

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Finding balance on the mountain

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



After checking pairs in a high-country pasture, we decided to ride to the top of Little Baldy, a pine-

covered peak of 11,500 feet elevation.

Rumor suggested there was a registry jar hidden at the summit where we could record our names with those other hardy souls who had made the climb. The ride to the top was relatively easy as we followed good elk trails and forgiving terrain. However, our search for the registry was to no avail.

### The descent

As we gazed across an expansive landscape, Brad mused, “There’s legend of an old trail that will take us back to cow camp in about half the time.”

At that point the cowboy in us just kicked into gear. With a collective, “Guess there’s only one way to find out,” the five of us turned northwest and headed downcountry in search of the path. It wasn’t long before we found ourselves in a patchwork of downed timber, slate rock and steep slopes.

My 27-year-old son was riding a new horse fresh off the Great Plains. The bay had a look in his eye comparable to a kid weighing whether or not to step onto a roller coaster for the first time. Sean, an accomplished mountaineer and rock climber, just accepted the experience as another interesting challenge.

As we weaved our way through the maze, as only a father can do, I snuck in a glance every little bit to see how he was doing. After a nearly hour-long descent, we found the old trail, and I had time to reflect on our adventure.

In every sense my son had



demonstrated balance. He had kept his weight appropriate to the movement of his mount, adjusted his own muscle tension to make it easier for his horse to maintain stability, and made decisions along the route to offset risk by avoiding obstacles that presented excessive danger.

Ultimately, he had made hundreds of small decisions that resulted in an experience for himself and the gelding yielding more value than cost.

### Balance on the ranch

As I think back on that day, the slow and steady descent from Little Baldy is a useful model for balanced ranching and life. Balance is multifaceted — achieving proportion and stability to keep upright, applying tension to attain harmony, weighing

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the costs and benefits of available options to make good decisions, and ultimately gaining equity.

Ranches are mosaics that remain upright and functional when optimal tension is applied to the relationships between the key elements of landscape, livestock, capital, creativity and people. Harmonization of elements is not a process absent of stress. Without appropriate pressure, the system collapses.

Balancing our focal point not only on what is immediate, but also multiple steps ahead, creates the opportunity for better choices to steady and sustain the system.

Ranching and life rarely give us the opportunity to attain balance absent of motion. Ecosystems, markets, people and society are constantly in flux. We must learn to find

balance in the midst of churning circumstance. Core principles and values are both ballast and compass — steadying our craft while guiding us toward true north. When

conditions are fraught with risk and uncertainty, our capacity for balance is tested. We score highest on that test via heightened focus, calm deliberative action and the application of sound principles.

That shared ride down a treacherous slope serves as a reminder that a sense of balance provides us the capacity to embrace challenges and obstacles confronted on life’s journey, as well as to enjoy the gentle slope of the valley leading home. |



Editor’s note: In “Outside the Box,” a regular, separate column in both the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.