

Riverbend:



The Name the Cows Built

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Idaho ranch earns CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence award.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**,
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Unless you’re building an ark, little good can come from 45 inches of rain in 20 days.

That’s what happened when Hurricane Floyd hit Snow Hill, N.C., in the fall of 1999.

For cattleman Steve Harrison, the results were life-changing. As the floodwaters rose, half of the family’s cow herd — the one he’d returned to the farm to manage — was lost.

When people asked about his plans in the aftermath, he answered simply, “I can’t go back to working in the hog barns.”

So Harrison headed west. The silver lining would come later.

At the same time, more than 2,000 miles away from that coastal farming community, Frank and Belinda VanderSloot and crew at Riverbend Ranch

prepared for their first production sale in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

Although he grew up hand-milking a cow to help provide for the family, VanderSloot was a businessman who was just getting into the registered-Angus business. People started to notice the herd was more than a hobby.

“Genetics are genetics,” he says. “It’s never been our intention to build the name, necessarily. Our intention has been to produce the absolute best-quality genetics and watch the numbers.”

It seems they’ve done both. Riverbend Ranch is the 19th-largest seedstock operation and among the largest Angus businesses in the country.

VanderSloot says he didn’t choose the breed.

“That was a decision made by the people. That’s where the demand is. People want what Angus brings to the table,” he says. “That’s a tribute to the people who have been running the Angus breed for the last century.”

He simply built on the strengths.

“The foundation was super great mother cows,” VanderSloot says. “It was a selection of one at a time — there were no group purchases, ever.”



► “When that animal leaves our ranch, it’s representing us, each and every one of us,” Steve Harrison says, referring to the whole team at Riverbend.

The only way a female entered the herd was if she could pass on paper and in eye appeal.

VanderSloot would hear other ranchers trying to add diversity in the foundation years by adding just the right cow families. “I’ve got lots of Lucys; I need a Beauty. I thought that was the craziest thing.” The cattleman wasn’t about to become a “collector.”

“In my opinion, you can’t have enough of the right kind,” he says.

For that attitude and all the actions that support it, Riverbend Ranch received the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand 2016 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award this fall.

Shared vision

Harrison was in the stands at the Bonneville County, Idaho, 4-H barn for that first sale of 120 bulls.

It was another eight years before the observer hired on with Riverbend — first in marketing and customer service, then managing the commercial operations. Today he’s at the helm when cattlemen from across the country come to the ranch headquarters to bid on more than 450 bulls. Another 200 are sold private treaty.

As general manager, he oversees the commercial and purebred herds, 17 full-time employees and the ranches spread across seven locations from California, Utah and Texas to Wyoming, Idaho and Montana.

“I’ve been fortunate to have some good managers on board, and the best one is

sitting right there,” VanderSloot says, with a nod to Harrison. “Steve’s a real student of all aspects of the business: the production side, the genetics side, the people side and the carcass side — and knowing what goes on after the cattle leave the feedlot.”

The two make a good team, with Harrison furthering the vision set by the owner.

“We empower people to make decisions and do their jobs. There’s not a lot of micromanaging going on,” Harrison says, praising the “lean” crew that manages all 5,500 head, combined registered and commercial. “The cattle themselves are a part of it, because we’re striving for cattle that go out and work and don’t require special attention. I can look after more cattle that are doing the right things.”

That was the goal from the first registration paper issued in the Riverbend name.

Data sorts fact from fiction

“The idea was, if we’re going to be in the business, we should do it right,” VanderSloot says.

That meant designing cattle that could work on the arid, harsh, high-desert

ranches in their region. Cattle needed to have maternal abilities, performance at the feedyard and a quality end-product for the consumer.

“The idea that you’re going to wreck your cow herd selecting for carcass traits is a fallacy,” Harrison says. “In this day and time, with all the selection tools we have available in this breed, and the advanced technology tools like genomics, we feel like there are plenty of cattle in the gene pool that can advance carcass traits and still keep the convenience traits the Angus cow was built on and is known for.”

The average Riverbend bull will have a below-average birth weight expected progeny difference (EPD), weaning and yearling weight in the top 15% and in the top 10% for weaned calf dollar value index (\$W). That’s while maintaining a top 20% for all carcass values.

“We’re highly data driven,” Harrison says. Glance at their salebook for proof. It lists nearly every imaginable data point — including dam information comparisons to all Angus non-parent bulls — prefaced with several pages explaining what the numbers mean and how to use them.

They know, because they use them, too, gathering more information at every segment. Riverbend’s enterprises include a commercial cow herd, stockers and a customer buy-back program, which has led to feeding 65,000 Riverbend-influenced calves over the past five years.

“We know firsthand and, honestly, it’s

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breeding for the real world that matters in our world,” VanderSloot says.

Traits like docility and mature height are “separators.” Potential animals are culled if they don’t measure up there.

Saying ‘no’ to status quo

“Each successive group of cattle gets better in terms of yield, in terms of conversion, in terms of grade,” Harrison says.

It’s been a focused march in that direction, right from the start.

“We didn’t go helter skelter,” VanderSloot says. “We were looking for a specific frame and type of cow that would work in the real world.”

When Dale Meek returned to his native state to take the reins as Riverbend purebred operations manager, he continued that path.

“For an operation our size, we use a pretty limited amount of sires in every breeding season,” Meek says. They narrow the list to a handful of bulls and then each cow is mated individually to the one that will “fit the strengths and weaknesses” of that animal.

“We try to build consistency through making a pretty large number of three-quarter siblings through sire groups,” he says.

In the commercial herd, they stick to just three sires for artificial insemination (AI).

“Sometimes we make a mistake and the

herd-environment interaction tells us when we do,” Meek shares. “On the other hand, it tells us when we get it right, too, and that’s pretty gratifying. I don’t know many in our organization where the status quo is okay.”

Barry McCoy has bought Riverbend bulls the past five or six years and applies similarly strict standards to his own Dillon, Mont., herd.

“What we’ve done is made a more efficient cow, one that’s weaning a bigger percentage of her body weight and one that just requires a little less forage maintenance through winter,” he says.

McCoy figures in their area it takes an average of 2.5 tons per cow to supplement through wintertime.

“That adds up to a big percentage of our cost of production,” he says, noting any improvements help.

However, the cattleman is not focused on efficiency alone. He sets EPD minimums, like no less than +0.35 marbling and ribeye.

“Even though I don’t directly retain ownership of the calves, I still have the goal of providing a good product for the next user,” McCoy says, noting he’d like to move toward that marketing method in the future. “Though it may not be direct, we benefit from that because eventually, the cattle work better.”



► **Above:** “We’re striving for cattle that go out and work and don’t require special attention,” says Harrison. “I can look after more cattle that are doing the right things.”

► **Right:** As general manager, Harrison oversees the commercial and purebred herds, 17 full-time employees and the ranches spread across seven locations from California, Utah and Texas to Wyoming, Idaho and Montana.





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He looks for “curve bender” bulls with lower birth weight EPDs and yearling weight EPDs in the range of 90 to 120, relying on all the information Riverbend provides.

“Steve has been a good neighbor and a good contact in the industry,” he says.

Reputation: cattle built, people upheld

It's likely Harrison has mentored more producers than he realizes. A casual meeting with his crew shows the natural camaraderie he fosters in his own team.

“Smiley. Legs,” he calls the cowboys by nicknames and laughs as they joke about the last time their boss threw his hat, a sure sign something didn't go right that particular day. The friendship is evident among co-workers, and Harrison says the buy-in to the overall mission is ever-apparent.

“When that animal leaves our ranch, it's representing us, each and every one of us,” he says. “They care about the end product.”

“What makes this such a great place to work is, if you get stagnant here, it's probably your own fault,” Harrison says. “There are a lot of other great benefits to the job — the scenery, the family life, everything else — but seeing improvement in the cattle is what really gets me going.”

It's a career that takes drive — in more than one sense.

Harrison spends 160 nights on the road, often pulling a trailer loaded with one of his favorite horses, traveling from one ranch location to another. Mondays are reserved for office work, and he talks with each ranch

manager several times a week, but it's just as likely you'll find the leader loading bred heifers or running the iron on the branding crew.

“I'd never been west of the Rockies until I moved here,” he says, southern drawl perhaps growing fainter, but still apparent. Yet, it's home.

The rancher watches The Weather Channel in place of ESPN, but with the annual rainfall around 10 inches, he's usually more glad than not when he spies a rain cloud these days.

Harrison doesn't even let the dark thunderheads get him down. Changing market dynamics put a squeeze on everyone, but he says they and their customers are prepared.

“That's where your customer service and value-added programs and the focus on quality are going to be important,” he says. As numbers increase, the premiums and discounts are becoming more pronounced, and those who have invested in the right kind of cattle will sustain. “The feedlots and packers are going to get a lot more discriminating in terms of how they bid the high-quality cattle versus the commodity ones.”

Silver linings all around.



Editor's Note: *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



► From the bulls they sell, to their customer relations, it's easy to see Riverbend's commitment to beef product quality. In the seedstock business, they also have a commercial herd, graze stocker cattle and place cattle on feed. They know each segment and design cattle for what works best for everyone. Digital readers, click the photo to view a short video featuring CAB's 2016 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence award winner.