



# Every Little Bit Adds Up

Jim and Maureen Skavdahl receive CAB's  
2007 Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

**A** little at a time adds up over the course of several years. Jim and Maureen Skavdahl's Lower 33 Ranch near Marsland, Neb., has steadily grown and improved with that philosophy.

Both came from ranching roots, but made their own way acquiring land and cattle as they could. The Skavdahls now own and manage 800 cows on 24,000 acres and manage an additional 600 cows on 17,000 acres in the rolling Sandhills of western Nebraska.

"The guy who owned this place was 90 years old, so I rode a colt down here one day to ask him if he'd sell it to me," Jim says. The rancher gave the place to his two children, who then leased it to Jim with the option to purchase — one he and Maureen exercised when they married in 1976. The couple bought cows from Jim's dad and at a neighbor's dispersal and have been building their operation ever since.

Fine-tuning the herd with the same steady precision has also yielded constructive results.

"At the start, we focused on performance," Jim says. "Then, as this carcass thing came into play, we started making sure everything was positive for performance on the fairly good carcass bulls we bought.

"We always made sure that gentleness, udders and function — the basic fundamentals of a good cow herd — came first. Then we added carcass," Jim says.

## Pattern of performance

They've been able to track those herd changes through performance and carcass data received from Beller Feedlot of Lindsay, Neb. The Skavdahls have fed part of their calf crop with the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feeder for the past five years, sometimes retaining part ownership and other years selling full interest.

"We pretty much call Jim every time we sell to give him the weights," says Terry Beller, owner-manager of Beller Feedlots. "Then when I get the grading information back I call him, because he's always as anxious as I am to get it. It's just so important to him."

Beller nominated the Skavdahls for CAB's Commercial Commitment to Excellence award, which they accepted Sept. 15 at CAB's annual conference in Savannah, Ga.

"Their grade and performance has been improving every year," Beller says. The yield grade (YG) 4s have simultaneously decreased. "They're really consistent and push 3.5 pounds (lb.) per day on gains. That's really good, because we don't push the implants. The cattle are doing that on their own."

Performance has been important to the Skavdahls since the first year they fed cattle.

"You can't lose sight of performance. If you put them in the feedlot they better convert,"

CONTINUED ON PAGE 156

► **Above:** Maureen and Jim Skavdahl have steadily grown and improved their Lower 33 Ranch near Marsland, Neb.

**Every Little Bit Adds Up** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 155

Jim says. "It doesn't make a difference what their carcass is if they don't convert."

From 2003 to 2005, the feed conversion on the ranchers' calves improved from 6.79 to 6.35. Three years of carcass data on Skavdahls calves show that increased efficiency was in tandem with a growing emphasis on marbling. In 2003, at 19.3% *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand acceptance, the cattle were well above the national average, but their cattle improved to 33.8% CAB in just two more years of feeding.

"The carcass thing starts on the ranch with good nutrition for the cow and a good vaccination program," Jim says. "Then you get the calves to the feedyard, and they have to know how to feed them. Then your end product is a pretty nice carcass."

Maureen adds, "But, you've got to start out with the right genetics, so it's all a big ball of wax."

**Culling for excellence**

To make those genetic changes more quickly, the Skavdahls artificially inseminate (AI) all of their heifers and the top 100 cows.

**Terry Beller, owner-manager of Beller Feedlots, Lindsay, Neb., says the Skavdahls make steady improvements in their cattle every year. The CAB-licensed feeder nominated the Skavdahls for CAB's Commercial Commitment to Excellence award.**

"It seems like we've really seen improvement in the heifers' progeny," Maureen says. If improvement falls short, there's room to cull; they keep back more replacements than needed and sell 3- and 4-year-old bred females.

"It's really nice to sell them at that age, because you know which ones go," Jim says.

That extra evaluation time also earns them a premium. "A lot of people don't want to calve out heifers, and they'll pay more for 3- or 4-year-olds."

Disposition is important to both the Skavdahls and buyers of their breeding stock.

"We're really hard on that," Jim says. "In the feedlot, it doesn't hurt to have them gentle. They're not looking around; instead, they're down eating."

Maureen says the labor shortage at the ranch and feedlot dictate cattle that are easy to work with. Just two full-time hired men help keep the large ranch operating.

"People are getting older in the ranching business, so it doesn't hurt to have that gentleness in there," she says. Those who buy their heifers and cows have stressed the importance of that, too.

Structure, disposition and now feedlot traits sort out which cows stay and which ones go.

"We are just getting situated now to be able to cull cows based on carcass traits," Jim says. Of course, identification (ID) and data have always been on an individual basis. "If

► Disposition is a priority for the Skavdahls, who say the benefits are evident in the cow herd and in the feedlot.



you've calved them out year after year, you know. You know cow number 260 and what you bred her to."

Still, computerizing those mental notes makes them easier to evaluate.

"It takes so much time to do all of that, but we've got it on the computer now, and we go back and look," Maureen says. "We cull based on those numbers."

Eliminating outliers has been a continual journey, but they're starting to realize the exact value of that focus. Skavdahl heifers sold to Beller Feedlot brought home the heifer division champion honor in the 2006 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) with 47.2% CAB and Prime, with no grid discounts.

"That group was really representative of our cattle," Jim says.

### Stewards of the land

As their cow herd increases in quality, the couple hopes to continually improve the land, too. Doing a little bit each year, they've planted windbreaks and become active in protecting the water supply.

"You save a lot more when you live on a



► The Skavdahls now own and manage 800 cows on 24,000 acres and manage an additional 600 cows on 17,000 acres in the rolling Sandhills of western Nebraska.

ranch, because you're always improving it," Jim says, noting that they reinvest in it every chance they get.

They share that message with different non-ag groups, like the high school teachers who stopped at their ranch this summer to learn about beef production. It was important to the Skavdahls to show them how cattle work can be part of a healthy environment.

"Most ranchers are real stewards of the land," Maureen observes. "This is how we make our living."

Years of drought have threatened pastures and the ability to irrigate. They have only one center-pivot irrigation system that's custom-harvested and used for corn and corn silage.

"Pivots are nice, but you don't want to dry up the groundwater, because your real production in this country is hay and pasture," Jim says. "It's not farm country."

In addition to the land that surrounds their ranch home, they stock cattle on the nearby, historic Agate Springs Ranch and manage the Carlson Ranch. They share equipment among all three places, but they manage the Carlson Ranch herd separate from their own. The same management philosophy applies, though.

"We've tried to improve their herd quality quite a bit, too," Jim says. The Carlson Ranch heifers, fed at Beller Feedlot, placed second and third in the 2005 NACC.

"You can kind of make a good living with that much ground, but it's also quite a headache to run, keep good help and keep everything organized," Jim says.

### Personal interest

All four of Jim and Maureen's children have spent time working on the ranch before leaving to pursue their careers.

"The kids were good stockmen, good horsemen," Jim says. "It's a hard, work-intensive way of life, and if you want to really get rich, I don't think it's probably the business to be in."

Maureen counters, "No, but you've got to love it."

Although their children are spread across the country — a cardiologist, a veterinarian, a teacher turned full-time mom and one studying law — they all stay connected to it.

"They're always very interested in the ranch," Maureen says. "I think partly they wanted to go out and do their own thing. They learned a lot out here, though."

After graduating from the University of Wyoming, where they met, there was never any doubt Jim and Maureen's future was in the beef industry.

"We're lucky that we're both interested in range and livestock," Jim says. "We make a better team, because we both enjoy the same thing."

Their custom feeder even picked up on that.

"They work really hard at it. They don't have a lot of hired help, so you know Jim and Maureen are side by side," Beller says. "It's that kind of people we really enjoy dealing with. They really take a personal interest in it."

