

# Commercial at Heart,



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## Montana’s Bobcat Angus is built on teamwork, shared perspectives.

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

**A**t Galata, Mont., Bobcat Angus is an awfully long way from Wall Street. In fact, literally just a stone’s throw from the Canadian border, it is more than 2,000 miles west of the financial hub of the United States.

That distance didn’t soften the sting of Nov. 20, 2008, when the Dow Jones closed at its lowest point in more than 11 years, down 43% for the year.

“When the stock market crashed, the all-time low for the century was the week before our Monday sale,” says Bryan Ratzburg. “That was not a very fun day.”

Traders remember that fall well, but it’s equally etched in Ratzburg’s memory.

“From a banker’s standpoint, these guys with operating loans, they had the clamps on them,” he says. “There were a lot of droopy faces that Monday at our sale, I can tell you that much.”

That was just the third production sale for the relatively young but fast-growing Angus business, a partnership between Ratzburg and his wife Cathy; his brother and sister-in-law, Ernie and Jayne Ratzburg; and John and Debi Goggins.

Once Bobcat Angus survived that, the rancher says they felt pretty confident they could weather most any challenge.

It may help that the business was born of a friendship already built on teamwork.

### Past the football field

Ratzburg and his brother are just 14 months apart in age. Raised “almost like twins,” they stepped onto the football field at Montana State University in August 1985 as freshmen, ready to prove themselves on the gridiron.

Almost immediately the offensive lineman Bryan hit it off with No. 71, Goggins.

Ratzburg was enrolled in ag mechanics, “unsure if I was destined to farm or ranch,” the producer says, “but I always had a passion for the livestock.”

As the years passed, some passions remained on the football field, but friendship grew. Goggins set Ratzburg up on a blind date with his now wife of 25 years.

First the couple made the move from Ratzburg’s home community of Conrad, Mont., to Galata, which is no more than a post office stop. The nearest high school is 30 miles away. To run errands, it’s more than 100 miles to Great Falls.

“People often ask why I like to live up here. It’s acquired,” he says with a shrug. “I grew up in a rural farming and ranching area. I like

the diverse atmosphere I deal with on a day-to-day basis.”

Then they chose a breed. Although his dad raised Tarentaise, they went straight to Angus.

“We dove in hard,” Ratzburg says. “They’re functional cattle. They live in the harsh environment up here.”

Indeed, the temperature can vary more than 140° F in a year, hitting into the 100s in the summer and as low as -40s in the winter.

“They survive, they produce and they give us a good product in the end,” he says.

The ranch was an early adopter of artificial insemination (AI) because, Ratzburg says, he “could see the benefit right away.”

In the 1990s, their weaned heifers were selling at a premium to steer contemporaries, so the family saw an opportunity. They first sold bred commercial heifers (still do), formed a partnership with Goggins and then began marketing registered bulls private treaty. The Bobcat name is, of course, a nod to their alma mater.

The first sale was in 2005, where they offered 50 bulls and 400 females. With a purchase of some mature cows from the Goggins family’s Vermillion Angus Ranch, they were up to 156 bulls for their second sale.

# Registered Passion

“Then we kind of slowly inched up from that point,” Ratzburg says. “It takes a while to get people’s trust ... the first six to seven years, it was tough.”

In a region known for its storied Angus programs, they’re carving their own name.

## Proving the program

Glen Kleeman of Peerless, Mont., came to Bobcat’s very first sale because he could find a ready supply of “the right kind” of 2-year-old bulls.

“We ran some yearling bulls once and it seemed like they always got run down on us, and it seemed like you had to feed them too much to get them picked back up,” says the commercial Angus producer. In addition to wanting a “bull that looks like a bull,” whose numbers match up with eye appeal, he wants them hardy.

Half joking, Kleeman says in north-central Montana, “You spend six months feeding cows and the other six months putting up feed for them.”

Yet, he wants the cattle feeders to come back and bid on his cattle year after year. He sells on a video auction, but always tries to follow up with the buyers toward the end of the feeding period.

“I like to visit with them to see how the calves are doing for them, if they like them,” Kleeman says, noting that he gives branding and preconditioning shots, and maintains a mineral program.

“If they’re not doing any good in the feedlot, we’ve got to do something different,” he says. “Hopefully you’re doing the right

things so they can make some money on those calves. If they are, chances are they’ll be back to buy your calves.”

The past few years, Kleeman bought all of his bulls from Bobcat.

“They’re good people to work with,” he says.

Ratzburg still manages 1,000 head of commercial Angus cows and sells steers on the Northern Video Auction, giving him a pulse on what his customers need.

“I’m a commercial man at heart, but the registered business is a great business because I get to meet the people,” he says.

The breeder also likes the chance to help others improve their cattle.

“Hopefully, we’re developing what the industry is demanding,” Ratzburg says. “We were strongly emphasizing our maternal side and now we’re really starting to pay attention to our carcass traits, too. We know it’s very important because we sell a lot of commercial steers every year and we want to make sure that the buyers have a very good end product.”

They sell bred heifers, including many females they purchase from their customers and AI-breed.

“When you’re bringing the whole program, they can see what the end female will be,” Ratzburg says.

The registered breeder likes to have herd sires in the top 15% for major carcass traits, while also keeping a strong emphasis on maternal function. Musgrave Big Sky, with a +134.38 beef value index (\$B) and a +72.61 weaned calf value index (\$W) at the time

of the interview, is a recent addition that illustrates the Bobcat type.

Strategy includes equal focus on phenotype and genotype.

“John and I study about every catalog,” Ratzburg says, noting that they make decisions together. “We almost won’t buy one we haven’t had eyes on, and most of the time we’ll both get a chance to see him.”

Plus, what the eye can’t see, they’ll use tools to reveal.

“We won’t buy a herd sire without it being 50K-tested,” he says. “There are too many benefits for us, and too much risk if we buy one without the 50K.”

In addition to improving the accuracy on expected progeny differences (EPDs), it also helps assure 100% parentage. They now use a genomics test on all replacement heifers.

They’ve traded meetings on the football field and the Rocking R Bar for those at the ranch or other bull sales, but the partners still have a lot in common.

“We’ve always kind of got the same eye,” Ratzburg says.

The friends talk several times a day and that ensures they’re still looking in the same direction.

“One guy told me, it’s a lifelong endeavor once you get into it,” he says. “And he was right. You keep forging ahead and trying to find new ones every year, and we’ve been doing that.”

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**Editor’s Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



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