



Time for Prime

Part 3: 'This is not hypothetical.'

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

It was just a bus tour through ranch country for South Dakota cattleman Jerry Kusser and his seedstock supplier ... until the email came in that made them both recall where they were at the time.

"I was scrolling through my phone, thinking, 'Is this a mistake?'" says Lee Leachman, Fort Collins, Colo. "It was just Prime, Prime, Prime."

Sure, there were other lessons that day, but these two were absorbed in a spreadsheet with its final tally. No mistake, the 2016-born calves were 68% Prime, and 88% qualified for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand or CAB Prime.

A proud smirk spread across Kusser's face: "I knew it!"

The remark was part good-natured banter he shares freely with those who know him best, but deep down, the rancher knew that was the kind of quality he'd been working toward his whole life.

The story begins long before the 2016 calves.

Staying the course

Kusser can name off the years without even having to stop and think. "1973, '75, and then in 1976 it got real bad."

That's when drought hit the family's K Lazy K Ranch, where Kusser and his brother, two cousins and a nephew manage 1,000 Angus females today in addition to farming enterprises.

He remembers many trips back and forth on Highway 212, hauling cattle as far away as Montana to find grass, halfway home to winter feed and finally to close-by pastures for calving. "The diesel fuel was 32¢ and pasture was cheap," the rancher says now.

Then, as if to add an exclamation point to "tough times," the 1980s ushered in the Farm Crisis, with its skyrocketing interest rates and tanking prices.

In the spring of 1976, the family purchased the place where Kusser and fiancée Jody Landgrebe now care for a large group of the mamas.

"We never raised one single spear of nothing on it, but guess what? We still had to make the payment," Kusser says.

On the other side of that hardship was the herd the family kept together. They started adding more and more Angus breeding to the mix, and "they just kept getting better as we turned them black," Kusser says.

That consistent base helped them survive drought again in 2002 and 2012, and, in

between, a tornado that hit the farm head on.

Staying the course is something of a Kusser family motto, even though "his dad was always on the cutting edge, not dragging his feet on anything," Landgrebe says.

Many in the area tried exotics in the 1970s and 1980s, but not them.

"We wanted to know if we were going in the right direction and which ones made the most money," the cattleman says. He would only sell steers to feeders who would allow him to pay to get carcass results, and that confirmed the Angus breed was working. Some data sheets go back to the early 1980s.

That's how they ended up progeny testing New Design 1407 for Leachman.

Data make a difference

"He'd been collecting carcass data for as long as anybody we know," the registered breeder says. "Jerry was one of the first herds that did a lot of AI (artificial insemination) to 1407."

The data proved the difference one sire can make.

"On the individual carcass data, he was way out in front of anything we had," Kusser says. "He was \$100 to \$150 better (per head) than the rest, just because of grid premiums."

Many sons of 1407 continued to influence the program. Later, bulls like GAR-EGL Protégé and Leachman Resolution added to the genetic pool.

Today, breeder and customer work together to be sure any cattle they test will meet Kusser's herd goals: moderate mature size, low feed intake and high marbling.

"We don't chase big weaning weights. We don't chase big yearling weights, because that just makes a big cow," Kusser says. "We are trying to stay moderate."

They weigh all winter feed with a mixer wagon, and track that data for Leachman.

"We feed a lot of these 2- and 3-year-olds, and we see feed intake going down," he says. During the growing phase, some lines of the cattle converted as well as 4.2 pounds (lb.) of feed per lb. of gain (4.2:1).

Several decades ago, Kusser and Ken Conway, GeneNet, discussed the carcass data and "where the money was." That cemented the need for emphasis on intramuscular fat (IMF), but the producer wasn't about to give up conception rates or calving ease.

"There's a lot of rhetoric in the industry that says these cattle aren't as good maternally," Leachman says. "We don't think that's right. What are the real drivers of maternal function? How well the cow does, and a lot of that depends on how big she gets and how much she milks, which really aren't highly correlated to marbling."

About three-quarters of the females are bred artificially, something the family has had success with for decades.

"We don't AI them all, but there's no faster way to improve your herd," Kusser says.

"Jerry is happier with the size and appropriateness of those females to his environment today than he was even 10 years ago, and they marble more," Leachman notes. "The mistake a lot of people make is that they've seen some of the high-marbling cattle that created females that lacked adaptability in their environment, because they were bigger and heavier-milking than what people wanted."

The "beauty of Angus," he continues, is that there is such diversity that high-marbling, lower-input genetics are out there. They are also looking to increase ribeye and better dressing percentage.

"You can find them and use them. Certainly the database and the expected progeny differences (EPDs) and DNA tests now make that all easier," Leachman says.

Disposition is a threshold trait Kusser has added to his list.

"We are getting older," he laughs.

Calving season emphasizes that need. Winter weather on the open plains often has them bringing pairs into one of four barns on the operation.

"I like calving season," the rancher says. "I just can't wait to see what comes out, when they're out there running around and start growing up."

They might take one or two fewer night trips out though. Landgrebe set up a Wi-Fi-enabled camera system, where they can watch progress from the office.

"Everything costs money, but I think that will pay for itself," Kusser says.

They've used individual electronic identification (eID) tags for the last 15 years and enter all data in CowSense.

"Jerry has a ton of discipline," Leachman says. "They're very keen on collecting the data and then very keen on making sure all their data is right."

That follows in other areas of management, too.

"We truly believe it's from conception all the way through to that calf until he is born, and then all the way through ... it will make a difference on his carcass," Kusser says. Mineral fills in nutritional gaps and switching to a 100% chelated formulation has improved intake and health.

"The calves eat it, too, and we very seldom doctor a calf after we wean," he says.

Less than 10 years ago, Kusser and Leachman were excited when the calves hit close to 100% Choice. Today, that would be subpar.

Hitting a higher target

The 458 steers hitting that 68% Prime mark did so with a 925-lb. average hot carcass weight.

The March-through-May-born calves weaned on the truck in late October, bound for Lincoln County Feeders in southern Nebraska. They started on feed without ionophores or implants, until they decided on conventional feeding and marketing. When they weighed 900 lb., they arrived at Kuner (Colo.) Feedlot for finishing.

"It looks to us like those premiums pretty easily justified feeding those cattle to a heavy weight and suffering the discount 4s on them," Leachman says, noting the 0.7-inch backfat and resulting 38% Yield Grade 4s (YG 4). "The decision

process as a feeder is, do I make money if I feed them one day longer?"

He credits a slower, longer feeding process with allowing expression of the marbling genetics, along with a heavier finishing-to-mature-weight ratio.

"I think there's a fairly subtle take-home: If you want to go after this Prime market, you really have to question whether you want really high yearling weights," Leachman says, noting this group was only in the top 40% for yearling weight (YW).

"Your goal needs to be 70% CAB or better, and with the genetics that are out there, if the market justifies it, you can get 70% or better," he says. "It's not hypothetical. This group did it."

Kusser has a quick solution for anyone wanting to copy his success: "They just need to come to me, and I can go buy them some bulls," he says. "We could start you real fast, just come buy some of my heifers, and I'll help you buy the semen and the bulls to breed them to. Genetics is where it's at."

It may sound like a wise-guy response, but it's rooted in truth.

"You've got to know where you are so that you have a benchmark. You've got to collect some data, and then you have to sit back and look at the EPDs on the bulls you used," Leachman says. "If the bulls you use this year are equal or less than the bulls you used last year, you're going to get equal or less results."

Kusser's not interested in that — not this year, not ever.

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Editor's Note: *Miranda Reiman is the director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



► Jerry Kusser has long been a proponent of receiving carcass data on his calves to know where and how to improve.