



The Best Job

Montana family moves back to take over a family tradition.

Story & photos by **Karoline Rose**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Like the Angus breed, the Loehding Ranch near Ekalaka in southeastern Montana's Carter County has been part of family history for nearly a century.

Just ask Travis Loehding. He and wife Corey represent the fourth generation, taking the reins from his parents, Bill and Candy, and ranching with the clear vision that their kids will be the fifth generation.

"One of the ranch goals is to keep the tradition of family ranching alive and well," he says.

Raising quality Angus cattle started in 1917, when Loehding's great-grandma bought land here and moved her sons "out west" with her.

The ranch quadrupled twice since then, but that's what it took to support the family.

While Travis and Corey lived in Denver for years, they decided ranching was the lifestyle they wanted.

"As a team, we decided we wanted to raise our family in a rural lifestyle," he says. "People in small communities like this take care of each other."

That's natural for family-style ranching, as they saw when moving back in 2006.

"It's been good — not only for us, but good for my parents, as well," Loehding says. "It takes a little of the work and stress off their shoulders."

Today, the family manages approximately 600 mother cows, with all heifers retained through the winter and replacements picked then, depending on needs and what happened the previous year.

"I follow in my father's footsteps when it comes to the steer calves," says Loehding, referring to retained ownership and finishing in a feedlot. "We have done this for a few years and it seems to work well for us."

The past few years those steers have been backgrounded in Nebraska on cornstalks to help cut feed costs.

"It's a cheaper way to put pounds on them. We are simply trying to find the best way to be profitable," he says. "Backgrounding has worked well for us over the past three to four years as the price of corn increased."

Working for the CAB target

Finishing the steers started in Kansas, then shifted to Nebraska and is now with Tom Williams at Chappell Feedlot near the town of that name.

"One of the reasons we went to Chappell with our calves is because Tom does an exceptional job of marketing the calves to target the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand," Loehding says. His family's calves often qualify for the brand at more than twice the national average.

"I think CAB is the target for most producers who raise black-hided calves, even people who don't retain ownership," he says. "We all simply want to raise good beef."

The partnership with Chappell is a key to success. The Loehdings trust Williams to



► Travis Loehding and wife Corey represent the fourth generation, taking the reins from his parents, Bill and Candy, and ranching with the clear vision that their kids, Tylle, 12, Bren, 9 and Chase, 6, will be the fifth generation.

feed and market the calves when they are ready.

“The other thing Tom does that appealed to us is that he ultrasounds the cattle about four to six weeks before they are finished,” Loehding explains. “He sorts them based on the ultrasound to help us get the quality grade we are aiming for so we can increase profits, and over time it’s paid us in premiums.”

Many tools are brought together on the ranch to keep the highest-quality cow herd possible, starting with a set of scales.

“We weigh all calves in the fall, and we weigh all cows when we pregnancy-check,” he says. “We normally try to sell a few bred cows based off of their weight versus the weight of the calf, analyzed as a ratio.”

All cows at the Loehding Ranch have an electronic identification (eID) tag that helps maintain records, making it easier to compare cow and calf weights, as well as following calves through retained ownership in the feedlot.

“In the feedlot it’s helpful because we get individual carcass data back on every head that is fed down there,” Loehding says. “We can trace it back to the cow and see if we want to keep her based on her calves’ carcass data.” It helped back when source- and age-verified calves earned a premium for export markets, too.

Records from established databases such as those at the American Angus Association are just as important.

“As far as EPDs (expected progeny differences) we study when selecting bulls, we keep in mind the fact that our steers are fed in the feedlot and we want to keep that segment of the business profitable and successful,” Loehding says, noting that concern has him studying growth and carcass traits.

“One of my favorite parts of this lifestyle is the variety we have. I am a farmer, I am a rancher, I am a steward of the land, I am a fencer, I am a welder, and I am a bookkeeper. I don’t know [if] I am an expert at any of them, but it’s part of the job.”

— Travis Loehding

“I look at the efficiency EPDs, yearling weight, and more recently I have been focusing on carcass EPDs,” he says. “I don’t think you can solely focus on the carcass side, but it gives you an idea on how to raise better [calves]. It helps us figure out what we need to do to raise better beef.”

Says Bill Loehding, “We have always culled on disposition. If we have a hot heifer in the alley, we send her down the road. We need functional cows.”

Selecting for environment

Ekalaka is 110 miles from the nearest McDonald’s, so ranch management is a little different than in more settled areas, his son adds. The temperature can range from -30° F to 110°, so cattle must be functional in all kinds of weather.

The grass and environment are part of most decisions, including moderating cow size.

“The area we are in is typically arid, shorter grass, and we run cows on tame

grass in the spring and crested wheat grass. We try to save the native grass until the end of July, and that seems to work very well,” the younger Loehding says. Cattle require more and better nutrition in the colder months when hay feeding is common with supplemental protein as necessary to maintain body condition.

Making the most of that nutrition, the family uses artificial insemination (AI) on all heifers to ABS bulls.

“It’s a way to pick some of the best genetics in the Angus breed to help build your cow herd to exactly what you want,” says Loehding. It helps shorten the calving season and supports keeping a closed herd.

“There haven’t been new cattle brought into the herd in the last 30 years,” he says, noting AI “helps us select the type of cow we want.”

It takes a lot of focus to keep the herd on track, but that’s not to say every day is focused on the same thing.

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For one who once made a living in the big city, it’s like not going to the same office every day.

“One day it’s moving cows, one day fixing fence and the next welding something,” he says. “That keeps the job interesting — and the view from the office is not bad, either. Working alongside my family is pretty important to me. It’s the best job.”

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Editor’s Note: *Karoline Rose is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



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