

Quality Start-up

Young producer grows his business along with his herd.

Story & photos by *Jenny Keyes, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

On a windy hillside near Talmage, Neb., frost and ice just showing in the early morning light, Travis Walters' Angus cattle take shelter in the barn. Bellied up to the feedbunks, they await breakfast.

The herd, now numbering 130 head, is a start-up seedstock operation that produces bulls for friends and neighbors who attend the March sale each year.

It's a herd that almost wouldn't have been, if not for a few instances of knowing the right people, or being in the right place at the right time.

Walters was in second grade when health issues led to the sale of his family's cattle, but he never quite got cattle out of his blood. Throughout high school in southeast Nebraska, he worked for a local cattleman and helped out on his uncle's farm.

A few years of Lincoln (Neb.) Crusaders Arena Football, a marriage and move to Memphis, Tenn., found Walters on the maintenance crew for a whipped-cream factory. Although he enjoyed the people, he knew that was just a four-year stopping point.

When wife Tiffany finished her optometry degree, they moved back to Nebraska near her home farm at Talmage, where father-in-law Don Harms helped out.

That's where the Walters Angus story begins: with that help, a USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program loan, 23 commercial-Angus heifers and a registered-Angus herd bull.

The transfer of purchased embryos to some of those females the next year and gradually buying more registered stock launched the seedstock start-up.

"I just always wanted to have Angus cattle, and I love them," the young producer says. "They're great mothers. It's amazing and it's nice when I have a cow that calves outside and I can walk over and pick that calf up. They'll walk right beside me."

His father, Ron, and brother Jake still help out on the operation, but becoming a father himself really put the exclamation point on the importance of temperament, Walters says. His boys, twins Jaxen and Graysen, and younger brother Drake are often out in the pasture or barn, starting to carry buckets.

"A wise old guy told me once, 'If your cows get out, you should never have to chase your cows back in. You should be able to

lead them,'" Walters recalls. He's seen that philosophy in action once or twice, and thus, "wouldn't feel comfortable selling any animal that was flighty."

Birth weight is a popular topic, but not much of a concern with today's genetics and a range of 68-pound to 75-pound birth weights on sale bulls, Walters says. Instead, he focuses on docility and the beef value index (\$B).

From the ground up

It must be working, because the sales are growing in tandem with the herd.

"The use of embryo transfer (ET) technology has been a major factor in building our herd," Walters says of the lift that's transforming a commercial start into a seedstock business. "We spend a lot of time and money on really good embryos to boost the genetics."

The rate of transformation to seedstock got a huge boost two years ago when he was able to buy Larry Bartel's "Bart's Place" registered herd near Syracuse, Neb. Now registered stock make up about 40% of the herd, and the rest form a pool of recipients.

Walters uses GeneMax® Advantage™ genomic testing on the commercial females to help develop a herd that works in every way besides providing recipients.

"You know exactly what your cows are then," he says. He may have a few cull bulls to finish with customer cattle in the future, but in the near term Walters takes a keen interest in a bull customer who finishes steers.

"I'll be watching those closely to



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In the meantime, Walters says he’s grateful to those who have helped by giving him a chance and providing advice. He has a long list that includes Gary and Larry Wellsandt, Dick Hollman, Steve Ruenholl, Kelly Kreifels and others — all sounding boards on early purchases and as he delved into the world of bull sales.

“Travis is lucky to have found people who have been in the business for decades that have been able to give him a lot of insight,” Tiffany says. “Without them, he might not be where he is today.”

Many of them also trade help, so they can synchronize heat or vaccinate more efficiently. The experienced crew of neighbors and friends, along with the barn Walters has set up to his liking, makes the hands-on work run smoothly.

“To have a barn like this ... you don’t find too many of these around,” he says, noting the sizeable investment in the working facility that accompanies it, but he knows it’s made to last.

“If you take care of your stuff — and that’s with anything — if you take care of your stuff, it’ll take care of you,” Walters says.

That goes for cattle, too.



Editor’s Note: Jenny Keyes is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

see how our bulls work with his cows as far as feedlot gain, grade and *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) acceptance rates,” he says. “Then we can work together to improve them.”

From the expected progeny differences (EPDs) to DNA tests to articles and other resources, “the information is out there,” he says. “You’ve just got to do the work to get it or read it. If you are going to put this much time and effort into raising these cattle, you might as well be the best at it that you can be.”

For Walters, that means keeping his local commercial producers in mind.

“You have to cater to your customer and what they want,” he says. “It would be nice to sell a \$10,000 bull. Everyone wants that, but if we can keep a consistent average and quality, it will be better in the long run for our customers.”

The breeder keeps in touch with his buyers throughout the year, all the while planning and preparing.

Before sale day, he works closely with his nutritionist to make sure the bulls are on track for maximum growth, but not getting overfat.

“The nice thing about this diet is that they are in their working clothes,” Walters says, with a handful of the ration in his palm. “You don’t have to worry about them going out to pasture and melting on you and not performing.”

Selecting for both maternal and carcass traits, he plans to keep leveraging the seedstock enterprise with commercial recipients as the herd grows to 250, buying land and eventually starting a customer buy-back program.

