

Lead or Follow

Kansan Frank Harper learns when and how to do both.



Story by
LYNDEE STABEL

It takes courage and confidence to lead, but it takes at least as much to recognize the skills of others and let them show the way.

Frank Harper lives on both sides of that divide.

He added a small cow herd to his farm north of Sedgwick, Kan., shortly after graduating from Kansas State University in 1992. "I needed something to do in the wintertime," he explains with a grin. Those cows were Herefords bred to black bulls, but more focus would follow.

Harper got better acquainted with his future bride, Mary, and her parents, commercial Angus ranchers Randy and Judy Mills, Florence, Kan. They soon offered welcome cattle advice and more. The herd grew with increasing Angus influence after purchased foundation heifers generated replacements from artificial insemination (AI).

The in-laws had built a relationship with Fink Genetics, Randolph, Kan., raising bulls for their mostly fall-calving cows. Since Harper grazed 150 mostly

spring calvers, he could lease excellent bulls in their off season.

Taking a leadership role

Early on, Harper began taking on leadership roles, serving in a local cattlemen's group and then as county director for the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA). He also spent a couple of years on the Kansas Beef Council, and in 2012 he is serving as KLA president.

"There are a lot of people more qualified than myself to act in this role, but I believe it's important to be active because we, as producers, are the best people to serve as a voice for our industry," he says. "And I am honored to do it."

Like other industry leaders, Harper maintains a keen focus on improving his own herd, as well. The AI and leasing provided access to top bulls, but females are top of mind in developing the herd.

"I'm on grass 365 days a year, so I need a cow that can handle a forage diet without a lot of supplementation while still raising a growthy calf that will grade well and grow in the feedyard," he says. Maternal traits come first. "In our high-dollar grass country, I don't have room for open cows."



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

Harper's calves are on track. One of the first pens Harper fed at Pratt Feeders achieved more than 67% CAB, including 14% CAB Prime.



"In our high-dollar grass country, I don't have room for open cows," Frank Harper says.

There has always been room for multi-trait progress, however. Harper had retained ownership on feed in western Kansas in the mid-1990s, building the balanced herd. But a few years ago, he tried finishing a couple hundred head at home.

"I felt like I needed to learn something about the entire feeding process, and I really enjoyed it," he says.

Meanwhile, opportunities had come up to lease more pasture and grow the herd to 750 head. As part of that, Harper bought some registered Angus cows from friend and neighbor Mark Harms with the agreement that Harms would buy bull calves back. The upshot is he no longer had time or room to keep finishing at home.

Handing over feeder role

Through his work with the KLA, Harper connected with Jerry Bohn, former KLA president and manager of Pratt Feeders. Since 2009, they have worked together to help calves reach their full potential in the feedyard and on the rail.

Whether it is cattle feeding or genetic strategy, Harper has learned there are certain areas where it is best for him to let others take the lead. "We have some good cattle today, but a lot of that is because I've been the recipient of some good planning," he says.

His in-laws and partner-friends freely share their expertise.

"I share with them ... here's what I am looking to do — put that together for me. I know when to say, you're better at this than me," Harper says. "There are so many people a person can learn from."

That holds true when the calves go on feed at Pratt, too. Based on the quality, they are on the right track in putting together a high level of success. One of the first pens, 77 steers, achieved more than 67% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]), including 14% CAB Prime.

Bohn praises both the stockman and the stock.

"His cattle have good genetics, are healthy, backgrounded and overall ready to go when they get here," he says. "That combination helps them perform well above average."

While Harper may rely on and learn from the expertise of other producers to help his cattle reach the peak, it is clear that others trust him to lead them in the big picture known as the beef industry.

"Frank is a smart, forward thinker," Bohn says. "I am pleased to know that when I decide to retire, there will be people like him continuing to lead our industry."

