



The Wright Stuff

Cattleman differentiates his replacements.

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

G rass blankets granite, thanks to a few inches of soil. The bedrock keeps these seven or eight connected pastures from becoming farmland — that, and the foresight of the modern-day Wright brothers.

Like the founders of aviation, a century and a half later on the opposite side of the Mississippi, these brothers are innovating and doing business a bit differently than their father.

Frank and R.J. Wright farm together on the Brandon, S.D., ground they grew up on. R.J. runs the crop operations, while his brother has always taken an interest in the cattle.

After studying diesel mechanics, Frank came back to build the herd.

Developing replacements

“Dad really didn’t like calving the heifers,” he says. “He always bought cows.”

So, Wright started out buying

replacements, but crunched the numbers and discovered he was “taking too big of a ding on selling heifers.”

Plus, he had a known product.

“I had carcass data, so I kind of knew what I had, so I started developing my own heifers,” he says. That’s grown into an enterprise where he sells replacement heifers, too, and he finds buyers who are also looking for moderate-framed females.

“The biggest and the growtiest heifers are the ones that go on feed or are sold as feeders. The littlest heifers get backgrounded. The heifers that I breed to sell are down the middle,” Wright says. He isonates (scanning by ultrasound) first and then uses visual appraisal.

“I review all that data, and I take my replacements out of there,” he says.

There have been other changes through the years, but the herd is now settled at 75% to 80% Angus.

“Carcass quality and temperament are probably the highest on the list,” he says of his selection criteria. “I let Mother Nature select for fertility.”

Calving used to begin in March, but now starts May 1. Wright traded building calf shelters and windbreaks for warmer temperatures and a shorter wait for green grass.

“It’s not without its challenges, but it’s easier to work with Mother

Nature,” he says, noting this decade’s larger equipment allows him to replace spring fieldwork with cow work.

The herd rotates through pastures, most of which are connecting parcels along a small creek. Some years there is more grass than

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others, as they seed some crop ground to hay meadows depending on the weather and market conditions.

Wright eliminated foot rot and generally improved health by fencing cattle away from the creek and developing water access points.

“That way the water they have access to is a good drink of water,” he says.

The ranch used to finish all the calves, using feedstuffs harvested on the farm and selling cattle through the GeneNet grid. Cattle were routinely reaching 90% Choice or better with 60% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance, but when feed prices started trending upward in 2007, Wright saw an opportunity to background and then market late winter.

Starting calves on feed

Whether he’s weaning calves from his own 350-head herd or receiving new ones, his recipe for starting calves on feed is simple: “Get them to eat and get them to drink.”

“That’s a big thing,” Wright says. They get a complete feed. “It’s got molasses in it, and if they get a taste of it, they like it.”

The next step is limiting the dust and keeping the water trickling.

“A water source is above them, and calves are drawn to the water by the sound of it. They just came from drinking out of a creek, and they can hear it running and find it,” he says.



Although he turned to early weaning during drought, typically the calves get acclimated to independent life in mid-autumn. His own calves are vaccinated in the summer before they go through a low-stress weaning program.

“The biggest trick is fenceline weaning them on grass,” Wright says. He used to pen

the calves and put the mothers on the adjacent grass, but says flipping that around made it a quicker process with fewer problems.

Western South Dakota calves are purchased off video auction. “They’re not commingled. They’re not in the salebarn getting nose-to-nose with other cattle,” he says.

Because the video-auction calves are usually weaned on the truck, reliable transportation is key, Wright says. “You have to have a reputable trucker who is going to be there when he’s supposed to be, and the calves are loaded, not rammed and packed in too tight.”

As an insurance policy, he will only buy vaccinated calves.

“We want them to have some reputation behind them and are trying to get them to match up with what I have in my herd,” he says.

Although Wright doesn’t get the direct feedback he used to, repeat buyers and good demand say his cattle are still hitting the mark.

“You always try to improve,” Wright says. “We read a lot. There are low-input producers and there are high-input producers and they kind of conflict. I agree with both of them. You have to get ideas from both sides and balance it.”

As a guiding principle for developing great cows, perhaps that’s the Wright stuff.



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



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