

# USING THE SCOREBOARD



Left: Channeling the intensity required to win seven state wrestling titles into the success of their ranch, the Wasserburgers of Wyoming's Bootheel 7 earned the 2022 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award. Pictured are (from left, back row) JD and Laurie; Eric; Andrew and Anne; (center row) grandfather Henry and wife Bonnie; and (front row) Andrew and Anne's children, Henry, Francis and Grace.

Cousin Trey Wasserburger wrote the nomination. He and his wife, Dayna, own and operate TD Angus at Rishel Ranch, North Platte, Neb. The Bootheel 7 steers handily won their TD Angus Feed Test "Highest CAB Percentage" category two years in a row, with pens at 64% and 65% CAB and 100% Choice or higher.

## A family tradition

Those moves are the work of JD and Laurie Wasserburger, with their sons Eric and Andrew and Andrew's wife, Anne, built on family legacies of pioneer great-grandfather Henry and his son, Henry Jr.

The 1916 homestead title started it all. Henry spent those first years in a "soddy" of stacked native prairie adorned with a cowhide door flap. He later established a ranch and passed the Bootheel 7 brand down to the son who began buying other area homesteads and grasslands.

Henry Jr. built up the modern ranch with sheep and cattle. JD further diversified with new businesses to support the next generation. They sold the sheep, and JD started a freight company to serve the area's oil and gas industry. His foresight paid off

## Monitoring performance with a competitive mindset earns Wyoming family CAB honors.

Story & photos by Laura Nelson, for *Certified Angus Beef*

Whether it's within the curved panels of an auction ring or the arch of a boundary line on a wrestling mat, the Wasserburgers of Lusk, Wyo., know what it takes to compete. Their herd's Bootheel 7 brand could stand for the seven state wrestling titles won by three boys in the fourth generation, but the mark predates the wrestling arena. It's been the brand carried by Wasserburgers looking for the 'W' since the homesteading era.

In September, they reached the winner's circle again — this time in Phoenix, Ariz., as recipients of the 2022 Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award. The honor marks years of channeling the same kind of intensity required to win a wrestling title into the success of the ranch.

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with two sons back on the ranch, proudly carrying the Bootheel 7 brand into its second century.

“There’s no such thing as being OK with where we are, even though we are extremely grateful for every single thing we have,” Anne says. “We’re growing, looking for new ways every day to integrate all aspects of farming and ranching — raising our own feed, feeding our own cattle, following them through to the plate. Whatever it takes to understand the whole process and figure out how to be the best at it.”

### Building the program

Around the table in the original homestead’s kitchen, Andrew pulls out a three-ring binder from his range management class at North Dakota’s Dickinson State University. It’s a snapshot of Bootheel 7 Livestock before he joined his older brother in the business.

Eric bought his first farmland in 2005 while at Chadron State College in Nebraska, setting the pace for “can’t wait”

expansion. In 2010, when Andrew’s final college project had him mapping the main ranch for soil types and grazing capacity, he planned new ways to build and manage grazing inventory. The brothers were staged to move the ranch into a new weight class.

That notebook tracked the grazing plan for three herds



JD Wasserburger fed his own cattle for the first time in the mid-1980s and saw his first CAB premium on a harvest sheet. Still, it was the maternal traits that drove their bull selections, aiming for high fertility, calving ease and making good mothers that birth and raise a solid calf and then get back in shape for another season.

totaling 500 mother cows. A dozen years later, they’ve more than tripled that capacity. Today, Eric takes the lead at Buck Creek Freight and all farming enterprises, while Andrew leads on the ranch.

**“Our goal here is to be really proactive in evolving with where technology is moving. If you’re not moving ahead, you’re falling behind.” — Eric Wasserburger**

“I just get out of the way and let them work,” JD says with a laugh. “They’ve got what it takes to be bossing me around now.”

JD is active on all fronts, but both he and his father are proud to let the younger generation lead. Laurie recently retired from teaching to manage accounting for the multifaceted business. Anne

serves as the local county attorney while wrangling the fifth generation of Wasserburgers on the ranch.

Andrew refers to them all as spokes in the same wheel, each contributing to the circle they hold together and keep rolling forward. There’s the inner hub, too, which includes eldest brother Jason, an oil and gas attorney, and his family in Cheyenne; plus in-laws with connections to the restaurant industry and cousins in the seedstock and feeding businesses, all contributing with unique insight.

Like generations before, Eric and Andrew looked for every opportunity to build and buy, now selling high-quality alfalfa and most recently building a grow yard for another element of control in cattle marketing. They can background their calves for the off-peak-season sale in February

and develop bred heifers for sale in November. They planted their first crop of silage corn this year while penciling the numbers on holding steers into yearlings when the timing is right.

The only way to keep tradition alive, they figure, is to allow it to change and evolve.

It’s the echo of a sentiment grandfather Henry shared earlier in the day: “You’re either making progress or you regress.

There’s no standing still in this business.”

### Competitive drive

“If you’re not competitive, you might not be a Wasserburger,” Eric says with a smile.

Others in the family joke: “Wasserburgers? Competitive? Good grief, we can’t play cards without it getting heated!” ... “Those boys can’t walk up the stairs at the same time without making it a race.”

Still, they know the hearts of true competitors beat to better themselves.

“If we don’t top the sale one day,” Andrew explains, “it’s not that we’re wishing the other guys’ cattle were worse, we just want to know how we can make ours better.”

Of course, they’ve topped plenty of sales over the years, and more frequently as the years go by. It’s competition that drove Henry and JD to move the cow herd to an Angus base decades ago. Competition drives Andrew’s and Eric’s selections today.

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Below: “I want that consumer to be proud of the fact that this beef came from a Western way of life that still handles their cattle with horses, takes good care of those animals and this land, people that work hard and really care,” JD says.



“It didn’t take sitting in many sale barns to see the black-hided calves were bringing more money,” JD says, looking back to when he returned to the ranch. Still, it was maternal traits rather than color that drove bull selection.

“In this country, you just have to have cows that can do it themselves,” Andrew says, nodding to the wide Wyoming prairie of big grasslands cut by deep coulees and rocky enclaves. “If she has bad feet, she’s not going to travel to water. She’s not going to travel to cake or mineral, which means she’s more likely to slough a calf or short him on nutrition. It just doesn’t work.”

He studies their performance records, willing the cows into a competition with one another. Is there room for second chances in the Bootheel 7 herd?

“No. There’s a thousand other cows out there that aren’t lame. Why do you need to be lame? There’s a thousand other cows that kept their calves alive during that storm. Why did you lose yours?” Andrew says. “If we keep cows like that around, we’re just asking for more of the same next year.”

They recently moved to a 42-day breeding target and use that scorecard as another opportunity to cut the least competitive mothers.

This exacting race to the top drives buyers. The last load of

heifers through the TD Angus sale ring earned \$200 per head over the day’s market average.

“Those buyers come back every year because they understand what we’ve done to produce females here,” Andrew says. “We feel like if you do that job right, raising cows that will raise heifers that will raise the next generation, the steer calves will fall in right behind.”

### Next-level training

Andrew points to one definitive training tool that helped the ranch grow to support multiple families.

“The use of technology is really what inspires me to keep moving forward, because you can actually measure progress on ranches now,” Andrew says. “Any way you can imagine, you can measure your range, your grass, your breeding,

**“It didn’t take sitting in many sale barns to see black-hided calves were bringing more money.” — JD Wasserburger**

your carcass, everything. You have a marker so you can know when you’re getting better. It’s your scoreboard.”

About six years ago, the family got curious about how competitive their beef could be on the plate. They started scanning potential replacement heifers with ultrasound to gain a clearer picture of marbling ability and ribeye size. They soon moved to scanning every heifer on the place, sorting to ensure every keeper had the targeted 1.1 square inches of ribeye for every 100 pounds of body weight, and an intramuscular fat (IMF) score greater than 3.5

— the threshold for Choice marbling.

This year, they invested in genomic testing for each heifer, with an even-more-detailed analysis of maternal, carcass and

performance traits. Now they know exactly what the scorecard will show before they step into the ring.

“That’s the fine-tuning,” Andrew says.

They tested all 690 heifers this year, all earning composite scores in the upper half of the Igenity® database. After sorting phenotypically for the top 500, they used the genetic data to sort by ribeye size, IMF score and weight.

“So we’ve got 500 heifers in there we’d be proud to breed on our place, but we only need 300,” he says, pointing out that they can see several nice 500- to 600-pound heifers that look identical on the outside. “Now we can narrow them down to the ones with that ideal ribeye inside, too.”

In the 2021 and 2022 TD Angus Feed Tests, they not only won the “Highest CAB Percentage” category, they came out on top of the “Percentage Prime” category,

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Left: “I just get out of the way and let them work,” JD (center) says with a laugh of Andrew (left) and Eric (right). “They’ve got what it takes to be bossing me around now.”



too. Topping two out of five categories was an honor, a brief moment to glance at the scoreboard and be proud to see their name in lights.

“But we didn’t win ’em all,” Eric says. “That means we still have a lot of work to do.”

### The real winner’s circle

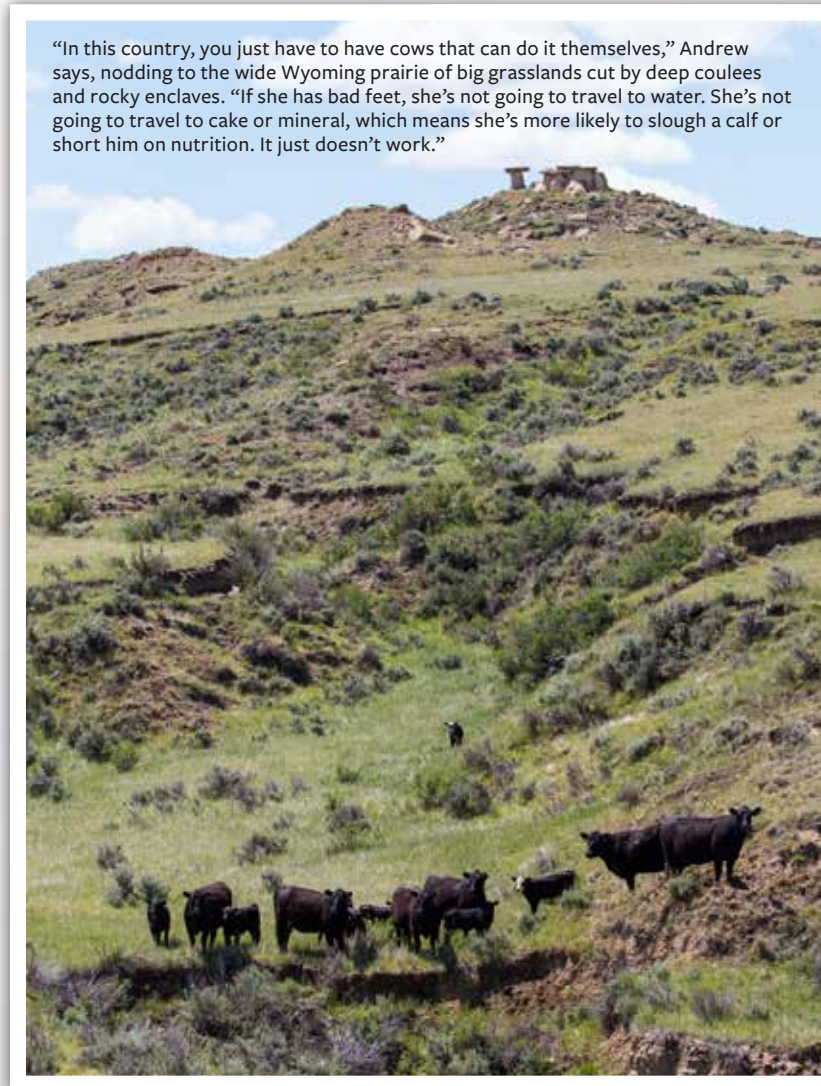
As much as they learn and lean on technology and the wisdom of past generations, the most valuable tool is still the skill as old as the ancient sport of wrestling or that of tending livestock: a strong social network.

Among others, JD points to the late western Nebraska feeder Dallas Larsen, who got him started feeding his own cattle and taught him how to evaluate potential for performance and profitability beyond the ranch gate.

“This is a tough business. It always has been,” JD says, “but you can’t let it get you down. I never saw Dallas Larsen have a bad day. That’s probably the most important thing I learned from him.”

Eric shakes his head, remembering that first purchase of farmground.

“I tell you, it was some tough love for a few years. We had one old tractor, no experience running a pivot, and that thing was breaking down — flat tires, stuck in the mud — all the time,” he



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recalls. “It was just terrible. But we stuck with it. Asked for a lot of advice. Got better.”

“It helps if you talk to someone smarter than you every day,” Andrew says.

They each point to good neighbors, growing business

partners, and a strong community as inspiration to keep learning, growing and helping the next generation.

“We all help each other out, make each other better,” JD says, driving across the same ranch trails as his father and grandfather

before. His grandkids clamor in the back. “We want kids to be proud of where they came from, proud of what we’re doing here. We want the chef to know when he’s serving a steak that came from here, it’s something he can be proud of, too.”

Now in his second decade as coach on the mat, JD knows that, like wrestling, ranching is not necessarily a test of brute strength. Rather, it’s a trial of endurance and control in the face of adversity.

“Wrestling’s a terrible sport to lose at. I don’t know why, but some kids are just devastated when they’re beat,” he says.

The only way to overcome the heartache and bounce back to get better, he figures, is to help an athlete feel proud of himself. It can’t be a pride of arrogance, but it must include an earned confidence that comes from knowing they’ve worked hard and used every tool training to be their best that day.

“If you can make a kid feel proud of himself like that, you’ve got it whipped. And boy, I tell you what, when the kids are proud of themselves, the parents are prouder,” he smiles into the rearview mirror. “That’s what makes it all worthwhile.”

Editor’s note: Laura Nelson is a freelance writer working on behalf of Certified Angus Beef.



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