

Been There, Done That



Feeders say their cow knowledge helps them and their ranching customers.

by **Miranda Reiman**

It's much easier to put yourself in someone else's shoes if you've been there.

At least that's what many Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feeders say about their experiences with cow herds. About one-third either own or manage cows in addition to their day-to-day feedyard management duties, and that can be a customer-service advantage.

"Most of the people I feed for are really good about wanting to know more," says Mike Hora, manager of Hora Prime Beef near Washington, Iowa. "They want to know what to do to have cattle that cut real well and make money while fitting today's grids." Hora also manages 100 Angus-based cows, which allows him to talk from experience.

"I'll give them nutritional and genetic advice," he says.

Paul Miller Jr., of Miller Cattle and Feedyards LCC, Torrington, Wyo., says having the dual role gives him credibility with his clientele.

"You can get to a rancher's level a lot easier," Miller says. "You can converse with them a lot easier and talk about the cow side of the business and herd management."

Miller has a club calf herd, but it's more than a hobby. That enterprise has grown so that he and his wife, Christine, sell around 60 show calves each year, and there are still a couple of semi-trailer loads to be finished at the feedyard.

Near Jamestown, N.D., Brian Amundson runs Bar V Ranch

Ltd., with 350-400 commercial Angus cows and a 1,500-head feedyard.

"There are some production complexities that sometimes, being just a cow-calf producer or a feedyard, you don't understand," he says. Looking at it from all angles helps determine the kind of cattle Amundson wants to raise and feed.

"We want a calf in the feedyard that can be efficient, put on pounds, be hardy, withstand the North Dakota weather and also produce a superior carcass," he says. Not only does he target that with his genetic program, he seeks out those cattle to buy. The advantage? These purchased cattle fit right in with his own on feed.

"My management style and the way I feed seem to match with Angus-cross cattle," he says.

For more than 20 years, David Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlot, Tabor, Iowa, fed cattle that piqued his interest.

► **Owning part of a registered Angus herd has given him a deeper appreciation of the full circle of the beef industry, says David Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlot, Tabor, Iowa.**

"I always wanted to get into the cow-calf end of things, producing genetics that we saw were profitable and worked in the feedlot," he says. When he and two partners had the chance to buy the Woodland Angus herd a few years ago, they went for it. Owning part of a registered Angus herd has given him a deeper appreciation of the full circle of the beef industry.

"We know that all of these genetics that we're producing are going to end up as a food product somewhere," Trowbridge says.

Although many of the feedyard managers started in the feeding industry, Sam Hands, Triangle H Grain & Cattle Co., has always come from the rancher's perspective.

"Dad bought a neighbor's 12 heifers after the blizzard of '57, and one of them had a calf at side. I bought it, and he and I have been in the cow business ever since," Hands says, noting that farming around Garden City, Kan., was their primary trade until then. After growing their cow herd considerably, the feedyard was added as a preconditioning location before evolving into the 4,000-head custom-finishing yard it is today.

Hands says that experience likely gives him an appreciation of where good cattle start.

"I always have a tendency to look more at the genetic side — whether that is with the cattle or the grains," he says. "Here, where we stem from an irrigated farming operation, we look at the cattle as a means of upgrading the value of the grain and pastures."

Of course that means that they're looking for more than generic cattle.

In pursuit of quality cattle

"I've had a lot of mentors and advisors over the years who have indicated that 'everyday' cattle keep the lights on and the bills paid, but the real profit is in the high-quality cattle," Hands says. "That's why we have chosen to pursue the cattle that we do feed and market."

But first they had to find out if their own cattle made the grade. In the early 1990s, they had been using artificial insemination (AI) for two decades. Calves were gaining 3.75 pounds (lb.) per day, converting feed to gain at nearly 6 lb., and heading to the packer weighing 1,275 lb. at 14 months of age.



► **"I have also made a huge emphasis in recent years on improving the disposition of my cattle," says Mike Hora, manager of Hora Prime Beef. "It only takes one or two dark cutters to convince you of that need."**



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► **Below:** Paul Miller Jr., of Miller Cattle and Feedyards LCC, Torrington, Wyo., says having the dual role as a feedlot manager and cow herd owner gives him credibility with his clientele.

"We felt like we pretty much had it all," he says. That was until they learned they were only reaching 40% Choice.

"We beat the cash, but it wasn't enough," Hands says. "Even though our performance was better than average, our quality grade was not."

They switched to Angus genetics and have been carefully monitoring their program so that their marks have improved to 90% Choice and better, with 4.25-lb. daily gains and pay weights beyond 1,350 lb.

Hands can draw on that when talking with other cow-calf producers.

"Most of the time people have not had the retained ownership experience and, until they see those first results, they don't know," he says. When the results come in, new customers must decide: "If their calves didn't do as well as they thought they should, would they try to learn from it and get better, or would they just change feedyards?"

Those managers who started feeding their own calves aren't about to switch feedyards, of course. They know better.

"I gear my cow-calf program somewhat differently than other people who do not have the opportunity to feed their cattle," Hora says. Feedlot performance is top of mind, along with health. "Then in recent times with grid marketing, I place a gigantic emphasis on the carcass."

He focuses his AI program on bulls with high marbling, along with cutability. Cleanup bulls come only from bloodlines that he's used with AI.

"I have also made a huge emphasis in recent years on improving the disposition of my cattle," Hora says. "It only takes one or two dark cutters to convince you of that need."

Using the information

All the carcass information he gets through the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) merges with his production records so that

he can cull based on complete data.

The added information allows Amundson the opportunity to see how management changes affect the final result.

"If we're going to implement a new implant strategy or different marketing program, we do it on cattle we have raised here on the ranch because we have a good understanding on what they'll do in a normal situation," he says. "So if we change a few variables, we'll see what outcome we get."

Trowbridge says having the direct connection to his herd genetics and being able to feed those animals that aren't retained as breeding stock makes his cows better.

"This herd had a lot of generations of high-marbling, high-production cattle," he says. "But when we have the choice to pick an animal, we pick one with the best marbling and ribeye combination that we can get while keeping all the other traits in line."

Genetic progress isn't easy to track in Miller's cow herd because he might have up to 20 different bloodlines each year.

"Those sires are selected for bone and hair, which isn't necessarily correlated with carcass quality," he says. "All of our cows are either AI'd or we put embryos in, so it's a pretty intensively managed deal."

They have a high percentage of calving difficulties and c-sections when compared to a typical commercial herd.

"That's one part of the industry that's not in correlation with the real world," Miller says. It's also a big addition to the workload. They hire outside help to get it all done, but he, his wife and three kids spend quite a bit of time working together, too.

"We show as a family. We calve as family, breeding — everything — we do it all together," Miller says.

Shared approach

Teamwork seems to be a common theme

when there's both a feedyard and cow herd in the picture.

In Hora's case, he and his wife handle pretty much everything from crops to the cows.

"There's a general lack of sleep and vacation time around here," he laughs. "Vacations are whenever we go somewhere to buy a new bull."

Amundson and his wife take care of their cow herd, but enroll the help of other employees with the feedyard and crops.

Although having partners may allow for more sharing of tasks, for both Trowbridge and Hands, there are still plenty of responsibilities to go around.

"There is a tremendous amount of work on the cow herd side of things, and just the recordkeeping to manage a purebred herd is a lot of hours," Trowbridge says. One partner manages the day-to-day care for the cattle, but Trowbridge makes selection decisions and registers the cattle.

Hands runs Triangle H with his two brothers, a nephew and several employees.

"As the operation has had the good fortune to grow, the thing that goes along with that is growing people," he says. "We have different people who have their areas, but it depends on the time, the season, the weather, the mission of the week, as to what they'll be doing besides daily chores."

Although it's not easy to juggle it all — from scooping bunks to pulling calves, or from harvesting corn to weaning to processing — all of these FLP partners say there is a sense of satisfaction in taking an animal from start to finish.

It also gives them some specialized knowledge, better communication opportunities and the ability to tell their customers with sincerity, "I've been there."

