



Work Hard, Smart

Only premium quality is worth the effort.

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

It was just another conversation between a cattle feeder and his order buyer, but the one Todd Wickstrum recalls from just a few years ago illustrates his family's core philosophy. It's the way they roll.

"Well, I'll go ahead and fill it up," the buyer said, noting he'd find "something" at the sale barn to make a complete load.

Wickstrum disagreed: "No. If you can't get quality cattle, go ahead and send it short."

The buyer debated transportation costs and lost opportunity.

"I said, 'Only send me quality cattle, even if that means the truck's half full or three-quarters full. I

can't afford the lower-quality cattle,'" the producer remembers.

The semi left for Westmoreland, Kan., a little lighter than usual.

That happened shortly after Wickstrum and his family returned to the diversified farm in 2013. His brother, Troy, was already heading up the trucking and custom-harvest enterprises.

The older brother had spent 19 years away, but the former Peterbilt engineer says when he began overseeing cattle care and risk management, he inherited the business model that centers around feeding only the best.

The third-generation feeder watched his parents, Larry and Sharon Wickstrum, build up what his grandfather started. The first

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80-head pen was built when he was just 3 or 4 years old.

"[Dad's] always been focused on, 'Why do you want to work that hard if the quality's not there?'" says Wickstrum, whose teenage son and daughter make up the fourth generation on the farm.

Today the feedyard includes those original pens and a new feedlot built just a few miles up the road in 2011, so that they have a 13,500-head one-time capacity.

It's built on a hill, with alleys that spread out like fingers. Every drop of runoff is contained, and later used.

"We're seeing the value of the manure," Wickstrum says with a nod to the row-crop enterprise. "There's a lot of tight clay ground in this area, and that manure's really made a big difference. It's helped a lot."

The feedyard also serves as an outlet for all of their home-raised corn and alfalfa.

"We don't sell any feed at all," Wickstrum says, noting that during peak consumption, the yard requires 2,500 bushels a day. By April or May they're purchasing feedstuffs to get them to the fall harvest.

Only the best

Many cattle come in from Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, and a good relationship with that cattle buyer ensures they get the kind that fits their goals.

Those must be high-marbling, high-gaining cattle, with capacity to grow.

"All the genetics have come up to where the premiums are there, but the pounds are really what's king," Wickstrum says. "We try to buy genetics that will get bigger."

Some will enter the yard as calf-feds, but nearly 3,000 will first make a stop on grass, mostly native Kansas prairie. They've had groups come off grass and gain 6 pounds (lb.) per day for the first 60 or 90 days. Those are the results they want to repeat, Wickstrum says, noting they're trying to get calves to reach well beyond the traditional 1,350-lb. target of years ago.

"You've got to get that finished weight further out so you can turn that whole thing from a red to a black number. Simple as that," Wickstrum says.

Cattle might go to other packers, but a large share go to U.S. Premium Beef (USPB). His parents were among the first to buy shares and send cattle to the cooperative in the 1990s.

"They had the opinion that they only wanted to feed quality cattle, and when USPB started, they were one of the ones that really had the premiums," Wickstrum says. Now, as all quality grades have increased, it's more about "maximizing your pounds without getting the discounts."



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— Todd Wickstrum

He uses the feedback USPB returns to help make decisions in their own 1,800-head commercial-Angus cow herd.

“We watch returns very closely,” Wickstrum says. “We’re always trying to look at them and see how they do, knowing different groups of cows that we follow all the way through the harvest process of those calves.”

Rarely do they have cow families that just don’t work out, Wickstrum says, crediting their main genetic supplier, nearby Fink Beef Genetics of Randolph, Kan.

“They’ve got a very common set of goals as what we do, and that’s beef production and overall bottom-line costs.”

Selection starts with mothering ability and keeping cow costs in check, “trying to make sure that the maintenance on those cows, that her groceries don’t get so expensive that she works herself out of a job,” he says.

All first-calf heifers are artificially



► More than a decade ago, the Wickstrum family earned accolades and substantial cash for their entry in the nationwide Best of the Breed contest: 160 steers of which 90% earned the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand, including 37% Prime. It’s easier to win a contest with fewer cattle, so virtually all other entries put in the minimum 80 head.

inseminated to keep a tight calving window. Since they are feeding their own, performance is a must and final carcass quality matters, too.

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“The worst thing for our industry is for somebody to go buy [beef] that they think is good or better than average and it does not meet their expectations,” he says. “The next time they’ll say, ‘No, I’ll have more chicken.’”

That’s not a scenario Wickstrum wants to be a part of, so he’ll leave those kind of cattle at the auction market.

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

