

Building on a Tradition

Reputation rewards hard work and Angus genetics.

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



Intent on the task at hand, Kirk Willoughby brings his John Deere to a halt and smoothly adds another round bale into the hay grinder. There are no days off, especially when you are your only employee, but that's fine with him.

Every day Willoughby wakes to his long-term joy and obligation — doing the best he can to maintain the ranching tradition that has been in his family for many generations. The Angus cow-calf operation at the heart of that effort is nestled in the hills near small-town Reynolds, Neb., just a few miles from the Kansas border.

“When my dad was in the war, World War II, his dad called and told him this pasture was up for sale,” Willoughby explains. “He wanted in on it, so he sent enough money home to buy it.”

The returning soldier purchased their first Angus heifers, and a generation's span later, his son bought their first white-face cattle.

“Dad had Angus, so I just bought Herefords to keep them separate,” Willoughby says. “That was back in 1976 when it didn't matter what color they were.”

For years, he and his brothers ran the operation alongside their father, but when his father retired and the brothers found jobs in town, he was left with some big decisions, including whether to go on ranching.

Willoughby decided to sell the Herefords

and build on his father's Angus cattle. The 1990s market helped with that call.

“We had a lot of baldies, and when you put a Hereford bull on them, they start picking the reds out, \$5, \$10, \$100 less,” he recalls.

Today, his Angus herd has grown to 300 cows. Premiums weren't the only deciding factor when it came to which breed to stick with; their maternal and easy-keeping characteristics convinced him there was a future with Angus.

Angus goals

Selecting for both maternal and carcass

▲ Kirk Willoughby wants to put out the best product he can, and that starts with animal health.

traits, Willoughby aims to keep consistently moderate-framed females.

“As I'm getting older, everybody's chasing the biggest weaning weights,” he says. “I'm at that 580- to 625-pound mark, and that's where I want to stay.”

If cows can't thrive in his feeding and management program within the first few years, he doesn't want them. Sure, some drop out as culls because they don't fit the sustainable practices that favor the land and other local resources.

► Premiums weren't the only deciding factor when it came to which breed to stick with; their maternal and easy-keeping characteristics convinced him there was a future with Angus.



“The bigger your calves, the bigger your cows,” Willoughby says. “It gets harder to keep them, so you have to hold, to have a medium.”

Ranching is transactional, the “grass manager” says. If you work for your cows, they will work for you, so he works hard every day to maintain the pastures they all call home.

“I like to run my pastures like it is a drought year every year,” Willoughby says, using spare words to justify that: “Don’t have grass, don’t have cows.”

He separates his herd into groups on different pastures during the 60-day calving window beginning in mid-February. Bull selection focuses on expected progeny differences (EPDs) for growth, with some limits on yearling and mature size.

“I want it to be above average in weaning weight and below 100 in yearling weight,” Willoughby says. Carcass traits don’t lead, but he keeps them in mind for his steer buyers. That’s why they must have positive carcass EPDs along with the moderate maternal characteristics he’s looking for.

“I’m more into 25, 26 milk [EPD], which is hard to find anymore,” he says. “Everybody is 30.”

In the end, he’s just looking to buy from folks who stay true to their word about the performance and characteristics of their bulls.

Reputation

The same no-nonsense attitude, whether it comes to animal health, breeding or culling cows, has encouraged consistency within his herd. Willoughby’s earned a reputation in the area and at the local auction market for having good cattle that bring buyers to town when it’s time to sell.

Larry Junker, owner and auctioneer at Fairbury (Neb.) Livestock Co. for 26 years, credits his long-time customer for helping to start the vaccination program for calves at his annual September preconditioned sale.

“He was my main guy when we started this 26 years ago,” Junker says.

As Willoughby recalls, he told the auctioneer, “I will spend a little more, Larry, if you want me to and if you think we can get a little more for the calves. And in return, it has been a good thing.”

While preconditioning vaccinations are fairly common today, Willoughby was one of the first in the area to begin using a regular herd-health program,

► Willoughby was one of the first in the area to begin using a regular herd-health program.



Junker says. Since that started, he says more and more buyers have come back to the market to bid on those cattle.

“I’ve got buyers calling saying, ‘Isn’t this the time Willoughby’s calves are selling? Are they coming this week or next week?’” Junker relates. “For 26 years he has sold everything with me — that means if it’s an old cow or anything. He is loyal to me, and that is very special to me.”

Willoughby treats other producers and buyers the way he wants to be treated, he says. He wants to put out the best product he can, and that starts with animal health: “When my calves come in, they know they’ve had their shots and the whole-herd health program.”

Few who sell at any local sale barn care to follow up with buyers to see how the cattle are performing, but Willoughby stays in contact with them, interested to see how his herd genetics play out.

“He’s a really good guy with a huge heart

and takes his cows very seriously,” Junker says. “I’ve joked with him a couple times, ‘Willy, in February when we start selling lots of cattle, can you come in and help me? And he grins and says, ‘Sorry, Larry, I have to be there when they’re calving.’”

Remember, he’s the only employee, sunup to sundown. However, Willoughby tips his hat to life partner Beth, and the occasional hand of good neighbors for helping out in the busiest times to keep ahead of the work.

Sometimes, when the chores are all done, he finds peace atop the highest hill on the ranch, riding a four-wheeler to where he and a good cow dog can look out upon a life’s work.

“I couldn’t imagine doing anything else,” Willoughby says.



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

