

Growing Beef in ‘The Good Life’ State

Family uses carcass data to make informed decisions.

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



Driving west along Interstate 80 in south-central Nebraska, passersby see more crops than cattle. Yet pulling off at the Cozad exit, just a few miles on either side of the Platte River, the valley gives way to rolling hills and canyons. The area is rich with warm- and cool-season prairie grasses, and the Ogallala Aquifer provides easy access to water.

It's there that Ryan Schneider, with his brother Jason and sister Jennifer (now

Howerter), grew up learning about the land and livestock from their dad, Randy. The four all still own cattle together, with Howerter taking time off from her career as a probation officer to help during the busy seasons.

“We’ve always worked together,” Schneider says, noting there’s never been a formal division of tasks. They all take turns during calving. They chat often enough to know what needs to be done and to do it.

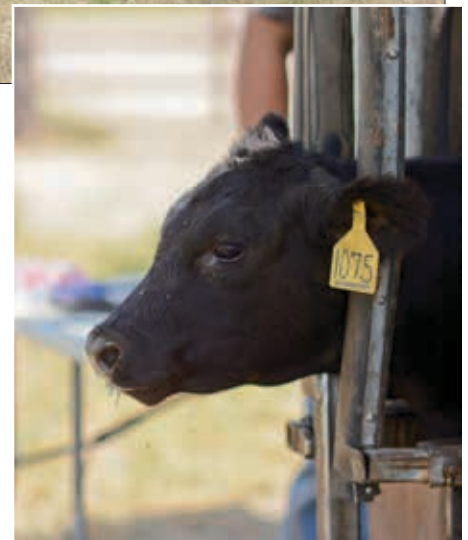
“We did a lot more work growing up than kids do now,” Schneider says. “The most important thing we learned was how to handle cattle.” They tagged along with daily chores at a young age, and by their preteen years they were doing quite a bit of “tractor work.”

It led to a tight-knit family and, even after they all headed off to nearby colleges, a desire to come back and raise cattle.

In the quiet hills, just far enough away to no longer hear the low hum of interstate traffic, Schneider’s grandpa started with a crossbreeding program that gave way to straightbred Angus when they saw improved growth in the breed.

Plus, those solid-black cattle sold better at the nearby Lexington (Neb.) Livestock Market.

The family sold their calves there “ever since I can remember,” Schneider says. He recalls the excitement of the auction barn as a kid, but the risk tied up in a calf crop tempered that anticipation as an adult. Four



► Individual calf data comes back from the feedyard because all calves are tagged.

years ago they started working directly with a local feedyard.

Grounded predictability

For Schneider, it was about taking the whim out of it. The cattleman liked having a set price he knew he could bank his whole year’s work on, rather than leaving it up to which buyers were in the seats that day.

Then there was an added bonus: “At the salebarn you didn’t get anything back,” he says. Though the last few years, owner-manager Anne Burkholder of nearby Will Feed Inc. has correlated ranch tags to feedyard tags and given the Schneiders performance and carcass data.

The results are promising. Their 2014



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heifers went 94% Choice and Prime, with 40% of them qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

Schneider likes having information to help explain what's going on with his animals.

"A couple of years ago one of the cows didn't look like it was milking and sure enough, last year's calf weaned 150 pounds lighter than the average," he says. "It's nice where she keeps everything; not everybody does that."

Of course, that relies on calves first being individually indentified at the ranch level, something that even Grandpa Schneider did.

Another thing that was instilled from the older generations: the importance of preconditioning and selective culling.

A month or so before weaning, calves are put through the chute for vaccinations, pour-on dewormer and individual weights. Their mamas are processed and preg-checked at the same time.

Like many operations in the area, drought caused the family to reduce numbers in 2012 when the rainfall was around 10 inches less than the region's 22-inch average. That put stress on all their land, but especially when running leased ground, "You have to be careful how hard you pasture them," the cattleman says.

The late calvers were the first to go, followed by disposition outliers.

"Dad always said if there's a bad attitude, they go down the road," Schneider says. Culling continued until their herd numbered a couple hundred head fewer.

"If we would have kept all the cows and fed them, we'd be money ahead," he says. Yet there's no point in looking back with regret.

"It improved our herd, too," he adds.

It rained, and ever since they've been keeping around 75 of the top heifers for replacements. Those females are artificially inseminated (AIed) to help tighten up the calving season, which starts with those heifers in mid-February.

Maternal traits are important. During mild years, the cows winter on stalks with just a mineral supplement. The family splits up calving-season herd checks, but if the weather is good, the mature groups go it alone overnight.

By the first of May, calving season has given way to planting, and the pairs are out to pasture.

Another year comes and goes, and their goals remain constant, Schneider says. "We want to get the most pounds you can wean and still have the feedyard have the carcass they want."

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



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