

A Trek Upward

Quality takes years of continued focus.

by *Miranda Reiman*

Reeses and Betsy Brown use their resources wisely. From grass and water to advice and information, the Beulah, Colo., ranchers take advantage of all the information they can get to make their operation more profitable.

"We've got quite a few of the things we need to get a first-class carcass," Reeves says. "We just need to move this in the right direction and keep pushing."

As 10-year members of U.S. Premium Beef (USPB), the Browns have set their goal on quality. Specifically, they want to reduce mature cow size while increasing percent Choice and lowering yield grades (YG).

Harvest groups from last year's calf crop of more than 400 steers and heifers ranged up to 86% Choice at Triangle H Grain and Cattle Co. The Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Garden City, Kan., has fed those cattle for the past nine years.

"Triangle H and [manager] Sam Hands are the most caretaking, dependable and honorable people," Betsy says. "We're fortunate to have our cattle there and work with them."

They work as a team with their coach. When Hands suggests vaccinations or management changes, the Browns implement them. He recalls health challenges the first year Triangle H fed yearlings for the couple. The cattle were wintered and summered before arriving in October.

"I was thinking this is going to be a cattle feeder's paradise, to have that much maturity on them," Hands says. "They'd been here about a month and got into a health situation."

The ranchers made changes for the next year, he says. "We started working on a vaccination and health program, and health has not been an issue as time went on," Hands says. "They've seen some definite benefits to that."

Not "doctoring" too many calves is a priority, Reeves says. "We try to use the best vaccinations we can use. They get a modified-live shot at branding in June, and they get a seven-way clostridial vaccination at pre- and postweaning." A general insecticide dewormer is given then, too.

Calves are fenceline-weaned six weeks in the pasture before going out for five or six

months of backgrounding on Kansas wheat ground, another change suggested by Hands.

"They've moved their market calendar up at least six months," he says. The Browns are now selling 1,300-pound (lb.) steers in August and September, a month or two earlier than they used to place 750-lb. yearlings on feed. That helps save their grass for the cow herd, which is one area of their operation the Browns keep a close eye on. Their pastures are divided into 70 individual pens.

"The management is cell-grazing," Reeves says. "We've been doing that since '86." They move the herd according to grass regrowth and moisture, as often as every day, never staying more than five.

"It's great for the country," Betsy says. "I like it for management, too, because it lets me go to the pasture and there are all the cows. I can look them over and go on to the next project."

The couple doesn't take their grass supply for granted, since they've been plagued with drought conditions off and on since 2000.

"We moved all of our cows to Oklahoma for two-and-a-half years while we let the ranch recover," Betsy recalls. This past year

they had reservations for the cows to go to a feedyard when driving rains came. "Within a week we had green grass. I never saw it grow so fast," she says. "The rest of the summer and fall were great."

Sticking with Angus

Their 45-year history in the beef industry has provided time to discover the merits of different breeds. The couple started with Hereford cows in central Texas, mixed with some Brahman, Santa Gertrudis and Beefmaster. Then, with the move to Colorado, Limousin and composite bulls were introduced into the herd. It wasn't until the late 1990s that the Browns began to use Angus.

They stuck with the breed, partly because of the advice available from their genetic source since 1999, Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan. Betsy says Mark Gardiner is "a great educator," and the Browns have done their homework.

"We are happy with where we're going now," Reeves states. "The Angus breed brings a

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lot of advantages, especially when you consider the Angus sire database. We enjoy and use the information available to us in terms of EPDs (expected progeny differences) and are really happy with the disposition of the cows.”

Switching breeds hasn't been a magical, overnight transition, however.

“We get some CAB® (*Certified Angus Beef*®) carcasses, so we know it's in the herd — it's just not been capitalized,” Reeves says. “I hate to say we haven't got the Yield Grade 4s under control and the quality grade as high as we would like. I assume it's still too much of the old genetics in there.”

Each year their percent Choice climbs. “We're creeping up — just creeping,” Betsy admits. “We just need to keep buying good bulls, culling our cows and heading that way. Also, it's important that we're keeping records and paying attention to the records we keep.”

Reeves says the game plan is in operation; now it's time to be patient. But that doesn't mean sitting on the sidelines.

“The exciting thing in moving into this challenge of improving quality is, we have more confidence with the Angus breed,” he

says. “We've got the tools, we're getting the genetics. We've got the handling and facilities, and with Triangle H and Sam, we've got the marketing tools.”

Homework

Hands gives credit to the couple for being “receptive” and doing that homework. As is typical treatment at Triangle H, carcass data is collected and returned with an index that relates that and feedlot performance back to individual animals.

“When you send them an index on the cattle, you feel like your time's well-spent,” he says. “You know they're going to look at it and make some changes.”

The Browns are not satisfied with the carcass quality in their herd, setting the bar higher each year.



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“Right now we're looking at any little thing that could be causing these numbers,” Reeves says.

Although results aren't instantaneous, Hands says they have seen directional shifts.

“As a result of genetic changes and the health program, performance and quality grades have certainly gotten better,” he says.

“They enjoy what they're doing and want to make a difference.”

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