

# Millennial Manpower



**Mentored by experience, set free to embrace change and make waves, the millennial generation is managing 21<sup>st</sup> century cattle differently.**

*Story by Paige Nelson, field editor; photos by Kasey Brown, associate editor*

**A**fter seven years as a stocker operation, KW Cattle Co. owner Roger Kraft's yearning for yearlings waned. The tight margins and unpredictable profits in stockers changed his focus from selling pounds to selling performance. In 2011, the stockers were sold and registered-Angus cattle took over the Fort Scott, Kan., grazing grounds. Such a dramatic shift in production goals required a new management strategy for the cattle operation.

Any good Angus breeder knows a great bull is produced from two great genetic sources — stacking the deck one might say — to produce exceptional quality. KW Cattle built its management team around sources of ambition and expertise. The goal: to create a renowned Angus breeding program. Nathan Wells, ranch manager, is a young, energetic decision maker with plenty of work ethic and motivation to accomplish the seedstock operation's goal of Performance Profit™ cattle.

"Things move fast today," says Harold

Miller, operator of business development for KW. "Nathan is not slow to make decisions, whether it's to buy a donor or turn one into a recipient."

From more than 30 years in the beef genetics industry, Miller knows matings, managers and what works in the bull business. When he joined KW, he saw great potential in those with whom he would be working.

"There was a sense of excellence here. They wanted to do more. If you want to be in this business, you have to have passion. That, maybe, is first and foremost, because there's a lot of hard nights," he explains.

Long, hard nights emphasize what assistant ranch manager Jeff Madison believes about the cattle he works diligently to produce. No matter the time, temperature or alternative, Madison doesn't shirk at an opportunity to care for his cattle.

"You've got to treat these bulls like they're your kids," he says.

Long-time friend and advisor for KW,



Matt Caldwell is relied on for his knowledge of the cattle industry and his eye for cattle. Thanks to his extensive contacts throughout the country, Caldwell is a source of networking and marketing for the young seedstock operation.

"We have relied on Matt for years to help us stay abreast of the fast-changing pace of the cattle industry. He has been from one end of the country to the other and understands the needs of the commercial men and women, and is a great asset to the team in building our Performance Profit cattle," says Wells.

Using four different sources of human potential, KW Cattle Co. believes it has a very bright future.

Why choose Angus as the keystone of the business and source of all present and future genetics?

"They're the best!" says Wells. Miller agrees.

► **Above:** KW Cattle Co. is helmed by (from left) Harold Miller, operator of business development; Nathan Wells, ranch manager; and Jeff Madison, assistant manager.

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“They can do it all,” he explains. “From a maternal standpoint to the harvest point, there just aren’t any hiccups.”

### Millennial management

Experts keep saying the millennial generation is different from all generations prior. They aren’t afraid of change. In fact, they seek it. When they find it — they incorporate it. That’s something Miller names as one of the attributes that sets KW apart from others.

“What we’ve done here, compared to any other opportunity that I’ve had a chance to work with, is we went after a higher level of cows to start than what most people can start with,” says Miller. “There’s a few females already on the property that if you put in all of their EPDs (expected progeny differences) in what I call economically important traits, they’ll sort to high percentile rankings in multiple traits within the breed.”

The improvement scheme doesn’t stop there. Miller says Wells and Madison aren’t benchmarking their herd to others in the region, but to the breed as a whole.

Being on the cutting edge of Angus genetics requires a strong pledge to emerging technologies, which KW Cattle doesn’t seem to mind. The ranch utilizes embryo transfer (ET), artificial insemination (AI) and *in vitro* fertilization (IVF). They also bank on young Angus sires backed by high-density (HD) 50K genotypes.



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“KW has made a tremendous commitment to embryo transfer. We’ve got an extensive group of cooperator herds,” notes Miller.

“With the ability to have HD 50K, where we didn’t have that five years ago, we really know what that animal’s going to do because we believe in that technology so much. So, in my opinion,” says Wells, “it would be ignorant of us to not go ahead and try and capitalize

on that, as opposed to waiting a year and a half when his accuracy is at 80%, and now somebody else is breeding a son of him.”

These technologies aren’t free, but KW Cattle Co. feels the investment in time, supplies and infrastructure is paying off.

“If we can IVE, then we don’t have to go buy a donor,” Wells figures.

Miller sees IVF as way to accelerate genetic progress and says it presents a marketable selling point for the operation.

“We already have used IVF. We have calves on the ground. It’s technology that’s emerging. It allows you to retrieve embryos from a cow more times in a year than you can through conventional flushing. You can actually go in and aspirate eggs out of the ovary every 10 days to two weeks and fertilize them in a petri dish.

“It allows you to reach into your yearling heifers much more quickly, without ruining them. The volume of influence from one cow can be pretty substantial. It gives you more uniformity in your offering,” he explains.

### Feet and flesh

According to the KW cattlemen, Performance Profit cattle are bred to work in any environment for any production scheme. To prove it, the yearling bulls are developed on fescue and prairie-grass pastures plastered with plenty of Kansas rocks.

“We want our genetics to work in different environments. That includes cattle that will work in fescue. But, if they’ll work here,



they'll work anywhere. The way we develop the bulls is definitely commercial-oriented," emphasizes Miller.

Some of the first KW bulls got their longevity test in central Texas. Wells and Madison viewed it as a way to gauge their product's standing on the commercial level.

When their bulls can succeed in central Texas — holding up on their feet and legs, holding their flesh and pleasing the customer, Wells says, "we know we're doing some things right. We also appreciate the feedback we get on the things we can work on."

Adds Madison, "If you can stand up in central Texas, you can stand anywhere."

Anywhere and everywhere just might be where this seedstock operation is headed. The youthful breeding program already has an international following.

One day in 2013 four Australian cattlemen dropped in at Rocky Mountain Sires and noticed a KW bull.

"They wondered who in the world KW Cattle were," Miller says, "so they got in contact with me and then Nathan. We've done business with them since."

He adds, "We've exported semen down there for them to use, and those calves have been weaned this spring and so we'll get that data. That will give us data information out of an entire different data set than AHIR® (Angus Herd Improvement Records). We like that different environment, different data set to see how our genetics will stack up."

However, the cattlemen don't just focus on the environment when they make matings. Wells says there's a change in the air in the way of commercial cattle production,



and he wants his bulls to be on the starting lineup.

"You're going to see more and more people begin to feed their cattle, because there's so much more money in it for them," he explains, adding that generational turnover will foster the change. "We need to make sure that we can offer that service, but that the same bull works for them if they just want to sell those cattle at the sale barn."

### **KW cattle community**

No matter the age, experience or ambition of the ranch decision makers, it takes an entire family's commitment to operate a seedstock program. To Angus families, it is almost a given that sacrifices will have to be made for the cattle. It's no different for the

wives of the KW cattlemen who support their husbands' hectic schedules and midnight calls.

It's just part of the job of a cattle producer to be busy, but staying busy and striving for excellence are two very different ballgames. KW Cattle Co. managers are busy because they are working to perfect their cattle.

"We're always trying to create the perfect animal to help better our customer's herd. While that's something that will probably never be reached, it's something we can definitely try and create," says Wells.



**Editor's Note:** Paige Nelson is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Rigby, Idaho.