

Diversification keeps the Woolfolk Ranch, near Protection, Kan., profitable and on the path to continued improvement.



FOLLOWING THE NUMBERS

Woolfolk ranch evolves.

Story & photos by Paige Holbrooks, *Certified Angus Beef*

It wasn't in Tyler Woolfolk's plan to return to the family ranch just outside of Protection, Kan. He spent 12 years forging his own path in the banking industry.

However, his data-driven mindset translated to the commercial cattle business, and when the chance to return home came, he took it.

Alongside his father, Kent, and brother Rylan, the three-man team collaborated with experts to grow their ranch on the Kansas-Oklahoma line. Together, they now graze 1,000 cow-calf pairs on nearly 20,000 acres and operate a backgrounding facility used to custom-feed calves and develop replacement heifers. That's in addition to the yearlings they graze out.

There's a lot on the plate for the small family team, but by making

the numbers work, they've learned to balance it all.

Three perspectives, one business

Kent always wanted his sons home and helping, but he encouraged the fifth generation on their ranch to pursue new avenues. He wanted to be sure ranch life was truly their desire.

It proved to be valuable advice.

Through Tyler's finance career, he built relationships and knowledge that drive many decisions today.

"He did a lot of banking

horseback," Kent says. "I'd see him on top of the hill talking on his phone, working."

"It was a great career, but I am happy to be back ranching full-time," Tyler adds.

Rylan traded ranch life for the feedyard, learning the ins and outs of a business sector that now serves as a crucial part of their

business model. Now he's back and manages the cattle on grass.

"His feedyard perspective and Tyler's banking background are a great combination," Kent says.

The connections and network both brothers made on their journey back to the ranch built a shared philosophy for profit-driven management decisions.

Data discovery

Diversification proved to be key in evolving the ranch. It began as an Angus-based commercial herd. The trio took signals from the data and sought new avenues for revenue.

After years of buying great bulls and developing the herd,

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PHOTO BY SHAUNA HERMEL

Tyler Woolfolk and brother Rylan (not pictured) bring experience from outside jobs as they now work alongside their father, Kent, on the family ranch.

Kent still had a feeling they could do better. In 2014, they experimented with retaining ownership of their cattle, hoping to capture the full value of their genetic investments.

“We were getting the cattle right where we wanted and allowing someone else to get the ‘goodie’ or premium out of them,” Kent says.

Marketing the cattle on a grid was insightful. The numbers showed potential for greater profit and areas to improve. They began putting together groups of feeder cattle — some their own, others purchased — and backgrounding them before sending to the feedyard.

Feeding cattle from varied genetic sources taught them the price of information — the more they know about their stocker cattle, the easier they are to manage and market.

“We use Angus for consistency,” Tyler says. “Not only do we get a more consistent product, but now

we’ve got a product that produces a high-quality carcass every time.”

For Woolfolks, it’s not just the breed or the carcass, but data on their females that helped them change course in their herd.

With guidance from bull supplier Gardiner Angus Ranch and veterinarian Randall Spare, they started genetic testing replacement heifers. In the beginning, there was a significant difference in maternal traits vs. carcass performance — cows had strong mothering ability, but lacked in growth and quality.

“We saw that there was an issue, and we decided to change a little bit on our bull selection,” Kent says.

They pursued balance, striving to breed a problem-free female that would produce a calf with a high propensity for marbling. Today, it’s working. Conception rates are steady, cows maintain condition, and the carcass characteristics are earning grid premiums. Recent loads have graded 44% Prime,

compared to 9% when they started.

Room for growth

Genetics only provide potential, and the Woolfolk crew knows management is another crucial piece of performance. Without hired help, they needed a way to provide more for the cattle without creating too much added labor.

In 2015, they built a grow yard. It is dual-purpose, used for backgrounding calves part of the year and heifer development as the pens empty. Managing the cattle up close and following their performance through the feedyard continues to send signals back on areas for better genetic selection.

After the Starbuck Fire in 2017 affected a small part of their ranch, they realized the grow yard could also serve as an insurance policy if



Owning cattle further through the system allows the Woolfolk family to capitalize on the genetic investments they make.

they ever needed to de-stock the pasture. There would be a place for the cattle.

Always looking around the corner for what’s next, the Woolfolks have a target: creating more high-quality, profitable cattle. As for how to get there? They’ll continue to follow the numbers. ■

Editor’s note: Paige Holbrooks was a CAB producer communications summer intern.