



# Big Leagues, Extra Innings

Colorado Angus rancher learns to win in a new ballgame.

Story & photos by **Hannah Johlman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**B**raden Schaal had always dreamed of playing professional baseball. From Little League to high school and college ball, the right-handed pitcher knew if he was going to be the best, he had to work hard. So he did, perfecting his pitches for nearly 15 years.

Making it in the majors is a once-in-a-lifetime thing — in the stadium or out on the range. Nobody gets two lifetimes, so maybe it was a stroke of luck that he realized one day he was never going to start for the Rockies or some other big-league team. The same changeup opened a doorway that would offer its own once-in-a-lifetime opportunity near Schaal's roots.

## Strong start

He finished his college career as a relief pitcher for the University of Nebraska–Kearney and took his degree in construction management home to his family's Burlington, Colo., 250-cow commercial ranch. He started custom haying, determined

to work just as hard in agriculture as he had in baseball.

"I came back with a vengeance, and that's what has driven me," Schaal says. The cattle market was just taking off, and a few ideas started to capture his imagination, rechanneling dreams.

One day nine years ago, he saw a notice of an upcoming auction that read, "Ranch for Sale."

That night, Schaal recalls telling his brother he was going to "make this happen." The determined 24-year-old set about exploring every possible hope to get financing for the 9,000-acre ranch just down the road from his family's relatively modest spread.

Neighbors, relatives, banks and other companies all said no. "I worked for some pretty large farmers at the time, but I could never get a yes from anybody," he says.

Crushed, a last-ditch effort led Schaal to the doorstep of Paul Rhoades, seller of the ranch. Maybe he could strike an owner-

finance deal. That ended politely, but in disappointment, leaving nothing but to give up.

Still, when auction day came, Schaal and his father found their way to the site out of curiosity. When only one bid was placed, and it from a California investor, Rhoades came over to Schaal's table.

"He had worked his whole life there. It was a multi-generation ranch," the once-hopeful buyer recalls. "So it was painful for him to see an investor coming in to buy his place. He said to me, 'Braden, if you really think you want to do this ... I'll finance it.'"

Schaal called his banker, bid once and bought the ranch. Though he knew Rhoades somewhat through church and community, in the years following, the new owner gained a valuable mentor and lifelong friend.

"He taught me a lot about cattle and handling. He taught me the importance of nutrition and mineral," Schaal says. "On the other side of the deal, he taught me how to be a standout person, a very moral person."

**Genetics made the progress. Scales measured it. Detailed records continue the progress.**

### Good genes

“I was fortunate that he had great genetics to begin with,” Schaal says. Selection and culling from genomic testing and artificial insemination (AI) facilitated a continuous genetic uptrend. “But by having the scales at birth, the scales at weaning and the scales at our feedyard, we could start seeing the improvements.”

He bought the feedyard with his dad, Clyde, in 2010.

“It’s another one of those goofy things,” Schaal says, noting similarities to his unlikely ranch buy. The place sat vacant for a few years. “We drove by it often, and finally asked, ‘Are you ever going to sell this place?’ He said, ‘I’ll sell it to you right now.’” Numbers were discussed and the feedlot was purchased.

Since that first giant step in 2008, Schaal has extended the network with Rhoades’ former landlords, too. Checking every pasture now would take all day and 360 miles, including land in Kansas.

Communication keeps more than 20 landlords happy, but so do strategies like initially stocking pastures at just 80% capacity. After AI, bred heifers top off only those areas that received adequate rainfall.

His cellphone lists more than 800 contacts, and he knows just about everybody in Kit Carson County. Most of them know Schaal is open for bartering propositions.

“I’ll listen to anything,” he admits, describing one trade that involved baling hay for a semi-truck tractor and a silage chopper.

“If the outcome makes sense, I’m in.”

Schaal is just as open, if a bit more conventional, in his data-driven quest for better and better cattle. With good help and equipment, the cattle company works and weighs each calf in its extensive pastures at birth. Electronic ID button tags record that and much other data over the next year: parentage, contemporary group, weights, average daily gain and finally, for terminal animals, carcass performance at the packer.

“I have actually culled some herd bulls because of that,” Schaal says.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 150



► Braden Schaal finished his college career as a relief pitcher for the University of Nebraska–Kearney and took his degree in construction management home to his family’s Burlington, Colo., 250-cow commercial ranch.

When Rhoades passed away Feb. 2, 2017, Schaal was called upon for the eulogy at his friend’s funeral. Of course, that was not so much about business.

The mentor had been a business coach in a sense, helping the young rancher see a suddenly bigger picture. There were “lightbulb” moments.

“You notice when you have a larger operation how the small things within can add up to large numbers at the end,” Schaal says. “When you have more of a cow-calf operation within a farm and multiple other businesses, like we had before, there’s some

money that never really gets acknowledged.”

The realization came from seeing progress in terms of “pounds on the ground” on Schaal Cattle Co.’s official weaning day Nov. 1 each year.

The 2008 calves, incorporating the Rhoades herd, weaned at an average 470 pounds (lb.). Five years later, steady progress brought that to 590 lb., and last year’s calves managed an average of 630 lb. on more than 1,000 head.

Genetics made the progress. Scales measured it. Detailed records continue the progress.

### Testing for the advantage

GeneMax® (GMX) testing matches sire to calf, so it made an impression when the same bull kept showing up at the low end for performance and grade.

“That was one of the hardest things that I have done,” he says, “culling expensive bulls because they weren’t getting the job done.”

Relying on statistical evidence is nothing new to Schaal. As a pitcher, his job when not on the mound was to record stats of all other players on the field. Today, he records stats for his “bull pen” and typically uses a spreadsheet to sort replacement heifers.

“I still take visual into consideration, but I use a computer to sort most of my cattle,” Schaal says.

When the GMX results rank their relative value, he says it makes sense to go with the investment and trust the numbers. From 6-year-olds down to this year’s heifers, none have a GMX score below 50.

“It’s not all on paper,” he adds. “I have seen results firsthand with my cattle and through the kill sheets, average daily gain and weaning weights.”

Last year, Schaal cattle graded 98% Choice, 10% Prime and well above 60% qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, results that he says would never have happened without DNA testing and AI that started just six years ago with 100 head. After seeing the progress, the bar was set high for 2016 at 1,000 head to AI for 2017 calves.

The Schaal team got that done with more than 1,100 head and may just AI them all this year.

“GeneMax tells me the weaknesses of my cattle, and AI tells me how I can complement

or improve on those weaknesses,” he explains.

Progress is the only option for keeping up in the cattle business, and perfection is always his lofty goal.

Schaal is much more attuned to expected progeny differences (EPDs) than earned-run averages (ERAs) these days, and there are no more dreams of a no-hitter.

He may give passing thought to what might have been, but with wife Jenny, their son Stetson and baby daughter Britton, those moments are rare. He’s too busy thinking about what is, and what comes next.



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



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