

# Getting There Fast

*After disappointment, DNA testing accelerates change in Montana.*

Story & photos by  
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Everyone learns the lesson sometime: You can't judge a book by its cover. Things aren't always what they seem.

Hugh Bradley learned that about his cow herd less than a decade after Shandi Bradley first learned that about Hugh.

"That is going to be the man you marry," her mother would tell her often, but Shandi wasn't so sure.

"I liked him, but he was too wild," Shandi says with a laugh. After a couple of years of friendship, a horse and a few dozen cows brought them together.

Shandi was at a conservation banquet where a horse was up for raffle. Her tablemate said, "If I win that horse, I'm

going to give it to you." Sure enough, organizers drew that out-of-stater's number, and with no place to keep an animal herself, that stranger made good on her promise to Shandi.

"Now I have a beautiful palomino horse," she says.

The new livestock owner was set to drive to Helena to get a brand.

At the same time, Bradley needed to get one of his own. The two went together, and rather than woo her with flowers, the rancher paid for Shandi's brand. They were married in 2007.

It was perfect timing. After several years working in construction, Bradley had purchased 30 cows and was getting back to his ranching roots.

"It's engrained in me I suppose," says the oldest of Guy and Robin Bradley's three children, the only one who is back

home. "It's just how I've always been as long as I can remember."

That, and he admits to some "stubbornness."

It takes that to ranch in an area where many have sold their small cow herds to focus on row-crop farming, where consolidation is common and many others have left the area completely for higher-paying jobs elsewhere.

"Stubborn" might suggest Bradley is not open to change. Evidence would suggest the opposite.

## A better picture

In 2012, after buying an HD50K-tested bull and wanting to learn more about what that meant, he "stumbled upon" commercial DNA testing.

"I wanted a picture of my cows and my calf crop, because we were never able to get any of that data back," Bradley says. The cattle sell on video auction and are often transported out of state for feeding. "This was a way for me to get a better picture of what's going on."

Shandi found a pleasant surprise when she discovered there was more to Bradley than she gave him credit for, but when he found out more about his calf crop, it was a different realization.

"I was disappointed," the rancher admits.

That year he looked at the replacement heifers he'd already selected. The 18 females averaged 45 on a 100-point scale, showing the most weakness in the marbling score. Those were mostly ones and twos out of a possible five.

Bradley says that's a reflection of many breeders in his area.

"They are just maternal traits, maternal traits, maternal traits," the rancher says. "That's fine and dandy, but your calves aren't being sold for maternal. They are being sold to a feedlot."

So he went to work improving. At

**Above:** Hugh Bradley uses commercial DNA testing to improve his herd.

first, Bradley just used the results to see what traits he should emphasize in sire selection.

"I wanted to see how everything would play out," the cattleman says, noting the first two years he still culled on his regular visual evaluation. "There were heifers that looked really good, that we liked and liked the mothers. The test scores were low, but we kept them anyway. It came back to show that the test scores were more accurate."

Since 2013, he's tested both heifers (with GeneMax<sup>®</sup> Advantage<sup>™</sup>) and steers (with GeneMax Focus<sup>™</sup>). That's when he started to see a trend.

"By my third heifer calf crop, I went strictly off the test," Bradley says. "I started putting more faith in the GeneMax test."

He culled those in the bottom 50%.

"I've been using it as my first decision," Bradley said. "There's been some awful good calves that went down the road, that we really liked, but they didn't have the score."

In 2014, the steers had an average GeneMax Focus score of 30. By summer 2016, 61 tested steers had a 74.1 average.

"I'm trying to get to a point where I don't have to do all this testing, or just do it for marketing," he says.

## Marketing aspect

While Bradley was researching GeneMax, he was also looking into Top Dollar Angus.

"Hugh contacted us first and wanted to know more about the program and how to get involved," says Kenny Stauffer, general manager for the marketing program. "We tell them to check their females, cull off the bottom 20%, and save only the best. On sire selection, just be a little more aware of where their carcass and marbling



After a couple of years of friendship, a horse and a few dozen cows brought Hugh and Shandi together on their Montana Ranch.

and growth scores are in their genetic selection.

“He’s done all of it,” Stauffer says of Bradley.

Top Dollar Angus requires herd sires be in the top 25% of the Angus breed for beef dollar value index (\$B) or the calves themselves must have top scores in one of the commercial DNA tests. At that time, Bradley wasn’t eligible.

This year, he just missed the mark by a few points ... until he culled the very bottom of the calf crop.

“I always try to cut the bottom 10% off anyway. We have for years; that’s just how we do it,” he explains. “You have little ones or ones that don’t do good or whatever.”

There were six calves under the 50th percentile, so sorting those off changed the overall group average to meet the 80-point threshold, and the calves earned the Top Dollar Angus seal of approval. Producers can use that designation as they market calves in whatever avenue they choose.

“If we are doing our job on the certification side, there should be a very, very high percentage of those animals, when they hit harvest, that will qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand,” Stauffer says.

This year’s calf crop sold on Northern Video Auction, and Bradley gives credit to his current seedstock supplier, Shipwheel Cattle Co., for alerting buyer Poky Feeders at Scott City, Kan.

Bradley hopes for the best so the feedyard will look to bid on the animals in the future.

“It’s not direct, but if you get them making money, they’re going to want your cattle,” he says. “It’s easier for them to manage their risk better. If there is less risk for them, they’re going to be willing to pay more for my cattle. If they’re going to make money on them, hopefully they’re going to let me make money on them, so to speak — the trickle-down effect.”

That motivates him to continue, even though some argue DNA testing is expensive. At \$17 per head for steers and \$44 for heifers, Bradley is

confident it’s a good investment.

“Last year, that was the cost of one replacement heifer,” he says. “Instead of going out and buying replacements, I’m keeping my own, trying to get the genetics I want with the bulls I’m buying so I can keep my own replacements.”

He’ll continue studying the sale books and his own results to expedite that improvement.

“You’re not going to do it without [genomic testing], unless you just have plumb dumb luck or time. You’re going to pick stuff that looks good and it isn’t going to perform at all,” he says.

Daughter Olivia and son Walker are the fifth generation of Bradleys. Someday they may run cattle here where Glacier National Park decorates the horizon. That adds to the pressure their father feels to

build up the herd his great-grandfather started.

“I’m trying to better everything in a shorter amount of time,” he says.



**Editor’s Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



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