

No Brag,

Just Facts

PHOTOS BY ERIN McMATH, COURTESY OF AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION

The Pelster brothers get the most out of their management.

by *Miranda Reiman*

Ken Pelster believes when you have good cattle for sale, you should spread the word.

The Bartlett, Neb., rancher runs a 600-cow commercial Angus herd with this wife, Carol, and brothers David and Dan. Each November they sell 300 feeder steers at nearby Elgin Livestock Sales' special Angus-influence auction. Pelster doesn't just unload his calves and hope for the best. Sale day is the culmination of an entire year's work. Indeed, it encompasses efforts from more than five decades of work.

"You can't rely solely on the sale barn to do the advertising," he says. "You've got to sell your own product, too." A month before the annual sale, Pelster puts together a letter listing the calves' management up to that point. He sends the one-page document to past buyers and feedlots, and also advertises with the Sandhills Cattle Association.

"I think it pays," he says, noting several return buyers throughout the years.

Uniformity

Beller Corp., of Lindsay, Neb., has purchased the heavy end of the steers for three consecutive years and entered them in the 2006 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). Cattle from that group won the steer division, with an 82% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance rate.

"From carcass to closeouts, we knew they were the kind of cattle that were going to do everything we needed," says Doug Beller, who runs the 3,500-head feedlot with brothers Dennis and Duane.

The Bellers returned detailed carcass data to the Pelsters, not yet a common courtesy in the arena of developing beef segment cooperation.

"That was interesting. I cross-referenced it back to the sires," Pelster says. "Some sires had more CAB-qualifying calves. Some sires that I thought would be real good, some of their calves didn't even make Choice."

Pelster says they do everything they can at the ranch to make sure the animals perform

well in the feedyard. All calves are vaccinated and weaned 40-45 days.

"You get them used to eating in the bunk," he says. "They'll get a light ration; they don't get pushed. That way they're not burned up. They respond good to feed for the feedyard."

They also stopped relying on a common production booster.

"The last three years we haven't implanted, and the calves are heavier now than when we implanted," Pelster says.

The brothers sort calves into two weight groups for sale, which differed by less than 100 pounds (lb.) this year. Their 50-day breeding season helps keep the weight spread narrow.

"That's the main reason we do it: uniformity," Pelster says. "It makes it a lot easier to merchandize them."

Records

It doesn't necessarily make calving season any simpler, though.

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“In the middle of March, we’ll average 30 calves a day for 10 days,” he says. That’s a good time to have family share responsibilities. Ken and Dan typically do most of the calving, while David takes over the feeding.

“If we’ve got a storm, we’re all three out there,” he adds. “I’m kind of in charge of the cow herd, but we make decisions together. The other two are in charge of feeding and the other stuff.”

In addition to herd manager, Ken could also be described as head recordkeeper.

“We tag all the calves when they’re born,” he explains. “At branding time, we tattoo everything with the year and the cow number, so they’re permanently marked.”

Replacement heifers get their cow tag and year brand at pregnancy-check. Pelster can easily cross-reference tag numbers and tattoos if a tag comes up missing.

Since 2004, they have been using AngusSource® tags.

“I would recommend them,” Pelster says, emphasizing the importance of properly transferring bull registration. “You can’t do anything without that.”

An added benefit of the genetic-, age- and source-verified program is the relatively inexpensive \$1 tag cost, he says.

“I don’t have a computer; I do this all by hand,” Pelster says. The records are every bit as detailed, though. “I could tell you the birth date of every cow in the herd.”

Pelster can also retrieve the weaning weight of each calf born on his place since



► Ken Pelster has hand-written records of his family’s herd dating back to 1958.

1958, when the ranch was under his dad’s direction.

Data-driven ranch management became second nature after so many years of keeping records, he says. “I wouldn’t know how to run it without them. I want to know what I’ve got.”

His data tell him he’s got a cow herd with a 93%-96% conception rate that survives on the available pastureland with few other inputs. The balance of early-season wet grasses and “rolling hill pastures” provide most of the feed needed for the cows, Pelster says. A 160-acre pivot planted to corn, alfalfa and some grass produces feed for the weaning and heifer-development rations.

“The cows have to make their own living,” he says, explaining that he tries to keep the expected progeny differences (EPDs) for milk and maintenance in check. Calving ease is also important. “We have over 600 calves

born in 50 days, so I don’t need to pull too many calves.”

Repro

Pelster buys bulls from three Nebraska suppliers: RRAM Livestock Inc. at Elgin, Dethlefs Angus Ranch at Ravenna, and Gray’s Angus at Harrison. He divides his herd by age into smaller groups for breeding and then manages half-sibling bulls together.

“Then I’ve got a pretty good idea what the calves are going to look like out of them,” he says.

Pelster uses artificial insemination (AI) sires on his replacement heifers.

“We synchronize and AI the heifers all at once to a low-birth-weight bull,” he says. “That’s worked out real good. We just AI them one time and whatever isn’t bred, we sell.”

The heifer conception rate has been around 70%, and all that have not made a place in the herd are sold at a special female sale in Elgin the beginning of February.

“That gives us more time to look and decide which ones to keep,” Pelster says. “Also, if we feed them a little longer, they sell better as replacements in the spring.”

It’s a tradition for four or five area Angus producers to sell at these two sales.

“The cattle are all pretty much alike,” he says. “There’s some pretty good quality in this area.”

For the Pelsters, that quality is rooted in a 55-year commitment to the breed.

“We never did get on the exotic kick like some of them did,” he says. “Our calves were usually just as heavy and outsold most of the exotics even when they were popular.”

Buyers of Pelster calves have discovered the secret to popularity in today’s market: uniform excellence in genetics, health, management, and the ability to hit the premium CAB target.



► Doug, Dennis and Duane Beller of Beller Corp. won the champion steer pen with steers purchased from Ken Pelster. Pictured at the awards presentation are (from left) Dennis, Dean and Doug Beller, Beller Corp.; Ken and Carol Pelster, Pelster Angus Ranch; and Naomi Gray and Jeff Pelster, Gray’s Angus.