



# From Hardwood to Hard Winters

## North Dakota family uses lifelong lessons to advance their cow herd.

by **Miranda Reiman**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

**A**t the heart of every winning team is a good game plan, one that puts the players where they're meant to be and gives them a chance to be successful, all while keeping an eye on the goal.

Kipp and Megan Sparrow of Mercer, N.D., learned the art of strategy and teamwork early. In their rural hometowns, just 100 miles apart, each preferred basketball to ice fishing, and the end of high school found them both playing basketball at nearby Jamestown College. The two quickly formed a bond over the love of the game and a shared sense of humor.

Yet, they had their eyes on life after basketball.

Although Sparrow admits his wife is currently the planner, keeping the busy family — which includes daughters Sophie, 12; Daisy, 10; and Charlie, 6 — on schedule, he started off with a game plan of his own. “I knew where I wanted to be: back on the ranch.”

Sparrow spent many spring breaks, and even quite a few evenings once the basketball season was over, calving. He came back to farm and ranch in the summers. All the while, Megan worked toward her psychology degree.

When the couple wed in 2000, they'd make their home where two generations of Sparrows before them had.

Following World War II, Sparrow's grandfather came back to the ground that's nearly the center of the state to start the farm. Today, with his parents Deb and Terry, and business partner Lucas Presser, the Sparrows still grow corn, soybeans, alfalfa and small grains on the graduated hills where farm ground gives way to pastures. There were always cows on the place, but the 150 head the third-generation producer came home to manage quickly grew to 500.

### Finding direction

“When I was getting toward the end of college and we were deciding which way we wanted our business to go, nothing was really set in stone, and there was a lot less risk to being a rancher than there was with the farming end,” Sparrow says. “As those numbers increased, we saw that we were maybe getting some added protection from the ebbs and flows of the commodity market, so we expanded a little further and a little further.”

The market scene looked different in 2000. “It was a lot cheaper to get into it, too, so it

was easier, and we built in a hurry,” Sparrow says. “We went from quantity — just based on trying to get some cash flow going — to quality.”

They purchased females for the first five years, and then began retaining their own. “We bought them on the cheap and then



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made them more expensive by what we put into them,” he says.

The second five-year spurt concentrated on moving that quantity to quality, and most recent history finds them honing in on a very specific target: docile, maternal females that produce the kind of calves feeders want.

“The last five has been the best, just where we’ve really done a lot of AI (artificial insemination) breeding,” Sparrow says. “When you start doing that, your quality goes up very fast.”

### Planned success

Of course, it doesn’t just happen. It takes a plan.

“We decided to go and really focus on the female end of stuff, meaning let’s look at what’s the best heifer that we can have without giving up performance,” he says.

Noting a saturated Angus bull market in his area, Sparrow says, “We wanted to carve out a niche for ourselves.”

This year they sold 170 bred heifers at the Angus Partners Female Sale, put on each January in part by their seedstock supplier, Spickler Angus Ranch. They’ve consigned to that sale for six or seven years.

“We are pretty tough on the cut. We cut out anything that we didn’t think would match at all,” Sparrow says. “It’s a very uniform group that goes through that sale.”

They have strict criteria at home, too.

“If I come scoop the calf up and walk beside the cow, that’s when I see the disposition I want,” Sparrow says. It’s partially because he’s a protective father and wants his girls to be safe when working around the cattle, but it’s partially because he wants them that way, too.

“If I’m working with an animal in the spring when it’s cold and it’s terrible, I want her to work good,” he says. “I want her to be gentle and calm. It makes everybody’s job easier.”

He’s been known to cull whole lines for flightiness.

“Everything starts with that as far as I’m concerned,” Sparrow says. “If she starts from something that’s good-disposition, then you can start from there and build off of it with anything — just the basic things you’d want to package together for the best female you could have.”

They check in with their buyers and keep replacements themselves. Market signals are a good indicator that they’re on target, too, Sparrow says.

Guiding genetic decisions is a strong relationship they’ve fostered with the Spickler family.

“They are hands-down some of the best people I’ve ever met,” Sparrow says. “There’s not a decision that doesn’t get discussed. They are very important to what we do on our ranch.”

The registered breeders know the philosophy that Sparrow operates under: He wants it all.

“Maternal quality, and all the carcass data comes right along with it,” he says. “You can’t go and use high-quality animals and not bring that along.”

Why focus on marbling if you’re not retaining ownership?

“I mean you’re not going to sit and ignore something that’s there,” he says plainly.

“That’s the way I look at it, anything positive you can add, you should always add as much as you can.”

Previously, they’d sold their steers at the sale barn.

“I didn’t get the feedback I was looking for,” Sparrow says.

However, reputation earned him a private sale, and a buyer who promised more data this year. Through a Spickler connection, Sparrow got a two-year contract and is looking forward to seeing how the group data matches up to his gut feeling.

### The busy season

If the sale is like the adrenaline that comes with a buzzer beater for the win, then calving season is like the intensity of a close game between two well-matched teams.

“We’ve had three really bad winters in a row, but honestly, you know what the toughest thing is?” he asks rhetorically. “Being away from your family. Spending 60 days laying in a calving barn, maybe eating supper with them every other night or trying to catch up on sleep. It’s two months of really, really tough work from February until April.”

Yet any good athlete knows there is no victory without sweat equity, and that tempers the challenges.

“Calving time is my favorite time,” he says, comparing it to training for a grueling sports season. “You get in there and challenge yourself, and spend those late nights and are tired and do that for each month straight, doing the night shifts, dragging calves around ...”

It’s part of what drew him back to the ranch.

“When you make it to the end and they’re out on pasture and then you make it to [the] next stage where you’re selling them, it all kind of works together to make itself worthwhile. That’s the enjoyable part of the challenge,” he says.

Then there’s the added benefit. Those on the “team” get to experience life in a rural setting.

“We need the beauty of nature,” Megan says. “It’s just a different tempo out here, and it suits us.”

It’s an ideal place to learn the values of hard work and community, the couple says.

“How we instill those in our kids is modeling them outright,” says Megan, who works as a school psychologist in several area districts. “Early mornings, late nights ... we are blessed though with all of our close friends and families having the same structure. Our farming husbands go. Us farming wives, we share our experiences. We’re there with our kids.”

Often that includes families helping others out, getting kids to and from softball, basketball, church and 4-H activities.

“I like seeing them in sports,” Sparrow says. “It really shaped our lives, and I hope it does the same for them.”

In another five years, those girls will likely be involved in high school athletics, and the Sparrow herd may number a few hundred more, if all goes according to plan.

“If you want to change something even in the short term, you’re looking at five years to get something completely changed. It takes generations,” he says. “If you came back in five years, this whole conversation would have a whole different tint to it.”

Just like a critical turning point in a game, Sparrow is excited for what’s yet to come.



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

