



Trading Places

Part 2: North Dakota ranching family considers quality while raising Angus seedstock.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Chad Ellingson mounts his horse just before daybreak. He settles into his saddle and looks out across his own North Dakota hills, clearly right at home.

“Oh, there are other ways to make a living, but it sure wouldn’t be as interesting,” says the fourth-generation Angus rancher.

Ellingson’s not alone. To his left and right are sons Stetson and Jameson and daughters

Sierra, Medora and Sheridan. His wife, Julie, stands nearby taking it all in. Cattle run in her blood, too, and when two join together with a love for agriculture and even more for one another, what’s there to do but carry on the legacy?

It’s a refreshing sight. For as much as they take advantage of the technologies of artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer

(ET) for their registered herd of 550, they do just as much the old-fashioned way — on horseback, around the dinner table, with family.

“I wanted to be a rancher all of my life,” Ellingson says. “That was my dream. When you get to live that out next to your family, you have to step back and say, ‘There couldn’t be a better way to make a living.’”



► **Left:** Ellingson Angus, Saint Anthony, N.D., strives to raise livestock that reflect an attention to detail that goes far beyond making money and satisfying customers. Pictured are (from left) Julie, Sheridan, Chad, Medora, Sierra, Stetson and Jameson Ellingson.

The Saint Anthony land that nurtures a fifth generation of Ellingson stock has been in Julie's family for ages. Chad grew up just to the north in Maddock, N.D., and when the two married, they blended their own small herds and later settled on the place Julie called home as a girl.

More than cattle people, the Ellingsons were born to Angus, each with grandfathers who raised registered blacks in the 1950s. Their livestock reflect an attention to detail that goes far beyond making money and satisfying customers. They like what they do and they're good at it, making all those early mornings and nights chasing the sun worthwhile.

"We think Angus cattle are pretty special," Ellingson says. There's a glimmer in his eye and a hint of a smile that says he means it.

He highlights their adaptability, maternal nature and survivability all before his hook: the consumer.

"When people think of a great eating experience, Angus beef is what they want on

their plate, and we want to be involved with a breed that is important to the consumer."

No matter the harsh winters, torn fences or cows that "often set your schedule for you," the family's commitment to the end product holds steady.

It's true the cattle sold through February's annual Ellingson Angus production sale serve commercial herds near and far instead of heading directly to the consumer's plate in some high-end steak house in Bismarck, but that's no reason to lose sight of how the genetics perform for those ultimate customers.

"We have a strong, working relationship with many feedyards, so we get data back on how our cattle perform in the feedlot and on the rail," he says.

In addition to the seedstock herd, the land and family support 250 commercial cows managed with the same mind-set when it comes to mating decisions.

"I think you can breed cattle that are balanced from a maternal standpoint," Ellingson says, "where the same cattle are earning quality marks on the rail."

The rancher uses all tools and technologies to breed a cow that will thrive and be efficient at home on the ranch, "but at the same time

CONTINUED ON PAGE 254



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Trading Places: Part 2 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 253

be the cow that produces a bull that will go and produce calves that are efficient in the yard and at the end of the day will hang a really high-quality carcass.”

If that seems daunting, Ellingson is here to dispel any naysayers. Once a beef sire procurement manager for Genex Cooperative Inc., he spent years honing his skills in the science and possibility behind the breed he loves.

He culls with that knowledge in mind.

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More importantly, they have to perform in every aspect of the industry. Every segment.

Ellingson helps market many of his customer's calves to the feedyard. That's where it's about keeping problems and costs at bay and efficiencies and profits on the rise.

“We sell bulls to commercial cattle producers, and many of them run straight-Angus cattle,” Ellingson says. Eighty percent of those are repeat customers year after year. “If the feeder can get premiums on those carcasses, it all trickles back to them wanting those calves the following year.”

While he may not hold the ownership papers, the seedstock producer is thorough before and after a sale. On the ranches,



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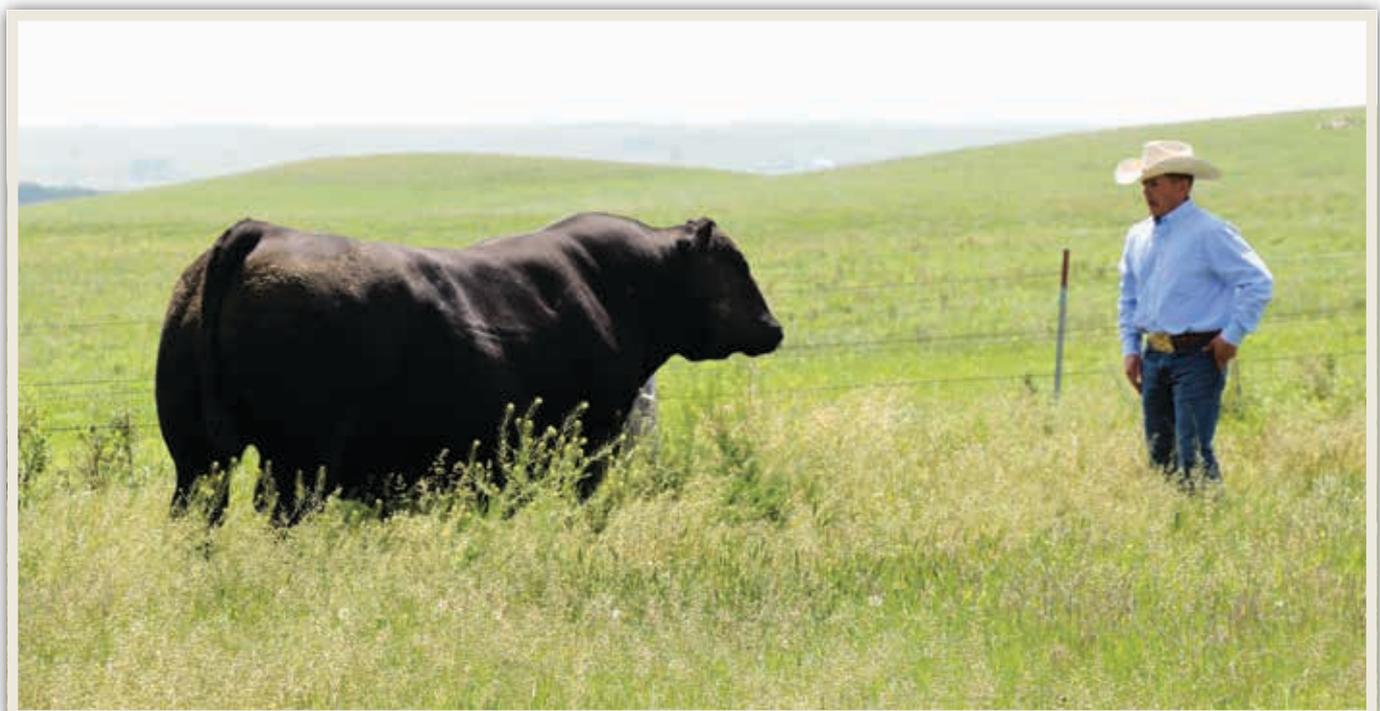
in the yards, Ellingson is anything but a spectator. He visits the feedyards to inspect his customers' calves and hears firsthand the results of how their cattle are performing.

“To ensure our genetics are producing a profit, it's important that we get out and see our cattle,” he says.

The 2015 sale featured 175 bulls and 40

registered females. Most bull customers came from the Dakotas, Montana and Nebraska, “but we do sell bulls across America,” he says.

Planning never stops, nor do the relationships between Ellingson Angus and its customers. Just like the cattle, but important in other ways, people are a priority.



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“They’re a big part of our program, and we hope to be a big part of theirs. It’s a working relationship.”

It’s a family one, too.

Up with the sun, with determination in their eyes, the Ellingson gang faces each morning with a purpose. There’s school, FFA and 4-H, friends and fun, but also a lot of hard work and lessons along the way.

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With a glance at the family’s real legacy, their father adds, “I think they realize they have the privilege of feeding the world.”

Next month we’ll conclude the three-part series as Ellingson trades places with Dale Zimmerman and chefs Dusty and Alan.



Editor’s Note: *Laura Conaway is a producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



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