



[PHOTOS BY LANCE ZIMMERMAN]

Baby Steps

Colorado rancher learns to walk the walk, moves her herd closer to grid marketing goals.

Story by
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Kathy Roberts worked to build up her cow herd. Getting her start as an 8-year-old 4-Her, she spent more than 25 years in the commercial cow-calf sector with mixed results. On the verge of selling out five years ago, Roberts somehow rustled up pasture to keep her cows together, and then found work on a nearby ranch.

Was there a future for her as a cow herd owner-manager? She had to know. After years of selling at auction markets, Roberts was ready to feed her own cattle.

"You've got to have a starting point somewhere, and I needed to know what I had," says the Trinchera, Colo., rancher. "That first year was a test."

Roberts got a 53% on the first test; 53% Choice, that is.

"I was hoping for 70%; it didn't happen," she says, "but, it's one of my goals, and I think it will happen some day. I just need to keep working at it."

This fall marks the fourth year Roberts retained ownership and fed all of her steer calves through a commercial feedlot. Since 2004, she has marketed all her fed calves to U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) and gets data back on every load.

"I've got so much to learn yet," she says. "I am very fortunate there are people who love to share their knowledge." Some of those people include her seedstock supplier Mark Gardiner; USPB staff; and her employer, mentor and friend Excel Smith.

Smith owns a large commercial herd and first got to know Roberts in her moment of need when he leased her that pasture.

"He took my cattle in on lease during the drought, which not very many would be willing to do," Roberts says. Four months later, Smith hired Roberts. Although the cow herds are separate, the two share in the workload for both.

"It has worked out," Roberts says. "We just help each other. He gives me his opinions and advice. Anyone who has been in the business as long as Excel has a wealth of knowledge, and I'm fortunate he's willing to share it with me."

They calve in February and March, typically wean and vaccinate the beginning of October, and send the calves on to the feedlot when they weigh around 600 pounds (lb.) in November. This year, however, Roberts early-weaned and sent her steer calves to the feedlot in September.

Seeing needs

Using her 2004 data, Roberts saw a need to increase marbling and decrease the more than 20% Yield Grade (YG) 4s and 5s. Roberts' Angus-based herd is growing, and she continues to select by using the expected progeny differences (EPDs) that match her grid-marketing goals.

"That's helped me tremendously as far as the direction I need to go, feeding those cattle and getting premiums on the grid," she says. "For bulls, I look for something with growth and good marbling. You've got to watch your bulls," she admits, "because you're trying to improve your cow herd, too. It's got to be all

of it." She's been retaining almost all of her heifer calves, and she plans to start culling some of her older cows this season.

Using Gardiner bulls the past couple of years, Roberts taps into the breeder's expertise. "I sent him all the information the first year and visited with him. He told me what I needed to look for in bull selection," she says. "I try to absorb it all and pick out what is right and what are going to be the best things for the entire herd."

Roberts has also altered her management.

"I bred my heifers artificially (AI) last year, and that was a big step for me," she says. "This year I AI-bred my heifers as well as my 2- and 3-year-olds. The older cows are covered by bulls."

Roberts says she'd like to AI the older cows, too, but doesn't have the setup for it right now. She says that's the fastest way to improve the carcass quality in her herd. "I'm trying to get there as soon as I can. It takes time to build the herd you want, and I have to be patient," she says. "It's going to take a while."

For three years her herd has been certified BVD-PI free, through Colorado's voluntary program to reduce the incidence of calves persistently infected (PI) with bovine viral diarrhea (BVD). "I need to capitalize on this, and will be feeding at a BVD-PI free feedlot this year. I think it will help tremendously in controlling health problems."

She notes that control starts on the ranch.

"Make sure your calves are vaccinated prior to going into the feedlot," she says. "That will save a

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Roberts got her start in the commercial cow-calf business. She now retains ownership and feeds all of her steer calves through a commercial feedlot.

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lot of problems down the road. I altered my program last year and had some definite setbacks. Now I've gone back to my original program.”

Detailed records

Roberts has begun keeping more detailed records. She bought 100 cows

from Hitch Ranch and keeps their tag numbers separate from the original herd. “I put certain bulls with these cows because I especially want to keep the heifer calves for replacements,” she says.

Each year she uses a different color ear tag for replacement heifers, so she can determine female age at a glance.

“It simplifies things for me,” she says. Roberts used to tag all calves at birth, but as the herd has expanded, she now matches some to their mothers at branding.

“It takes some time and is getting more difficult as the herd grows, but it's worth it,” she says. “I like to know who belongs to who, so I take the time.”

When Roberts looked at last year's calves in the feedlot, she was surprised. Some of the best-looking steers did not end up as top value. “I got my paperwork back and my big, growthy steers were YG 4s. It totally blew my mind,” she says. Still to be sorted out is whether those calves could have been sold earlier to realize their full potential. In any case, those results pointed out the need for greater uniformity.

Roberts has seen her percent Choice climb a few percentage points, and her calf crop is becoming more uniform. It can be a slow process with the occasional setback, but she remains optimistic.

“This is something I've always wanted to do,” she says. “Everybody needs to feed at least once so they know what they've got. Then you can start improving and making the adjustments. I know the quality of my cattle is getting better. Through nutrition, synchronization and AI, my calves are becoming more uniform.”

Roberts bought land in northwestern New Mexico, and plans to eventually move the herd. Right now, she's just enjoying full participation in the cattle industry.

“You know what you've got, and you aren't just raising cattle,” Roberts says. “You're seeing it from start to finish. It's been eye-opening, educational and a whole lot of fun.”



Kathy Roberts stands with Excel Smith, who hired her. Although the cow herds are separate, the two share in the workload for both herds.