

Teaming with Quality Ideas

Oklahoma couple shares ranching duties and a quest for improvement.

Story & photos by
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Jack and June Zimmerman do almost everything together, using almost every relevant tool and idea to do it right. The Zimmermans of JZ6 Ranch, Checotah, Okla., married more than 50 years ago after meeting as students at the University of Arizona.

They each had some background with cattle, June hailing from Texas. Jack had grazed heifers on the family's desert ranch northwest of Tucson, Ariz., and he liked to rope and wrestle rodeo steers. But the main Zimmerman holdings were in Illinois, so the couple's first 20-year career was in the Quarter Horse business near Chicago. June was educated as a registered nurse, though she now confides her first intentions were in the area of veterinary medicine.

For years, they dreamed of ranching in Montana, but too many snowy winters made them think more about southern

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opportunities. In the mid-1970s, they took a shine to the lake country of eastern Oklahoma and bought a place in 1979. June's 20-year nursing career helped launch the start that grew to a 1,000-acre home for 180 commercial Angus cows. That's counting a couple of leased quarter-sections across the road.

"We started with some cows that were just about like everybody else's," Jack says. "I figured, you buy some cows and some bulls, put them together and you sell the calves. I found out in a hurry that there was a little more to the cow business than that."

They traded horses for the first Brangus bulls, which brought some uniformity to the mixed herd, but not enough other benefits. Always open to advice, the Zimmermans

started with a Kerr Foundation link that led to their first registered Angus bulls. At the time, Jack explains, the Kerr Foundation was into farmer programs.

The Zimmermans moved on to a close relationship with Oklahoma State University (OSU) Extension and, since 2002, the genetics have come from Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan.

Details, details

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For any practical value over time, it pays to keep records, June says. "How else do you know what cow had what calf, especially after you get feedlot data?" They also have used AngusSource® since 2003, now including electronic identification (EID), specifically radio frequency identification (RFID) tags.

When Joe Neill operated his Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Welch, Okla., the Zimmermans fed progeny there. It was just 120 miles, and they could visit to check on the calves. When Neill retired, the couple fed in Kansas for a time with mixed results. Now they feed with Buffalo (Okla.) Feeders LLC, another CAB partner yard. It's about 300 miles from them, but not far from their seedstock supplier.

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says. “I don’t know anybody more detailed in following their cattle than June and Jack.”

The feedlot makes no bones about aiming for top performance and follows a fairly aggressive implant program. However, that is countered with ultrasound sorting and a precision that gets 70% to 80% Choice or better out of the Zimmerman cattle, “and zero discounts,” Fanning emphasizes.

“With the right cattle, you have to aim for the high-quality target,” he says. “I mean the cattle need to be efficient in this high corn market. They need to yield and grade, and they do. It takes some effort to get zero discounts, but it’s worth it.”

Buffalo Feeders cattle manager Chad Grimes maintains frequent contact with the Zimmermans. “We have a lot of good news to share, like last year when their cattle averaged 4.51 pounds (lb.) per day average daily gain (ADG) at 90 days. But I even call them if we have to treat something,” Grimes says. Jack and June may call a little more than the average customer, but Grimes doesn’t mind.

“It’s fun to work with them and track all the numbers,” he says, through techniques like ultrasound scanning and computerized sorting by red-flagged RFID. The ultimate numbers come from a U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) report, such as the one on 35 steers last February that showed a net live premium of \$104.12 per head. The details show 64.8% hot yield, 31% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) and CAB Prime with, of course, “zero discounts.”

Continuous improvement

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Weaning is so stress-free that calves average 2.4 ADG for the first 30 days, before they come in for what June calls “their big kid shots — the modified live.” They get the first shots at spring roundup, with pairings confirmed by observation and RFID affixed. Calves are weighed twice and boosted before steers head for Buffalo and heifers move into the JZ6 replacement program.

Genetic uniformity has been one of the most significant gains in those five years, enhanced by a tight calving season, with 80% born in 45 days. The Zimmermans have used commercial artificial insemination (AI) to get a crop of

uniform heifers, but recently switched to a more local option.

“We decided to invest more in our own bulls, collect them for AI and let them follow themselves,” June says. It has reduced the number of bulls needed, enhanced uniformity and helped launch another profit center in bred heifers. “We even buy some heifers back from heifers that we sell, because we like the rapid genetic improvement,” she says.

There were days last year when many people would have felt discouraged. June’s macular degeneration threatened to limit her participation in this “mom and pop” Angus enterprise, though it would never take away her focus on quality. Jack got hurt in an accident with cattle. A few months after removing stitches, a Fourth of July lightning storm claimed 10 cows, but failed to break the drought.

Then things began to click. With better health and the drought broken, the Zimmermans are happy to see cattle performance and quality setting new records this year.

“It’s partly because of the better genetics,” June says. “Although you have to have the guidance, too, or you can waste that. We’re not the biggest outfit, but everyone is so willing to help us produce the best.”

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