

The Big Picture

QB helps complete pass from ranch to consumer target.

by **Laura Conaway**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

For as long as there have been Hocketts in Adrian, Mo., they have raised beef cattle, more and more with the consumer in mind. You can ask Harlan or his 88-year-old father, Buford. Venture out across the tall fescue and dew of an early morning and you'll likely find them checking cows together as they did 50 years ago.

A lot has changed, too. They've used DNA testing the last three years, and they even partnered with a Kansas feedlot on finishing the 2012 calves. Not long ago, \$400 calves were noteworthy. This spring, the Prime steers they sold earned a \$436-per-head profit.

"My dad raised cattle, and I just always raised cattle, too," the younger man says. "It's just always been my thing."

A good thing, and getting better by choice. When the Missouri-based program called Quality Beef by the Numbers (QB) set out last year to help integrate production from pasture to plate, Hockett looked into it.

"I called Mike [Kasten, QB director] and said, 'Hey, this is something I'm interested in,' and he said, 'Okay, I'll be over to see you.'"

"I was just a guy trying to improve my cattle," Hockett says, "and fortunate enough to get involved with Quality Beef. That support, understanding and the knowledge they have has put me many steps ahead of where I could have been on my own."

On their own, the Hocketts were doing well by most standards. With the use of artificial insemination (AI), he and wife Susan partnered with Buford to wean, background for 45 days and then market calves at a local sale barn. Many breeds made

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their way through the cow herd, but Angus remains at the forefront.

"Susan and I will sit down and decide what numbers we want in our EPDs (expected progeny differences), and I compare everything to that," Hockett says. "I'm finding the other breeds aren't getting me to the same place that the Angus do. They're not coming up to our standards."

High-percentage Angus heifers have been screened with the GeneMax™ (GMX) test since 2011, and the herd seemed to be on track, but it was time for a comprehensive look into the herd. It was time to feed cattle.

Enlisting Kasten's help, the Hocketts decided to feed a pen of steers and heifers 400 miles west at Irsik & Doll Feed Yard, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner near Garden City, Kan.

Seeing clearly

It wasn't an easy choice, for it meant deferring income and committing to a new form of marketing corn-fed cattle on a grid. The patriarch of the family was not convinced their cattle would be cared for so far from home.

"We had a couple months of high corn prices when we first sent them out there, and we thought, 'Oh boy,'" Hockett recalls. "When you go to feeding them, you see more of it, understand more of it. I've always known



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HARLAN AND SUSAN HOCKETT

► Harlan Hockett and his wife, Susan, decided to feed a pen of steers and heifers 400 miles west at Irsik & Doll Feed Yard, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner near Garden City, Kan. Seeing a \$436-per-head profit on Prime underscored ultimate goals for the Hocketts.

about grading, but not until you've actually had some skin in the game do you really begin to understand it."

Working with Kasten and feedyard manager Mark Sebranek, what was once blurry became a pleasing matter of fact that brought sighs of relief: The pen of 87% Choice or higher cattle were lean with an average Yield Grade of just 3.05. It included 38% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) or Prime and brought in a return of \$215.89 per head profit, 61% above the average that week.

Last fall, Sebranek says, with cattle prices so high, it was hard to get cattlemen to hold on through the feeding phase. Those who did saw a happy ending.

"For the people who put them in the feedyard, we actually sold fat cattle higher per pound than what their cattle were worth as feeders," he says. Then there was the added weight.

Considering the market, Sebranek says many ranchers will partner with the yard the first time and then move to full retained ownership, especially if they have the right genetics and results.

Seeing the \$436-per-head profit on Prime underscored ultimate goals for Hockett.

"It's the best of the best. That's what we strive for," he says.

With a June CAB price advantage of \$12-\$15 vs. Select and Prime up to twice that,



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even in the face of record overall beef prices, the market supports that.

"Prime, CAB and premium Choice is where the money truly is," Kasten says. "Throughout this whole recession you've seen the demand for CAB just continue to go up in a nice, straight line. I mean you've got to just stick your head in the sand if you don't think quality is what the consumer is demanding."

Analyzing the Hocketts' data, he says fast-growing calves brought in premiums, but quality grade was the main profit driver.

"There's a lot of debate about whether you choose quality, you'll lose this and that, but no one will ever convince me that we can't put an animal together that can do it all," he says. "That's my push, why not put those together? Fast-growing, efficient and Prime."

The Hockett calves lacked something in uniformity, starting with a spread of 364 lb., but they finished with an average weight of 1,309 lb. and an average daily gain of 3.3 lb.

Finishing what they started

Thanks to individual records and supporting QB analysis from fellow rancher Kasten, as well as AI company experts, reproductive physiologists and economists, the next steps are clear.

"Taking the time to gather your records to do this will be the biggest financial return on



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your time you will ever receive," Kasten says.

Hockett agrees, enthused by the sense of direction that he reads as: more Angus, further emphasis on the carcass (yield and quality grades), and less variation.

"I love the data," he says. "I like to see the stuff that we can get down and work through. If we can cull the bottom 10% and keep the replacements out of the top 10%, or somewhere in that percentile, I think that's going to show us a big improvement."

Just as positive about the team effort and resources available at every step of the way, Hockett looks forward to applying what he learned, asking questions and stepping out into uncharted territory.

On any given morning, you can still find him and his dad checking cows. He is still bringing up what others might call troublesome questions, but he knows those are the questions that spearhead change. The phone calls to Kasten and Sebranek won't be the last, as another load of fall calves headed west this summer.

Carrying on a family tradition but armed with more information than ever before, Hockett finds delight and profit in raising a quality product that meets the needs of others.



Editor's Note: Laura Conaway is public relations and industry information specialist for CAB.