

“You don’t build up a quality herd by hanging on to your inferior animals. Culling is one of the best tools you have.”

— Lon Wadekamper



Save the Best, Cull the Rest

Setting your culling bar high can be an expensive proposition, but if you are seedstock producers Lon and Sheri Wadekamper, it is just part of the program.

Story & photos by Ed Haag

The name given to a seedstock operation can say a lot about its owners and how they manage their business. For example the “LGW” in Lon and Sheri Wadekamper’s LGW Ranch is short for “Let’s go work.”

“If you aren’t willing to work around here; you are gone,” Lon says, smiling.

The Wadekampers’ work ethic applies to both man and beast, says Steve Coleman, a longtime bull customer who has a large commercial calf operation at Molalla, Ore. With an annual culling average that in some years adds up to one-quarter of their herd, the Wadekampers practice what they preach, he says.

“Lon has bought a lot of cows from

different outfits, and if they don't work out that first year and raise a calf the way they are supposed to, then they are culled," Coleman says. "He doesn't seem to mind culling something that he might have paid a little too much for."

Coleman, who is regularly called upon to judge bulls at regional consignment sales, admits to being a beneficiary of Lon's penchant for culling. "Three years ago I bought 47 of those cows that Lon said didn't fit into his program, and I've still got most of them in my herd," he explains. "His culls are still better than everybody else's."

The Wadekampers don't just focus on heifers and cows. During the last seven years, their bull culling average has been more than 20% (see Table 1, page 108). Sheri notes that because of LGW's long-term commitment to improving the quality of their genetics, they refuse to back off on culling just because their earlier efforts are starting to bear fruit.

"This year we had over 200 bull calves and prepared 150 for the sale," she says. "We are still in the process of pretty heavy culling."

Culling for quality

The reason the Wadekampers maintain a strict culling regimen is simple. They are on a mission to produce the best genetics they can possibly produce, as quickly as they can possibly produce it. For the Hermiston, Ore., Angus breeders, this means stacking generations of artificially insemination (AI)-sired calves from proven AI sires while having zero tolerance for less-than-top-performing cattle.

"You don't build up a quality herd by hanging on to your inferior animals," Lon says. "Culling is one of the best tools you have."

Because the Wadekampers are convinced that an animal's genetics are only as powerful as its weakest trait, they are not willing to overlook weaknesses in one part of an animal's profile just because that animal excels in another.

"Every trait is number one to us," Lon says. "If they have a bad eye, a bad bag, a high tailhead, a bad attitude — it is all the same. Those animals are culled."

Sheri points out that it isn't just she and Lon who are observing their animals for

potential culling.

"Everyone who is around our animals is empowered to help us weed out problem animals," she says. "Whether it is an employee, an AI tech, even the feed salesman — if he says that

particular cow has bad structure or a bad attitude, a note is made, and she is gone."

One particular type of cow the Wadekampers are more than willing to eliminate is the one with a poor disposition. "If we see a high-headed cow, she is out of here," Sheri says. "We breed for animals that are easy to handle, and we don't have any room in our herd for animals with a bad attitude."

Wadekamper bull customer Joe Chvatal appreciates Wadekampers' efforts in this area. "I have found the offspring from their bulls to be gentle and easy to handle," he says. "On our little operation on irrigated

"Everyone who is around our animals is empowered to help us weed out problem animals."

— Sheri Wadekamper

pasture, where the cattle never leave home, and they are handled a great deal, that is a necessity."

While the Wadekampers do rely heavily on observation to make their culling

decisions, they have developed a breeding program to automatically eliminate late-calving cows.

"Every year we move our breeding schedule up two to three weeks," Lon says. "Then we cull the last 30 or so cows."

He adds that they began with a spring breeding program and are now half way to their goal of a fall breeding program. "We started in March and now we are in mid-January," Sheri says, adding that once they reach a November starting point they will keep the same breeding dates every year.

Lon explains that, rather than culling their late-calving cows, some seedstock producers create a second herd where their late breeders become fall breeders. "Those guys are dead-ass wrong because those late-calving traits are then carried on through to the commercial producers," he says.

Coleman notes the Wadekampers' zero

CONTINUED ON PAGE 108



► **Left:** The Wadekampers ranch motto, "Let's go work," applies to both man and beast.

► **Below:** The Wadekampers are on a mission to produce the best genetics possible.



Truth in numbers

For both Lon and Sheri Wadekamper, it makes no sense to cull for quality without an equally disciplined commitment to selecting the genetics that will enhance their expected progeny differences (EPDs). “We really feel the bulk of our success and progress has been from stacking generations of AI-sired calves from proven AI sires,” Lon says.

Using artificial insemination (AI) as a tool to improve herd quality has always been an integral part of the Wadekamper’s production strategy. Even as commercial producers, 300 out of their 500 mother cows were Aled.

As seedstock producers, AI plays an even more important role in producing high-quality bulls. “Now, in two cycles we try to get 85% bred, and then we use cleanup bulls to do the rest,” Sheri says, adding that those late bull calves all go as feeders.

For the Wadekamper, anyone who does not use EPDs to assess bull quality is ignoring one of the best evaluation tools ever invented. “I can’t understand how some people still won’t look at the numbers,” Lon says. “I have been in the business all my life, and I know there are guys who can pick a better bull by the numbers than I can using my eyes.”

To Lon, the individuals who understand and know how to use the data have a distinct advantage over those who take a more instinctual approach to bull selection. “There is a new generation [of] beef producer coming, whether we like it or not,” he says. “Many of these people have been successful in other businesses and know how to use statistics and records to evaluate quality.”

Sheri notes that these new bull buyers are already influencing how she and Lon sell their bulls. Not only do they post the EPDs for every bull they sell in their sale book, they also post the EPD average for the breed on every other page. “That was suggested by a customer who obviously uses the EPDs in his selection process,” she says, adding that the overwhelmingly positive response to the idea shows that he isn’t the only one.



Table 1: LGW’s bull sale averages, culling percentages*

Auction year	Bull sale avg.		Culling rates		
	No. sold	Avg. price	No. culled	Total no. in herd	Culling %
2007	124	\$2,550	92	462	20%
2006	115	2,516	118	482	24%
2005	102	2,628	88	431	20%
2004	120	2,296	94	413	23%
2003	90	1,849	98	393	25%
2002	80	1,706	13	282	5%
2001	76	1,807	44	256	17%
2000	62	1,428	28	136	21%

*Chart provided by LGW ranch.

tolerance philosophy has resulted in well-balanced animals suited to a wide range of applications. As a commercial calf producer who manages his cattle on every conceivable terrain, from lowland meadows to mountain scab rock, he finds this quality invaluable in his operation.

“Their bulls don’t fall apart when you turn them out with cows on tough ground,” Coleman says. “They will come out with better flesh than a lot of other bulls that you buy.”

He adds that the Wadekamper’s efforts to develop well-balanced bulls not only benefits calf producers such as himself, but also those who pursue other marketing strategies. “Sheri really works hard on their carcass program so those who want to retain ownership of their calves through slaughter do equally well with their bulls,” Coleman says.

Chvatal is one of those ranchers hoping to cash in on Wadekamper’s superior carcass genetics. “I am looking to produce calves that are worth more money whether I retain ownership or decide to sell them and let someone else finish them,” he says. “For example, their bulls are way above average for ribeye.”

Lon notes that it is not his job to second-guess the needs of his customers. Rather, it is his job to provide them with the best-quality bull their money can buy.

A tough eye

For the Wadekamper, it is a matter of producing the type of bulls they sought as commercial beef producers. Prior to entering the seedstock business, they owned and operated a 500-head commercial herd. Lon is quick to point out that as a calf producer he learned that culling a problem animal as soon as possible was the best way to avoid future losses.

“We proved that to ourselves a long time ago when a cow lost a calf and we’d say, ‘She’s a nice cow, and it wasn’t her fault,’ and let her slide,” he says. “The next year she’d lose another one.”

It isn’t just the cattle business that has helped shape the Wadekamper’s views on the importance of demanding quality from their animals. Lon’s tenure as a quality control specialist in the aerospace industry contributed, as did he and Sheri’s 25 years of experience marketing alfalfa hay to a client base in Japan.

“There probably isn’t any industry more selective than the one dealing in export hay,” says Chvatal, who, in addition to producing calves, sells hay into the Japanese market.

“Everything has to be the best, or they just won’t deal with you.”

He notes that individuals who compromise their quality, assuming an inferior product will go unnoticed by Japanese buyers, quickly learn an expensive lesson paid for in lost markets.

“You only lie to them once,” Chvatal says. “They might buy it from you because they don’t have any other choices, but they won’t come back.”

Chvatal sees similarities in the seedstock industry. “[If] someone buys a bull and it doesn’t turn out, they won’t go back,” he says, adding that Lon and Sheri were successful selling hay to the Japanese because they always sold quality. Now, as seedstock

“There is a new generation [of] beef producer coming, whether we like it or not. Many of these people have been successful in other businesses and know how to use statistics and records to evaluate quality.”

— Lon Wadekamper

producers, they are following the same principles. “In their bulls what you see looks good and, even more important, what you don’t see is also good.”

He cites as an example Wadekamper’s commitment to producing bulls that

enhance calving ease. “On our first-calf heifers, our bull calves are averaging 90 pounds, and we haven’t had to pull one,” Chvatal says. “When Lon and Sheri tell you it is a heifer bull, you can believe it.”

