

Thinking BIG

Trial and success led to quality-focused Missouri cow herd.

Story & photos by LANCE ZIMMERMAN



Relatively new to the business, Bolivar, Mo., producers Monty (left) and Mary Wheeler are expanding with breeding stock fit for their management style and calves that bring a premium on the grid.

“Farm life” may be a romanticized concept. Starting a large-scale cow-calf operation, however, can make it seem more dream than reality. Sleepless nights, costly lessons and anxiety over keeping the operation in the black are the daily realities of starting out — and only the strong survive.

Monty and Mary Wheeler are inching their way out of “survival mode,” where they lingered for about a decade. Aiming to raise feedlot calves that can hit a quality target, the Bolivar, Mo., couple hopes to become a mainstay in the industry.

Being new to the game means continual adjustments, but the Wheelers like to focus on the same goals as the big players. As they increased their commercial Angus herd from 20 to 200 head in 11 years, they discovered carcass premiums are available at any annual marketing level.

Angus discoveries

The biggest focus in the Wheeler operation has been on selecting quality breeding stock at a maturity that works well for their management style.

“We started the hard way the first time through,” Monty says. “The first time we ever bought, we purchased weaned Charolais heifers because we couldn’t get any blacks.”

Growing them to maturity and waiting another nine months for a calf required too many investment dollars without a return. Bred heifers quickly became the answer for future herd genetics.

The Wheelers planned for expansion at the right time. While they were looking for new herd prospects, many drought-stricken Oklahoma Angus producers were

downsizing. Those early breeding-stock purchases created the base of the herd.

“We liked the black cattle, and we thought they did pretty good,” Mary explains. “Then, we started listening to others and heard what they had to say about *Angus*. We learned some more about the breed and decided that was the way to go. That’s where the money was.”

The next step

Discussions about the Angus breed naturally progressed into the potential to capture premiums available through retained ownership at the feedlot. By 1996, the farm demanded the Wheelers’ full attention. Mary says it is a “more than full-time” operation today.

A feedlot tour at Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feeding partner Irsik & Doll Feedyard, Garden City, Kan., encouraged the

Wheelers to think more seriously about the profit that can be captured through grid marketing.

“We really began to ask ourselves if we had the type of cattle they want in the feedlot,” Mary recalls. During the next year, they thought about feeding the next calf crop, then picked up the phone and began a relationship that is in its fifth year.

“The first time we sent cattle out there we only had 61 cattle on the load,” Monty adds. “We kind of worked our way up from there, but we got some help on sharing trucks and filling loads at the start.”

While many feedlots do not cater to smaller producers, Irsik & Doll Feedyard manager Mark Sebranek found a way to manage the smaller lots without losing time or money.

“When we sort up, we know the head count, customer’s wishes and marketing strategy,” Sebranek says. “We try to be family-oriented.

Whether it is a customer with 40 head, or even 20 and his neighbor’s 20, we help any size.”

Monty says Irsik & Doll has met all of their expectations for communication and reliable carcass data. The feedlot has become a reliable source of information for the Wheelers’ breeding decisions.

Processing the feedlot data is one of Mary’s jobs, and her records go back to the first group of cattle they fed at Irsik & Doll. She says the data they receive serves as a valuable return on their hard work throughout the year.

“It is just like Christmastime when you go to the mailbox and see that envelope,” she adds.

Hitting the target

Monty says other producers may be missing out. They synchronize and artificially inseminate (AI) their

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Monty says producers who synchronize and AI their cows, only to sell the calves, are throwing away an opportunity to evaluate those genetics by feeding them out.

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— Monty Wheeler

cattle “only to send them on down the line.” Throwing away a shot at evaluating those genetics seems like a lost opportunity to Monty.

There are few lost opportunities at the Wheeler farm. Most of their cattle finish above or better than USDA Choice, and a couple of years ago a group reached 100% Choice. With those numbers, Mary says, “We have no intention to quit.”

Despite early success, Monty remains realistic when it comes to hitting high targets.

“We even made the paper when the cattle reached 100% Choice,” Monty adds. “Mark asked if we had been bragging about that pen. I told him, ‘No,’ because the next time they might not do that. I know each pen can vary from one time to the next.”

The Wheelers will continue to focus on what they are doing at the cow-calf level and leave the feeding to Sebranek. Despite increasing their herd size 1,000% in little more than 10 years, the Wheelers see room for more growth. They are gaining a reputation in the area as quality producers.

“Now if people know there is a farm for rent, they will call us up and let us know,” Mary says.

Focus on the future

No matter what the size, the Wheelers will continue to grow until it feels “right.” Until they reach that point the goal is to remain progressive — attending farm, feedlot and packing plant tours any chance they get. Getting information from across the industry is what has helped the Wheelers grow as fast as they have.

Knowledge picked up along the way has led to changes in their grazing and breeding programs, which has in turn added value to their operation. The biggest value-added component throughout the years has been the weaning and backgrounding program started with the help of neighbor Clark Tygart.

That’s one thing that helps get the cattle to 800 pounds (lb.) and keeps them performing once they reach the feedlot. “They are bunk-broke and don’t bawl or walk the fences. They just go out and get to performing right away,” Monty explains.

The backgrounding option prior to the feedyard has been a successful management approach for the Wheelers, and Monty tries to convince others to do the same. While no one has taken him up on the offer, they will continue to stand behind their management decision.

“We always retain ownership the whole way through,” Monty says. “If my cattle are going to make money, I want to make it. If they are going to lose money, I want to be the one that loses it.”

Feeding and selling cattle on the grid has given the Wheelers an opportunity to measure value. Maintaining a quality harvest point gives them peace of mind, knowing they can continue running their business successfully for years.

When it comes to ranching, the business has to be profitable before life can be enjoyable. The Wheelers are living a plan that provides both.