

Eagle Hills Ranch Seeks Marketability

This Nebraska operation sees profitability in Angus genetics.

Story & photos by Troy Smith

The view from I-80 displays the importance of row-crop production along Nebraska's Platte River Valley. Seldom are fields of grain missing from the roadside panorama. The view from the road suggests the highway corridor traverses some country well-suited to growing row crops. Based on appearances, its farmers take their business seriously.

At mile marker 211 is the exit leading to Gothenburg. Situated some 220 miles west of Omaha, Neb., and 270 miles east of Denver, Colo., this community's economy depends heavily upon the production of corn, soybeans and alfalfa. The locals claim there are 60,000 acres of irrigated crops grown within a 15-mile radius of Gothenburg.

Most area farmers are progressive, interested in agronomic advancements and eager to adopt practical technology. They pay attention to plant genetics, seeking varieties offering optimum crop yields. Gothenburg native Todd Geiken agrees that genetics are important to crop production, but he considers genetics to be no less important to cattle production. In

►**Above:** Todd Geiken (left) and Shane Geiken plan matings to emphasize complementarity between females and sires. The brothers avoid extremes and try to blend genetics that balance growth and carcass traits with maternal characteristics.

►**Right:** When choosing females to retain for breeding, the brothers look for heifers out of dams whose records promise fertility and moderate milking ability.

his family's commercial cow-calf operation, genetic selection receives no less emphasis.

The Geiken family — brothers Todd, Shane and Wade, and their father, Norm — operates several ag-related businesses, including a grain elevator and a trucking firm. They raise grain and forage crops on about 2,600 acres. Todd and Shane take

primary responsibility for a cow herd numbering close to 1,600 head.

Their paternal great-grandfather was the first of their clan to manage cows in the hills south of Gothenburg. The operation passed on to succeeding generations, and gradually became more diversified. Eventually, the demands of other enterprises shifted some attention away

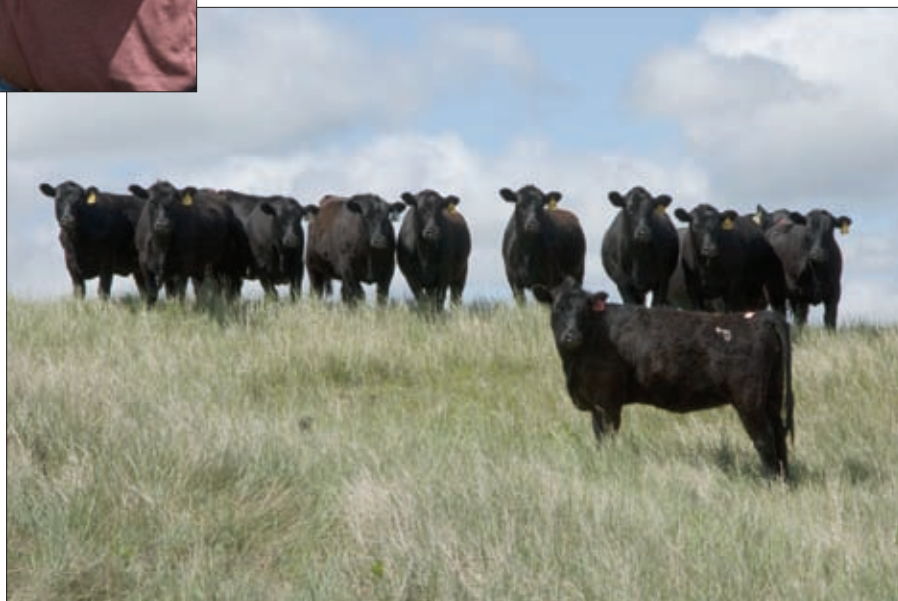
from the crossbred cow herd. For a while, before his sons became part of the operation, Norm Geiken was nearly out of the cow business. With this fourth generation's involvement came renewed focus, expansion and a new name: Eagle Hills Ranch.

Going straight Angus

"When we decided to get back in, we went with straight Angus. We wanted maternal traits and calving ease. Angus gave us that and enough outcross opportunity to meet our goals for growth," Todd says. "As much as anything, though, we wanted to raise calves that were marketable."

From the interstate highway, westbound strangers catch more frequent glimpses of grass, but most would be surprised at the amount of rangeland found just outside the Platte Valley. South of Gothenburg and across the river is an expanse of rough hills and canyons where the majority of Eagle Hills pastureland is located. Cattle are trucked, twice a year, between that summer range and winter quarters north of town, where most Geiken crop acreage lies.

The primary cash crops are corn, soybeans



and popcorn, and cows graze fields of residue during the winter. Supplemental feed resources include home-raised alfalfa, a little grass hay, and cane and wheat straw. During recent years, wet distillers' grains have provided an economical protein source when blended and fed with ground low-quality harvested forages. That allows a bigger share of high-quality alfalfa hay to be marketed for cash.

"We start calving in mid-February, with most calves born in March. We pair-out into some intermediate pastures until we get the calves worked and it's time to go to summer grass," Todd explains.

According to Shane, bulls are currently purchased from two different seedstock sources that methodically introduce fresh genetics to their proven breeding programs. Then, the brothers plan matings to emphasize complementarity between females and sires. The brothers avoid extremes, and try to blend genetics that balance growth and carcass traits with maternal characteristics.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) and dollar value indexes (\$Values) are used for bull selection, along with the seedstock producers' in-herd records. Phenotype is important, too. They look for easy-fleshing cattle with depth of rib and thickness over the top and in the quarter — "cattle with guts and butts," as Shane puts it. Concerned about the mature size of females they will retain as herd replacements, they believe cattle of frame score 6 are big enough. As calf-sellers, rapid growth from birth to weaning is important, and so is uniformity of type.

"We run groups of closely related bulls — mostly half-brothers — running each sire group with about 80 cows," Shane explains. "Calves are identified by sire group so we can evaluate their performance, and so we know which way we want to go when mating the daughters we save."

When choosing females to retain for breeding, the brothers look for heifers out of dams whose records promise fertility and moderate milking ability. The keepers are bred by artificial insemination (AI), and turned out with cleanup bulls that are closely related to the AI sire. A few young cows are bred artificially as well, and plans call for more of that. The brothers see AI as a way to access some of the best genetics available and hasten genetic improvement in their own herd.



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Keeping track

Knowing the lineage of each female they breed also aids in avoiding genetic defects resulting from recessive mutant genes associated with certain Angus cattle. The Geiken brothers say they had some bulls that were carriers of arthrogyriposis multiplex (AM), but it hasn't been a problem.

"And it won't be a problem for us," Todd

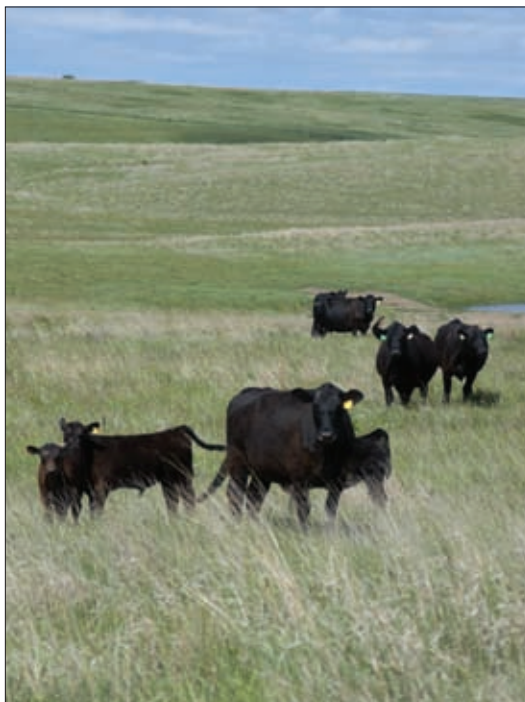
states, noting that fewer than 1% of the cow herd might be carriers, and steps are being taken to prevent propagation of the mutation in the herd.

"We can easily avoid mating a carrier bull with any females that might be carriers," he adds.

Recordkeeping at Eagle Hills Ranch has evolved from a simple paper trail to a computerized system. At branding time, calves are fitted with electronic identification (eID) tags, which allow entry of their individual identification numbers plus dam and sire-group information to the system. Thereafter, whenever calves are processed for vaccinations or health treatments, and when weaning weights are taken, all pertinent data is entered chuteside. Subsequent data collected on calves is added to their dams' production records, increasing the value of those records for evaluating daughters as potential herd replacements.

"We used to sell bawling calves, right off the cows," Todd says, "but it's been more profitable for us to wean and background the calves for at least 45 days. Up until the last few years we sold mainly through a local auction market, although we have retained ownership and fed out some of our cattle. We sold them on the grid and retrieved the carcass data when we could. We try to follow up with calf buyers, too, and collect as much data as we can."

The information they've gathered shows improvement in the percentage of calves achieving Choice quality grade and an



► Knowing the lineage of each female they breed has helped the Geiken brothers avoid genetic defects even though they have used some carriers of AM in the past.

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acceptable yield grade. The data suggest the percentage of calves that meet specifications for *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) has increased from 25% to 65%.

Four years ago, the ranch added age and source verification through a USDA-approved program, and became an approved source of non-hormone treated cattle (NHTC). Thus, the calves qualify for feeding programs targeting export markets. The brothers believe these steps have helped stimulate competition among calf buyers. Exposure to potential buyers also has increased since Eagle Hills Ranch started consigning a majority of its calves to video auctions.

Each of the last three years the Geikens have sold calves on a September sale for November delivery. They typically sort steers and heifers into three groups averaging 725, 625 and 525 pounds (lb.), respectively. Buyer response has been good and, thus far, the winning bids for heifers have differed little from those offered for steers.

“Video marketing has worked to our advantage, although we have sold some replacement-quality heifers at private treaty.



►They look for easy-fleshing cattle with depth of rib and thickness over the top and in the quarter — “cattle with guts and butts,” as Shane Geiken puts it.

And we’re not saying we won’t decide to retain ownership again. We’re trying to maintain some marketing flexibility and choose the way that offers the most profit potential,” Todd says.

By using proven Angus genetics, through planned mating, Todd and Shane are working to optimize economically important traits and increase the uniformity of their product. And they’re using management tools that add value

and create opportunities to access more markets. They’re optimistic about their future in the cattle business.

“We’re in a good area for raising cattle and crops, and there have been some opportunities to buy more land. We’ve bought some additional grass located near to us, and we’re trying to expand our herd a bit more,” Todd offers. “Long term, we think there is good reason to be optimistic.”

