

Perfect Is Better

Eastern Kansas rancher aims for the top rung.

by Lyndee Stabel

“I thought there had to be a better way.” That conviction by Leon Stauffer, Yates Center, Kan., has driven management, marketing and herd improvement from the start. It encompasses the entire approach to his family’s commercial Angus cow-calf operation.

Stauffer grew up helping his father, a veterinarian, care for the Shorthorn herd, but a cow doctor learns much from observation.

“He just saw lots of cattle and recognized the qualities in Angus that he liked,” Stauffer says. “There’s no point dehorning them if you can breed it out of them, and they have good maternal instincts.”

Calving ease was another point of contention. His father used to say he made more money off of other larger breeds because of all the C-sections he performed for clients. It was no surprise when it was Stauffer’s turn to start a herd that he went with Angus.

Twenty-eight years later, he manages more than 480 commercial Angus cows for his family while serving a key government role as Farm Service Agency (FSA) director for Woodson and Wilson counties.

With those responsibilities, the cows must be trouble-free. Handling practices and herd docility certainly called for that “better way” approach.

Stauffer remembers gathering cattle with other producers as a kid. “They’d chase them with horses and pickups, but it’s so much better for them to follow you with a bale of alfalfa on the back of the truck or some cubes. It’s a lot easier and a lot safer.”

When he is looking for help to work his cattle, Stauffer says anyone who knows how to use a cattle prod, whip or hot shot does not need to be around his cattle. Any animal that has a bad experience while being worked will only be more reluctant to go back into the catch pen the next time.

“It’s a lot easier to handle them slow and easy, and, like playing football, you just have to think ahead of time and move your feet and get into position,” he says.

Stauffer sold his calves at a sale barn for the first few years, but looked for a better way that returned more information than the selling price, rewarded improvement and did not require the per-head commission fees.



► Leon Stauffer manages more than 480 commercial Angus cows for his family while serving a key government role as Farm Service Agency director for Woodson and Wilson counties. With those responsibilities, the cows must be trouble-free. Handling practices and herd docility certainly call for that “better way” approach.

Nearly every year since then, he has retained ownership and fed his cattle.

Raising better beef

It fit his goal of profitably creating the best beef products for consumers to enjoy.

Bull selection has been Stauffer’s main avenue for producing top-quality carcasses. Any bull he buys must meet a strict set of criteria, including minimum expected progeny difference (EPD) and ultrasound scores for marbling, ribeye and backfat. By keeping heifers out of these bulls, he is steadily improving the genetics and carcass quality traits of the females, as well.

“I think more people need to strive for higher marbling in their cattle,” he says. “A lot of exotic breeds lack good marbling, but uniform, well-marbled beef products are what the industry needs to successfully compete with pork and chicken.”

Going a step further, Stauffer recently experimented with using the Zoetis High-Density (HD) 50K genomic testing on a few females and a bull to learn more about these animals’ individual traits.

Those steps make sense considering the ultimate goals of being at the top on both sides of carcass value: USDA Prime and Yield Grade (YG) 1.

Stauffer is steadily working his way there. For the past three years, he has fed with

Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) partner feedlot McPherson County Feeders, near Marquette, Kan. In 2012 he fed 284 head that finished at 97.8% Choice and Prime, 47.9% CAB, and only 7% YG 4s. A pen of 77 head that finished in early 2013 went 100% Choice with 20.3% Prime and 54.1% CAB.

Drawing on his father’s legacy, Stauffer makes sure his cattle can realize top carcass potential by maintaining a strong health program.

“I saw people that had wrecks and had never vaccinated,” he notes. “It’s a lot easier to run them through and work them, than to have to doctor them and still have some dead ones.”

Allan Sents, manager at McPherson County Feeders, credits the genetics, condition and health for above-average feeding and carcass performance.

“It’s encouraging to work with people like Leon and see what’s possible when a cow-calf producer dedicates himself to improving quality grade and performance in cattle,” Sents says. “That he can get these results is very encouraging to the industry. It’s always a pleasure to work with these cattle, and we certainly hope we can continue to do so.”

▲

Editor’s Note: Lyndee Stabel is a freelance writer for *Certified Angus Beef* LLC (CAB).