



A Banker, a Buyer and Long-distance Neighbors

Connecting quality cattle from the Montana mountains to Nebraska feeding plains.

Story & photos by
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There are two things Bruce Keaster figures he needs in the cattle business: a

good relationship with his banker and a good relationship with his cattle feeder. Check and check.

Those two winning tickets aren't just luck.

That banker relationship requires good ideas, a can-do attitude and the intestinal fortitude to ride out a few storms along the way. Likewise, a cattle feeder requires much of the same — plus the kind of cattle that back it up.

Check, check and check.

"It's the peace of mind of knowing we've built that trust, and I have those two I can call up and know they're a partner in my business," Keaster says. "They're in it with me."

He and wife Janet ranch with their two adult daughters near Belt, Mont. His great-grandfather homesteaded just on the other side of the central Montana town, nestled between the Highwood and Little Belt mountains. There, they keep 800 mother cows, primarily commercial Angus, but with a growing purebred herd, too.

That's where the can-do attitude and long-term patience and planning comes in.

"I can't change the world, but I can work little by little to have something good that comes from our place," Keaster says.

Do-it-yourself genetics

When they started artificially inseminating (AIing) in the early 1980s, Keaster was frustrated with the resulting females.

"The two things were bad bags and bad attitudes," he says. "I thought I'd get to work building a registered herd with the qualities I wanted in my commercial cows."

He started creating bulls that would

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Bruce Keaster and wife Janet ranch with their two adult daughters near Belt, Mont. His great-grandfather homesteaded just on the other side of the central Montana town, nestled between the Highwood and Little Belt mountains. There, they keep 800 mother cows, primarily commercial Angus, but with a growing purebred herd, too. Pictured are (from left) daughter Rachel Heberly holding Kreighton, Bruce Keaster, Janet Keaster, Laura Coffler and husband Drew Coffler holding Mason. Not pictured is Rachel's husband, Steve.

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add thickness without a huge frame, cows with longevity and calves with performance all around.

Keaster planned to AI until his registered cattle were as good as his commercial herd. It took eight years of selective breeding and hard culling to produce sires he wanted to use beyond

clean-up duty, and replacement heifers he was proud to keep on his own place, then begin selling.

He participated in the American Angus Association's Sire Evaluation Program in the 1990s, which compared progeny of young bulls to those of proven, reference sires. Individual ranch tags were tracked

through finishing and harvest to add data to the new expected progeny difference (EPD) numbers.

"I saw that you can really control the whole product by breeding to a higher carcass value. I scratch my head sometimes when I see some of the things going on," Keaster says, describing a popular sire with

a near-zero marbling EPD. "I'm sure the cattle are good, but why would you miss out on that?"

There are bulls out there that will do the same things, plus positively impact the final product.

"Why use something average or below average when you could get right to the point? If I'm going to raise them, I want them to be something that people want to eat," he says. "If we're supposed to compete with Brazil and Australia, we have to start emphasizing the eating experience and the marbling. That's essential."

You can follow along as the Keaster cattle journey from the Montana mountains to this Nebraska feedyard at www.blackinkwithcab.com. They're one of the ranches featured in CAB's "Following the Calves" series, which updates the cattle's progress every other month through the finishing process.

Carcass evaluation connections

That carcass evaluation program connected him to a like-minded feeder in Columbus, Neb., and he's been selling his calves to Loseke Feedyard ever since.

Feedyard owner and manager Ryan Loseke provides feedback on animal health, performance and carcass data, with an information flow that goes both ways.

"I always want to sell the most pounds as we can, but he wants to sell a female out of them," Loseke says. They strike a balance with Keaster's genetic focus: "The frame score on those cattle really hasn't gone up over the years, but they're getting thicker, and the weaning weights are going up."

Since the Keasters began focusing on their registered Angus genetics, Loseke says he's seen their variability narrow on in-weights and feedlot performance.

"They're more predictable in that sense," Loseke says.

That predictability goes further down the line, too.

Neil Sweeney farms and ranches on the other side of Belt, and about two-thirds of his bull battery is sourced from the Keasters. He, too, has a long-standing relationship with Loseke. They started out renting grass to Keaster, then started swapping bulls for grass when Sweeney saw what the cattle were doing.

"Bruce just has really good cattle. I think that's why Losekes keep coming back for ours, too. They know what they're getting with them," Sweeney says.

Getting six loads of consistent cattle from Keaster, plus a couple more loads from his customers, is especially valuable to a feeder in markets where they're leaning hard on a good relationship with their banker, too.

"I know what to expect from a health standpoint, carcass, performance. So when that market goes from \$1.70 to \$1.05 in a quick hurry, that's one thing that's consistent. I know the health will be solid and the mortality will be next to nothing. That helps," Loseke says.

A preconditioning program that's been perfected during the past 20-some years keeps that mortality rate nearly nonexistent in the feeding phase.

"I know exactly what they've had at birth, branding and preconditioning, and I know it's been done well," says Loseke — who is also a veterinarian — which means he doesn't have to double up efforts at in-processing. "There's nothing we don't know about them before they get here."

Connecting the data points

"It sure seemed like years ago, the high carcass cattle were the harder-doing cattle," Keaster says. Genetic progress and more dynamic selection tools have put those traits into focus. "Now, a person can find the marbling one that fits the muscle and thickness, too."

A mutually beneficial relationship between Keaster and Loseke has again paid off in finding a balance of genetic traits.

"On high-quality cattle, if we could eliminate the [Yield Grade] 4s and 5s, [it'd] be gravy," Loseke says. Yet when they want more pounds in the feedlot, they can tend to tip over the line to external fat.

"Bruce has really looked at that with the ribeye area — we're having [fewer] 4s and 5s on those even though they continue to grade well," he says.

Knowing Loseke is watching those results keeps the Keasters in check and focused on improving every year.

"It keeps me more aware that I've got to keep working at it rather than getting lackadaisical about it," Keaster says.

"We've had years when we've been close to 60% CAB® (*Certified Angus Beef*®), and other years when it's down, but we know we want to keep improving on the carcass."

That's passed along to Sweeney's cattle, which have hit up to 41% CAB with Keaster-influenced offspring, too.

"The Angus breed has come a long way in being able to do it all," Sweeney says. "We know Bruce is looking out for us on the carcass, and we know that's what the Losekes want. So then we can focus on what's most important to us, and just know what's built in."

The Keasters have been able to maintain those high-quality pounds of beef while moving calving season a month later to try and keep new calves away from the most extreme winter conditions in Montana. Meanwhile, weaning dates and weaning weights have stayed the same.

"That's a testament to the genetics they have on performance," Loseke says.

It's also a testament to how much rancher and feeder value their relationship.

"It's just like neighbors, except they're 1,000 miles away. They're good friends and neighbors, and that's almost as important to me as the cattle part of it," Loseke says.

They talk on the phone every other month or so to check in on the cattle in the feedlot, exchange ideas and performance on different sire groups, and swap family stories.

"Any business that doesn't have a market is futile. So between having a banker who backs my crazy ideas, and a market with the backing of people that are

so close we consider them family — well, that's worth more than anything else to me," Keaster says.



Editor's Note: *Laura Nelson, a former writer for Certified Angus Beef LLC, is general manager and editor of Big Timber Pioneer, Big Timber, Mont.*