

Focused on the Future

These young South Dakota Angus enthusiasts are dedicated to building their seedstock business in the breed.

by Kindra Gordon

For many high school and college students, having their own Angus operation someday is a goal they may dream about but aren't quite sure how to make happen.

South Dakotans Jon Millar and T.J. Gabriel have both made raising registered Angus right after college a reality. Millar; his wife, Breezy; and their young son, Ryle, today operate Millar Angus with 220 registered Angus cows near Newell, S.D. Gabriel, who is engaged to be married in September, owns Deep Creek Angus Ranch, which includes 120 purebred Angus at Midland, S.D.

In the nine years since graduating from college in 1999, these two young men have established and built their respective Angus herds, and they conduct an annual production sale together in Philip, S.D., each February.

How did they make their Angus dream a reality? Here, Gabriel and Millar share the path they've taken during the last decade.

Why did you want to get into the registered Angus business?

Millar: My parents, Ellis and Pat, raised registered Angus cattle at Onida, S.D., for 35 years and still raise Angus cattle today in Montana. With that upbringing, I loved cattle and started buying a few head when I was in high school and continued to add to my herd while I was in college. When I graduated from South Dakota State University (SDSU) in 1999 with a general agriculture degree, I came back to the ranch because I knew raising Angus cattle was what I wanted to do.

Gabriel: My family has ranched here in Haakon County for more than 100 years, so cattle have always been part of my life. We had commercial cattle, but in high school I started with some registered Angus. I attended Western Dakota Vo-Tech in Rapid City for ag and ranch management. I knew I needed to get my education, but I wanted to return to the ranch as soon as possible, so I took the two-year vocational route. During and right after college I worked with a neighbor and long-time Angus breeder Bonnie Sivage. She taught me a lot about the seedstock business, and I knew this was what I wanted to do.



►T.J. Gabriel and his fiancée, Jeanine Endres.



►Jon and Breezy Millar and their son, Ryle.

How did you get the financing and land to set up your Angus operation?

Millar: During my last semester of college, I approached three banks for a cow loan. They all told me I had a college degree, and I should go get a job. The fourth bank I went to was First National Bank in Fort Pierre, S.D. The loan officer, Morgan Larson, offered me a job. When I said, "No, ranching is what I really want to do," he gave me my first cow loan, and they are still who we bank with today.

Around Onida, where I grew up, there is a lot of valuable cropland, and it's difficult to find land to expand with cattle. So in the fall of 2001, Breezy and I were engaged and we were able to find some land to lease near her hometown of Sturgis, S.D. I had 75 registered cows put together when I left my parents' operation and have been slowly building the herd up from there.

In 2005, Breezy and I bought a ranch with 1,400 acres near Newell, S.D. At that same time, Petry Angus in North Dakota was dispersing, so we purchased 40 cows from them to expand our herd.

Gabriel: I'm on the ranch I grew up on. My grandparents, Billy and Arlyne Markwed, ranch 1 mile north of my place. I began to purchase this place from my grandparents when I came back from college in 1999 and, to date, have about 2,000 acres. I have a great relationship with my banker, Tim Larsen of Bankwest, but due to lower interest rates and the Beginning Farmer program, I got most of my financing through the Farm Service Agency (FSA). My grandparents still raise commercial cattle, and I help them with labor, and we share machinery costs. They wanted to see the ranch passed on to the fifth generation; I couldn't be here without them.

What did you learn through the process of getting started and going on your own?

Millar: It's not easier when you leave your parents' operation. All the little things add up, and everything is solely your responsibility: the repairs, fuel for the tractor, etc. That was a big adjustment. Everything falls on your shoulders.

Breezy works off the ranch, and we are fortunate to have her parents nearby so we are sometimes able to share labor, for which we are very thankful.

Gabriel: The responsibility is solely yours. There are a lot of things to contend with, but the main thing is that you enjoy what you do. Finances will always be an issue. I try to have a good business plan and stick to a budget. I work off the ranch, too, as an artificial insemination



(AI) representative and doing pregnancy-checking, so that helps with income.

On the ranch what are your biggest obstacles?

Millar: Finances. Input costs are so expensive, whether it's machinery parts, fuel or feed, we just have to absorb it as a cost of operation. We are always trying to find ways to cut expenses here and there.

The drought has also been a big obstacle, always having to round up enough grass and hay for the herd. The drought has slowed our ability to expand some. We were close to 250 head, but had to sell off some cows because of the dry conditions.

Despite the hurdles we have faced, we are still glad we chose this line of work. We love what we do.

Gabriel: Not being able to control the weather, markets and fuel prices are all obstacles, but drought has been the toughest. We've had drought conditions since 2001. I had a herd of commercial cows and had to sell them in order to keep my registered cows together.

Despite the challenges, you just have to try and plan the best way you can, and find better ways to market your cattle and keep costs down.

What services from the American Angus Association have been helpful to you? What would you like to see more of?

Millar: I use the online Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) program to input data on our herd and register calves online. It makes recordkeeping fast and easy.

Gabriel: I use the AHIR services and love the American Angus Association web site. That's a great tool to turn data in. Both Jon and I have used AngusSource® in the past to tag and market our feeder calves. We've also collected carcass ultrasound data.

Probably the best asset has been our regional manager, Vern Frey. He has been a huge help and source of knowledge.

In the future I'd like to see the Association help educate producers about DNA testing, like GeneStar®, and the feed efficiency markers, such as how to better use that information and how it may someday be used in expected progeny differences (EPDs).

How did your joint production sale come about? What have you learned about having a sale?

Gabriel: I had a sale the first couple years on my own, but because I only had a few head and so did Jon and Breezy, it made sense to work together to offer larger numbers at our sale. It has worked really

well, and it is a great way to cut advertising expenses by splitting the cost.

I was new to the seedstock business and had to build my own customer base from scratch. I aim to get to know my customers and their needs. I recognize that it is important to be there for your customers year-round. You can't just sell bulls one day a year; it's a full-time job.

Millar: The joint sale has been a great way to expand while keeping costs down. Breezy (who has an advertising degree) places all the advertising and handles the ad and catalog design for the sale. We've learned that marketing bulls is a year-round job. You need to be selling your bulls, your program and providing customer service 365 days a year if you want to have a successful sale. It requires a lot of hard work, but it is very rewarding.

What are your goals for your operation for the future?

Millar: A few years back we set a goal to sell registered replacement heifers in our sale, and we're excited that we were able to do just that during this year's production sale. When it comes to our future goals, we'd like to have 350 registered Angus cows, so we're working on growing our herd. We would also someday like to hire a full-time person to help with the day-to-day operations. In regard to our sale, we would someday like to hold it at our ranch.

Gabriel: I'd like to keep expanding slowly over the next 5-10 years. My goal is 200 registered cows. I'd like to regularly market 50-60 purebred bulls. I've had it hammered into my head to focus on the cow and stress maternal traits.

In the future I'd also like to market some females as replacements to bring more money back to the ranch. I would also like to start buying back some of my customers' females and either market them as open replacements or breed them and offer bred females.

What advice would you give to someone else who is just starting out with a registered cattle operation?

Millar: If you really love what you do, it doesn't seem like work. There will be obstacles and challenges in whatever career path you take, but you can be successful if you work hard at what you love. The good Lord never brings you up to something you can't get through.

Also, ranching is more than just a way of life, it's a business; you've got to be smart, money wise. It doesn't matter if you're a registered or commercial producer, you need to be good at marketing your calves. It's a competitive marketplace.

The last piece of advice is that it's important to be conservative, but sometimes you have to take a risk. I think back to when Breezy and I leased our first place; it seemed like we were taking a big risk, but we worked hard and it helped us get to where we are today. Then, when we decided to buy the place we are on now it was another big step, but owning land had always been a big goal of ours and we've never been sorry.

Gabriel: Set goals on the type of operation and cattle you want to raise and stick with your goals. Stay true to your plan and your program and you'll do well. The first couple of years were tough, but once people saw the type of cattle I was trying to sell, it started to turn around.

Build a strong relationship with your customers. Talk to them throughout the year and see how the cattle are working. If there is a problem, fix it. Repeat customers will keep you in business. If people don't want to buy you and your program, it doesn't matter how good your cattle are.

Build relationships with breeders who have been in the business. They are a wealth of knowledge. They have seen the trends and have been through the good and bad times. Don't be scared to ask questions. Most importantly, enjoy what you do.

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