes at his parent’s house, the vehicle he and wife Tacy had driven across the farmyard was buried.

“We had to walk home,” Andrew says. “All you could see of that Jeep was the two black rails sticking out of the snow.”

They still didn’t know it was going to be the blizzard they’d remember for decades.

All told, 4 feet fell. Andrew rode his snowmobile to lead groups to feed.

“I didn’t open a single fence for three days of riding around looking for calves,” he recalls. That included driving to pastures on the other side of the usually busy I-90.

Having less wind and herd drift than their neighbors to the north, the family only lost six head, but there was still much damage.

“Before the snow melted, we had about 3 inches of rain on top of it,” Andrew says. “That melted all the snow, and it flooded. Not only were all the fences smashed down, but then they were washed out, too.”

When normal fall weather returned, the first priority was to fix the fence that borders the interstate.

“Everybody was very tolerant,” Ken Snyder says of mixed cattle and good neighbors. They are still finding trash that washed in or fences that need attention. “That was 2013 and we’re still cleaning up.”

Atlas left its mark on the land, and their memories.

for overall, across-the-board improvement,” Williams says.

They’ve increased grade and muscling at the same time. Last year 233 steers went 58% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand and Prime, with only 5.2% yield grade (YG) 4s.

“Even if you just move quality grade up a third of a score, that’s a lot more money in your pocket,” Ken says. “It’s extra, and it didn’t cost me any more to create them.”

Growth doesn’t have to mean getting bigger when you can simply get better.



Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is the director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*