

Luck Looks Like Work



12

Jake O'Dea (left) and his dad, John, say managing a heifer-development business is more hands-on work than having a bigger cow herd, but it requires less land or capital to make it happen.

Through a heifer-development enterprise, Nebraska family builds a service and a cow herd simultaneously.

Story & photos by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content & strategy

‘O’pportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” Thomas Edison may have said that more than a century ago, but John and Michelle O’Dea of Indianola, Neb., and their sons have taken it to heart. Much of their success in building a cow herd has come from taking the “opportunities” no one else wanted, like raising day-old dairy calves to sell as feeders, baling and selling square bales, and custom-calving heifers.

John taught his sons, John Jr. (“G”) and Jake, the value of betting on themselves and reinvesting their profits early on. The young Holsteins turned enough profit for the enterprising boys to buy steers. Then came the Angus heifers, which started as an FFA project and are now a small, registered cow herd. The private-treaty registered bull sales help supplement the heifer-development business that takes quite a bit of their focus throughout the year.

Seeing the land and capital needed to operate a traditional cow-calf operation inspired them to take a different approach.

“We decided we needed to do twice as good with half as many, and that we needed to figure out ways we could develop females, develop a marketable product without a lot of land tied up,” John says.

Right from the start

What started with 12 heifers in development quickly doubled and doubled again. Today they source around 300 females from mostly known suppliers, all within a couple-hour radius of their

southwest Nebraska base.

“We’ve got some guys that we just try to buy them whatever they cost,” John says, noting they also test out new possible herds in smaller groups.

“The farthest away I’ve ever purchased a female is two hours. We believe in sourcing the females that work right here and do it right,” John says.

The O’Deas have a few rules: They want moderate-framed cows made for Sandhills-type grazing scenarios. Good feet are a must, along with cattle that “hair up for the winter,” but slick off for the summer. Disposition matters.

“We have a saying around here that we don’t tolerate rude behavior,” John says.

They also want a female with good cow sense.

“She’s got to be the kind mentally that doesn’t put herself in a bad situation. She’s got to be the kind that stays where you put her and knows where her baby is at,” he explains. “There’s a lot of things that they still don’t have an EPD (expected progeny difference) for.”

In addition to being set up genetically, they want management to line up from ranch of origin to their place. Their specs include being weaned and preconditioned at least three weeks.

“When we have to doctor a heifer for respiratory disease at weaning, her odds of becoming a bred [heifer] fall off of a cliff,” John says. A female starts with about a 70% chance of getting through all the sorts and criteria; but, if she’s treated, that falls to a 25%-30% chance.



“It sets them back,” he emphasizes. “They’re behind forever, and it really makes a difference.”

That’s why they are so confident that they will pay a premium for heifers that fit their protocol.

“Every heifer should be weaned on their home ranch as far as I’m concerned,” he says.

Good days, not perfect

Those females will come in green, too, if the O’Deas have their way, and then they’ll grow them slow.

“You don’t need them to have great days, but every day needs to be a good day,” says John. “We don’t ever want a heifer to gain 2 pounds a day at our place. We don’t get them too fat, and you’ve got to test them.”

He suggests a breeding rate above 80% means they were too easy on them.

“We need to eliminate the 20% least feed-efficient heifers every year for our customers,” John says. They put the pressure on them at home, so they go and perform for their customers. “We don’t want to have them fail somebody else.”

Thinking of their buyers — not just in the year of the sale, but for the future of that female in the herd — keeps those ranchers coming back.

Many times it’s their added service that hooked buyers in the first place.

Labor a marketing tool

“Offering the custom-calving deal really helped us market quite a few of the bred

heifers,” Jake says. “Our initial market was old, retired farmers that still had some cows. They needed five or six heifers every year to put on their 80-head cow herd that were all going to match. They wouldn’t have to worry about pulling a calf, and they wouldn’t have to worry about testing the fence or anything like that.

“We’ve always just stayed true to that,” he says.

Serving a market where cattlemen buy a handful of heifers at a time, as opposed to selling in a few big drafts, has its advantages and disadvantages.

“There are a high number of sales that we have to do to get our number, but people will pay the right price to make that work,” Jake notes.

That is an advantage on their own labor situation, where it allows them to spread both breeding and calving out over three and a half months.

The side hustle

If John’s first lesson to his boys was to work hard, his second was to always have a Plan B.

Although the family has raised cattle in Nebraska since great-grandfather O’Dea settled right after the Civil War, even John started out with the resourcefulness of somebody working on an alternate route to the beef business.

“We’re the fifth- and sixth-generation producers with first-generation problems,” he says. “There wasn’t a paid-off deal to take

over. It was just work along and do the best you can.”

As a young adult, during their early years of marriage, John worked in the oil industry, seeing it as the path to his cattle dreams.

“The oil field was never a destination, but it was a vehicle,” John says. “When we started buying land, I cashed in my oil field retirement to do it.”

They built a lot of fence by spotlight and feed many cows in late-night hours.

That same philosophy of being flexible in pursuit of a final goal applies to the herd today. If a heifer comes up open, she transitions to their direct-to-consumer freezer beef business. They process 15-20 head per month to keep up with beef demand. Starting with the right genetics gives them a lot of confidence in the beef quality, no matter the original purpose for that animal, John says.

“You’ve got to be working at finding one that’s poor carcass-wise in the Angus breed,” he notes. “If it’s three-quarters Angus or more, you’ve got to be trying to fail on the carcass side, or your management or health has to fail.”

So, an open simply signifies a new path, and that supports that idea that the O’Deas want a heifer to fall out in Year 1 if she’s going to fall out at all.

“We’ve still got an exit strategy when they’re here, but if guys are running them all summer on grass and they don’t breed back, then they have to eat that initial cost,” John says.

If a cow starts to cop an attitude, there’s little hesitation: “We’re pretty aggressive cullers,” John says. The O’Deas make several cows a year into hamburger for their catering business and into beef sticks, which they package and market.

Staying close

Even his sons have their own version of redirected plans. G was slated to take the reins in the cattle business the brothers developed as teenagers, while Jake figured on getting an ag education degree to teach school with cows on the side. However, G found an interest in welding and enough local business to make it a business while continuing to help on weekends or during busy seasons. He’s still in the partnership, but that left an opportunity for Jake to opt for a full-time cattle career.

“I’m very grateful that they’re both here, and I’m looking forward to the fact that they’re geographically close enough that we can be a part of their adult lives,” John says. “That’s worth more than any money, to have the kids around.”

They’ve been a “pretty tight team” for a long time, and John says he is optimistic about their future.

“There’s such a shortage of willing and able participants in agriculture right now that the opportunities seem to migrate to the guys that are willing to get out there and put forth the effort and time,” John says. “I don’t see anything to change that.” **ABB**



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