



Scanning the Horizons of High Quality

Sorting cattle with ultrasound near harvest to help market cattle most profitably is turning into a growing business for one Nebraska family.

Story & photo by *Miranda Reiman*

Ken Bode has spent decades in the feeding industry, but he no longer trusts his eye for sorting.

“After a lifetime of experience in the cattle business, what was real disappointing was that our eye was absolutely worth nothing when it came to carcass value,” he says. “I could see some of the exterior fat and some of what I liked, but I couldn’t see how much backfat there was, or marbling or ribeye area.”

Bode operates UltraSort LLC, a full-service ultrasound and marketing company, with sons Cody, Tyler and Jake. Cody is the ultrasound technician and Tyler works on the animal handling side. Jake, a high school senior, helps out on weekends and full time

during the summer. They typically get more than 90% Choice on cattle they sort for the grid.

“That enables us to get our customers anywhere from \$40 to \$100 in added per-head premiums on the cattle,” Ken says.

After selling their Elgin, Neb., feedlot three years ago, the Bodes started UltraSort. It’s been gaining a steady stream of business from yards in Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota ever since. During fall’s busy season, they spend five days a week on the road. During the slower months of February and March, they’ll visit at least two yards in a seven-day stretch.

All of that volume keeps honing Cody’s skill.

“I’m more confident in what I do now,” he says. “Every day is a learning process. You get into different types of cattle and you learn what works.”

It started with a lot of trial and error. “We probably spent six months just purchasing fat cattle and running different scenarios,” Ken says. “We did several thousand cattle on test. We had some customers that helped us when we started. We explained, ‘I think we can do this,’ and they learned with us.”

Cody shadowed John Brethour, former Kansas State University (K-State) beef scientist and ultrasound expert. Since then they’ve adapted the program to fit their needs.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 88

► **Above:** “We target Angus cattle for a simple reason — that’s where all the premiums are for grading,” Ken Bode says. “The Continental breeds genetically won’t fit most grids because of marbling and fat issues. They just won’t make it.”

Scanning the Horizons of High Quality CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87

Waiting until near market time, the Bodes sort cattle using ultrasound data, deciding when and where each should be sold.

“When you do it 80 to 100 days out, there are different variables,” Cody says. “Everything can’t go as planned — they can go off feed, or we can have some bad weather, or that animal isn’t done doing what he’s doing. When you’re [scanning] within a couple weeks of the cattle being killed, you have a pretty good idea what those cattle are going to be.”

Tyler clips and oils the steer at the 12th and 13th ribs, and then Cody scans and interprets the reading, which tells him estimated marbling, backfat and ribeye area. Cody runs through the yield grade (YG) and grid equations in his head.

“Our customers are paying us to make them money and the only way we do that is through premiums. One of those we shoot for is *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®),” Ken says. “We market the cattle where they’ll do the best.”

By studying the grids of a handful of Midwestern packers, Ken says they know which cattle fit which destination.

“We’re able to market several loads a week, and we have a good relationship with the packers,” he says. “It’s a win-win-win situation for everybody. The packer knows what he’s going to get. The feedlot knows what his return is going to be within 5%, and we get paid.”

Some calves are sold within the week, others get a 30-day tag, and the last group is considered the “out” group, which will not be sold on a grid.

“We guarantee our work. If you don’t make money over the Nebraska weighted average, we won’t charge you anything,” Ken says. “But we always get paid.”

Angus = premiums

Their fee is \$1 per hundredweight (cwt.) live on the grid cattle and \$1 per head for “those that don’t cover their expenses,” Ken says. If it’s apparent there aren’t going to be enough cattle in a group to sell on carcass merit, they don’t waste time sorting them.

“We’ll just take them back to the pen and tell the feedyard that we’re not doing the cattle or them any good,” Ken explains.

Most of the feedyards rely on the Bodes to sort their “high-end” cattle. “We target Angus cattle for a simple reason — that’s where all the premiums are for grading,” he says. “The Continental breeds genetically won’t fit most grids because of marbling and fat issues. They just won’t make it.”

History helps determine where and how cattle will be sold.

“We try to know implant strategies, days on feed. If you know the genetic background of the cattle, it helps,” Ken says. “We have a lot of feedlots that are starting to keep track of the ones that are graders and are actively trying to buy them back. The value does get back to the ranch, or it will.”

Knowing the implants might even determine whether it’s advantageous to sort the cattle.

“The implants do diminish the grading, but the better the genetics, the less it diminishes it,” Ken says. “If you have mediocre genetics and you use a hot implant, you’ll probably take them out of any kind of grading program at all.”

Ken has open dialogue with customers about the value of the livestock they buy. He says increasing corn prices will hurt the poorest cattle the most.

“You have to be efficient now,” he says. “The better quality the animal, the more efficient and the better he’s going to convert, and your bottom line is going to be better. The inferior cattle are the ones that are going to suffer. The cattle with no carcass value and less conversion and less performance are not going to command as much as the good Angus cattle.”

Feeders are going to need to pay attention to the economics of quality.

“There could be a big difference,” he says. “If there’s \$80 to \$100 value difference in the carcass and up to 2% difference in the feed conversion, that’s big money, especially if you feed 10,000 head. The total dollars become huge.”

The UltraSort crew not only tries to make feedyards more money, they also try to save them labor costs.

“The feedlots have enough to do with their work,” Ken says, explaining that their crew handles everything from bringing the cattle up from the pen to sorting. “We can’t expect the feedlot to help us; it costs a lot if you’re pulling four or five people off their normal duty.”

The Bodes also make sure they have all the tools they need to complete the task.

“We come with a trainload of equipment if we have to,” Ken says. “It’s a big deal to handle cattle in the right manner at harvest time to prevent shrink and bruising.”

Typically, four to six people arrive on site with a 44-foot (ft.) hydraulic alley chute designed for ultrasound work, gates, horses and the scanning equipment. With the right facilities, they can test about 100 head per hour.

Feeding experience

The family draws on their past feeding experience in this arena, too.

“You have to understand how a feedlot runs,” Cody says. “You’ve got to know your way around cattle. It’s a lot better on them and you.”

Sometimes handling cattle in the least stressful manner means altering their business hours.

“We work a fair number of cattle very early in the morning during the summertime because of extreme heat conditions,” Ken says. He admits the 2-8 a.m. schedule isn’t glamorous, but it allows them work with market-ready cattle when it’s most comfortable for them.

UltraSort customers find value in discovering what’s under the hide.

“Anymore, where you’ve got such a black populace of cattle, if you don’t know the genetics, it’s hard to decipher what the cattle are unless you do ultrasound,” John Anderson, manager of S&A Feedlot, says. “There are a lot of cattle that look Angus and walk Angus, but then when we ultrasound, the marbling just isn’t there.”

The Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Plainview, Neb., yard has been working with the ultrasound company for a year.

They started using the technology “to try to capture added value for our customers. The results have been positive,” Anderson says. “We don’t get into a situation of gridding cattle that won’t work on a grid. We’ve found out in the past, if you get into a situation like that, it takes seven good pens to offset one bad pen.”

Terry Beller, of Beller Feedlots, Lindsay, Neb., used UltraSort to help “fine-tune” entries for the National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). Their champion heifer pen went 47.2% CAB and Prime, with no discounts.

“It’s definitely a tool in sorting the outliers,” the feedlot manager says. “They do a good job. A lot of it is how good your technician is. We feel comfortable with the Bodes, and they treat us good.”

Cody says UltraSort is building its reputation on that.

“When you have a business, you have to have good service and performance to get repeat customers,” he says. As the business grows, the service could enfranchise another crew and has already started to scan replacement heifers. That could lead to a more consistent supply of those “high-end” cattle worth scanning in the feedlots.