



From the Ground Up

Nebraska couple finds their opportunity to enter the cattle business by leasing land and cattle.

by Taylor Edwards, intern

Working hard to accomplish your goals is something to admire, especially when paving your way into an industry on your own. Luke Kovarik and his wife, Natalie, did just that, keeping the future at the forefront of their minds.

With a home base in the Nebraska Sandhills, Kovarik Cattle Co. is a commercial cow-calf operation with a growing registered herd focused on commercial cow-calf profitability. Built

from the ground up, the Kovarik family prides themselves on building maternal genetics and developing quality replacement heifers.

The family has a deep love for the beef industry. Both Luke and Natalie have backgrounds in the industry and have found their way back to it.

“I remember one time — it was winter, and everyone was gone, so I built a fire in the fireplace,” Luke recalls. “I had the ABS [sire directory] and sat in front of the fire

all afternoon looking at bulls.”

While growing their operation, the Kovariks have always kept long-term goals in the conversation. Many of those surround their children and the future of the industry.

Humble beginnings

“This Angus herd, and really this commercial operation, is ours,” Luke says. “It wasn’t our parents’ or grandparents’ operation.”

Luke went to college thinking he would be



a dentist. However, at the time, there wasn't an opportunity to pursue a career in that specialty. So, he decided to go to graduate school, thinking he would work in nutrition or pharmaceuticals — something that would allow him to be involved in the cattle industry.

After graduation, an opportunity came up to lease a ranch and cows.

"That's when I realized I could come back and be involved in production," Luke says.

"I always wanted to come back," he emphasizes. "I feel very lucky that there were opportunities to lease from older ranchers who wanted to phase out or retire, allowing me to do that, because it wasn't always realistic."

The Kovariks grew their operation by

leasing from other ranchers and slowly purchasing land.

"It was harder from some standpoints, doing it that way. Financially it was much harder, because there wasn't an already-paid-for ranch," Luke says. "My parents had a land base, which helped; and we leased from them, because that was our opportunity."

Luke started with the mentality of, "If it works, it's on us — and if it doesn't work, it was on us as well."

"One thing Luke credits to being able to start as a first generation is really diversifying," Natalie says. "He had multiple streams of income, depending on the time of year; and being in different sectors of agriculture, the cash flowed much easier. Two pieces of advice that we always

give — lease when you can, and diversify."

Both parties benefit

"I lease now from three ranchers who had cows and either didn't want to do the cow work anymore, or couldn't and didn't want to sell their cows," he says. "I was able to lease the ranch and the cows. In one instance I bought the cows after a little while, so it was a really good avenue to get started with commercial cows."

Lease arrangements benefit both parties, providing an avenue for those wanting to slowly phase out of the cattle business to do so, while encouraging others to pursue a career in it.

"It requires so much capital to get started

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and buy land and cows,” Luke explains. “At 25, it’s impossible. But to be able to lease both of those, it helped to be able to grow my own stuff on.”

Passing it on

Now that the Kovarik operation is thriving, they have two full-time hired men. Luke provides opportunities for them to grow their own cattle businesses.

“We try to give them both opportunities, and we try to do that for anybody that works with us or is associated with us,” he says. “Sometimes we’ll partner on cattle together or do things where they can make extra money. As an employer, providing an opportunity for cattle ownership is really important to employees.”

The next generation

With three boys on the ranch, Tad, Jaks and Rue, it’s important that they get involved and spend time out in the field.

“It’s a hard balance. Obviously, you need to get work done, but you don’t want your kids to not enjoy the experience,” Luke says. “Sometimes you catch yourself saying, ‘I need to get things done today; I don’t have time to bring the kids with,’ and other times you have an extra half hour to bounce around with the kids and spend time together having fun.”

Not only do the Kovariks have their boys on the ranch, but they frequently host interns to promote the industry to those outside their home and provide young people hands-on experience.

Many of the interns, and members of the younger generation, have a passion for the cattle industry, but no opportunity to learn.

“Interns and bringing on some of this younger generation has been very pivotal for our operation,” Natalie says. “A lot of good has come out of welcoming more people onto our operation and trying to make them a part of our operation.”

Providing those opportunities gives meaning to what they are doing, Natalie says.

“If we don’t think about the next generation, what’s the point in doing it now? That’s what Luke and I have lots of conversations about,” she explains. “If we aren’t doing this for our boys or [the] big picture, then what’s the point?”



Luke and Natalie Kovarik are growing their operation so their sons can all join the operation if they want to.

It’s important to work the next generation into your operation, the Kovariks agree.

“I get frustrated when people say, ‘You can’t hire anybody good anymore,’ or ‘Nobody wants to work anymore,’” says Luke, noting that they’ve been able to find good help and from a variety of avenues. “If you create a good opportunity and a good environment, most of the time you’re going to get good help.”

Their internships are popular. Quite a few apply or show interest.

“I’m from a rural area, and it seemed like plenty of people wanted to get into farming or cattle and just couldn’t get into it,” Jake, one of the summer interns says. “I still think there are plenty of people who dream of being cowboys or having cows, and just can’t get into it financially.”

“There are kids that want to work in that younger generation,” Luke observes. “I’ve found a lot of them and been happy with them.”

In agriculture, many of the jobs are serious, and mistakes can cost thousands, Natalie says. This might deter one generation from bringing on the next and providing learning opportunities on the ranch.

When Tad was in about the sixth grade, he popped the tire on the tractor while feeding, Natalie recalls.

“He was so young, but we wanted him to learn,” she says. “If we would’ve freaked out that he made a mistake and said, ‘You can’t do it anymore,’ he wouldn’t have some of the skills he does.”

If you involve younger generations, you have to understand there will be mistakes made and lessons learned, Natalie notes. “So, try to prepare yourself for that.”

The long view

“We didn’t start this operation to turn around and sell it,” she says. “Most of what we do is with the intent that some or all the kids will choose to return, and that’s why we continue to grow. It’s important to us that if all three wanted to return, we’ve created enough opportunity that they could come back.”

Creating a successful operation for their children to come back to is a dream shared by many ranchers. Maybe the most important thing these people share is the desire to instill qualities in their children that will lead to a successful life no matter where they go.

“I think there’s a lot of similarities in ag and other things as far as being successful,” Luke says. “Hard work. I think education is important, and then integrity and honesty — all those things.”

As someone with a large online following, Natalie says she is often asked, “How?” People want to get involved in the cattle industry and are looking for a place to start.

Maybe the most difficult thing about agriculture is that there is no one-size-fits-all working model to give to people wanting to get started.

“It’s so variable,” Natalie says. “It’s hard to give blanket advice to every kid wanting to get into agriculture, and I think that’s one of the hardest things we’re up against.”

After working to overcome a lack of opportunities, Kovarik Cattle Co. is giving back to the industry and raising babies of its own.

Says Natalie: “I just feel really blessed that our kids are integrated into nature essentially.” **ABB**