

Leading with Cows

Registered Angus herd complements diversified Kansas farm.

Story and photos by **Melissa Leander**

Neal Haverkamp knows his bull customers have demands beyond their cow herds. After all, the Bern, Kan., seedstock producer operates as part of a diversified family operation, building the enterprise on careful attention to what customers want. He extends that definition to both bull buyers and beef consumers.

“We’ve always had a commercial cow operation,” Haverkamp says. “The Angus business came about because I bought six heifers back in 1993. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to get into the bull business, but I knew Angus was the breed to use, whether that was registered or commercial.”

A few years later, he decided to grow the purebred core, first by adding females from Rinkes Cattle Co. of Holton, Kan. As Angus genetics built a better Haverkamp commercial herd, the opportunity came up to buy the entire Cypresshurst Angus herd in 2000 from Bob and Glenda Hall, Leavenworth, Kan.

“The timing was right because we wanted to expand, and Bob had a great set of maternal-trait cows — that’s where we’ve always started,” Haverkamp says.

Timing and opportunity soon brightened all other aspects of his life: He got married. Wife Marya would become a partner in every sense of the word.

Nemaha Valley Angus (NVA) was formed in 2003 when Haverkamp and his four brothers decided to combine their respective operations into one to become more efficient in the use of labor and equipment and to capture the economies of scale of a larger operation. Expansion would lead to 500 cows, with 200 registered, including 30 fall-calvers more recently purchased from Molitor Angus at Zenda, Kan.

“We saw Molitor as the leading herd in Kansas for producing Pathfinder cows,” Haverkamp says. “That goes hand in hand with my belief that maternal traits come first.”

Marketing

When he was sure that he wanted to be in the bull business, Haverkamp still had some initial concerns over how to find customers. “At first it was hard to get people to buy bulls,” he notes. “But once we got a few out there and people had success with them, word of mouth helped us win more customers.”



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The first traits in demand were calving ease, disposition and growth. “Then they started saving heifers and decided the maternal traits were a strong point, so we keep building on that,” Haverkamp says. Four years ago, he started selling commercial bred females in a special cow sale at Marysville Livestock Inc., about 40 miles west.

“We’ve come to the point now where all the guys who’ve bid on them in the past keep coming back,” he says. “We have even sold bulls to those buyers, and others are starting to ask.”

According to Jim Dalinghaus, commission market manager, the reputation is well-

deserved. “Neal’s cattle produce uniformity,” he says. “When people can sample from his cow herd as well as bulls, they can get a high-quality, uniform calf crop every year.”

The NVA web site (www.nv-angus.com) says, “Our goal is to continue to improve feedlot and carcass characteristics while not straying from the fundamental strengths of the Angus breed.”

Udder quality is the No. 1 trait Haverkamp looks for in selection. “Of course, that’s not too limiting in the Angus breed,” he says. Expected progeny differences (EPDs) for milk can be in the mid-20s, while birth

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weight EPDs hit a ceiling around 3. Most customers either farm full time in other enterprises or work in town, so they can't afford to worry about calving or poor udders.

NVA focuses on local customers in northeast Kansas to the Missouri border and a few counties into Nebraska. However, a few customers live as far away as western Kansas and northeastern Nebraska.

"We like to focus on selling bulls in our area where our brand and our name mean something," Haverkamp says. The sales method of choice is private treaty to those who respond to advertisements in local farm papers or hear from referrals.

Building the brand

Haverkamp tries to improve his cattle, brand and reputation by aiming for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand target. He feeds steers from the commercial herd, and some bought from customers, at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Gregory Feedlot near Tabor, Iowa, and with Bob Wehrs, a Seward, Neb., feeder who specializes in sorting cattle for the grid. Feedlot and carcass data are reported back to his customers.

NVA began feeding in 2001 with a Kansas Angus Association project that showed 25

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head finished with a value spread of \$529 difference from top to bottom. "I think that's probably what got me going more than anything," Haverkamp says. "We still see some variation, but we've improved. From that next year's cattle achieving less than 3.7% CAB, last year our calves went 31.7%. So we're getting there."

Indeed, a pen of NVA steers enrolled in last year's National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) made 41% CAB. In April 2007, a harvest group of 25 steers less than 15 months old went 100% Choice with only one Yield Grade (YG) 4, and 48% met CAB qualifications. "That's the kind of progress we



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have been waiting for," he says.

The best-grading calves always come from the youngest females in the herd, too, following a drive to add marbling without giving up anything else. "There are plenty of Angus bulls we can choose from that have it all," Haverkamp says.

Customer service is evolving. "Most of our producers have relatively small herds, and we want to provide some help with marketing. They need to find ways to get in on the premiums if they are going to spend the money on genetics," he says. "That's my job as a seedstock producer, to provide advice and opportunities for marketing cattle, not just providing the genetics."

Dalinghaus appreciates Haverkamp's approach. "Neal is very apt to the market and what it demands of cattle. He can match a producer's cow herd with his bulls to produce the cattle that the industry needs," he says.

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A few more customers are showing interest each year, he adds. That's encouragement enough for NVA to stay involved and improve at every level, adding value to cattle and beef.



► Marya and Neal Haverkamp's son Dane, already a junior member of the American Angus Association, will blaze a trail for his new little sister, Addie.