

Relationships matter to Wade Massar and his family. Pictured are (from left) son Tell Massar, Jeanna and Wade Massar, ranch hand Landon Vannoy, daughter-in-law Ali, son Tyrel, granddaughter Justine Massar, and ranch hand Allen Piroutek.



The Right Sort

Massar Ranch rides herd on uniformity to court repeat buyers and build an Angus reputation.

Story & photo by
LAURA NELSON,
for *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Wade Massar is not even a little sheepish about his vices: good horses, time in the saddle and time in the sorting pens.

“My wife says sometimes I just like to sort for the sake of something to do — ‘you just sort to sort,’” the Circle, Mont., cattleman laughs. “We do everything on horseback, and that does make it kind of fun.”

He does the bulk of his sifting before calves ever come through the working pens. He sorts through genetics to create calves with capacity and cows with condition. He sorts through mineral programs and forage data to customize the perfect year-round nutrition plan. He sorts through calving data, disposition notes and health records to cull with confidence when need be. Finally, he sorts steers and heifers at calving time so he can focus on sorting for consistency within sex groups at shipping time.

“When you’re sorting and pairing them out, the more you handle them, the more you can really pick out the cattle that are tough to

handle, especially the young cows — if they won’t just pick up their calves and walk you to the gate then, you know, she gets a mark. Every time you sort ‘em, it’s an opportunity to really see the calf, too,” he says.

While that kind of sorting adds time in the saddle, that’s not why he does it.

“I want to make sure that feedlot is satisfied with the set of calves I send him,” Massar says. “I want a repeat buyer. It makes money in the end if he knows he’s going to be treated well.”

Every step of sorting, from the bull sale book to the carcass data, is

geared toward their ultimate ranch goals.

“We’re trying our best to raise the right kind of cattle for the good of the entire industry,” wife Jeanna says. “We just want to raise better calves each year; to give the right vaccines at the right time; to have healthy, productive cattle; and those long-term relationships that work for everyone.”

Feeding the right sort

While a repeat buyer is the long-term relationship Massar has his mind on, not even the best business arrangements last forever.

He connected with a farmer-

feeder in Iowa nearly 20 years ago, and it was the perfect fit: Stan Sievers wanted just Massar’s kind of cattle. He wanted 300-400 single-source Angus calves that didn’t need babied from a health standpoint and that had the nutritional head start to finish well.

“For 17 years, he bought them every year. That was a good deal,” Massar says.

Along the way, he learned which cattle do well in the feedyard, and what he could do better on the ranch to keep a repeat buyer.

“I learned a lot about the variance of those cattle — no matter how much you sort. You think you have a uniform set of cattle there, and you go see them at the feedlot and they’re about ready to be slaughtered and they still look pretty uniform,” Massar says, “but then they’re hanging on that rail for grading and there’s a big difference.”

Noting those details came in handy down the line. As life happens, Sievers eventually retired — in his late 80s — and Massar was left looking for a new market. Fortunately, he had used that time to keep sorting, narrowing variability and getting his cattle more uniform under the hide, too.

He ended up in a Nebraska feedyard for a year, where he got some encouraging data back on his calves and all those years of work. In a group of 82 heifers, 45.5% had the marbling to qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, including nearly 4% Prime. At least 50% made it to low-Choice, leaving less than 5% Selects. Half made Yield Grade (YG) 3, with 43% in the premium YG 2 category.

Just like all those years in Iowa, he took what he’d learned about variability under the hide and put it to good use.

Not really the cowboy sort

For more than 30 years, he’s kept cattle back to fill his own yard at home, too.

Set up for success: Genetics, health and nutrition

To start with, you want calves that have the capability to make money in the feedlot, Wade Massar, Circle, Mont., says. If you aren’t comfortable or confident with what your cow herd produces, then you probably better not retain ownership.

“The mama cow is where I make my money, and she has to stay in the herd and raise a good calf every year. Anything that’s high-maintenance, we sort out of the bunch as soon as we can,” Massar says. “The best thing to do is to sell the cows that don’t produce the good calf. I keep trying to buy better bulls, so keeping those poor cows doesn’t make any sense.”

Second, you have to have a really good health program at the ranch, with vaccination protocols done right and on time.

“It costs a lot of money to treat sick calves,” he notes. “It’s a big expense to treat them and then the potential gain diminishes.”

Calves get a full suite of vaccinations in the spring and then three to four weeks before they go to the feedyard.

“And you have to have good nutrition,” Massar says. “You can’t send calves that are lacking in nutrition, because that’s what sets up their immunity right. I think that’s even more important than their shots.”

“You can give a calf all the shots in the world, but if they’re malnourished, they’re not going to take — the cows have to have a good mineral program and they have to have adequate grass, protein and energy in the grass.”

There are a lot of good mineral programs out there, but most aren’t tailored to your ranch.

“There are areas here where I know it’s absolutely necessary to supplement this or that,” Massar says. “There are areas where I feel it’s not as important because I know the trace minerals in that pasture. We tend to have high sulfate levels in some of our water, and that ties

Because, despite his inclination toward working cattle on horseback, Massar jokes that they're not really cowboys, anyway. He recalls one time when sons Tell and Tyrel were younger, when they had begun getting into horse work themselves.

He pulled them aside one day and sprang this idea on them: "You boys think you're cowboys, don't you? And they really did," he laughs. "I told them, you know you're really not. You're hayboys. You put hay up for six months, and then you put it out for six months. You spend more time handling hay than cattle in this business."

Tell and Tyrel are both on the ranch now, working with their dad to continue growing the right sort to feed or to sell. Sometimes, the ones they keep home are just to background; other times they take them to finish. As is often the case in this forage-rich area, it all depends on the market and feed supply that year.

"We have the ability to put up a lot of feed here at our place, and that plays a big role in it — we have the feed, and sometimes it's better to sell the feed through the calves," Massar says.

Again, a good opportunity for lessons learned: Some years, feeding cattle has been more profitable than others, of course, but like fun time in the sorting pen, it's a vice that goes well with his vocation.

"It's just something I like doing," Massar grins. "There's just something about raising those calves up and sending them to harvest to see how they do. I just like having a hand in it from conception to kill plant."

It also gives him more control over marketing.

"When we see cattle selling at auction, they're getting the same money for every pen that is ready to sell, on average. So if I want to make some extra money on the rail by selling on the grid, the cattle better be a little better than average," he says.

"Money talks. I only sell on a grid the cattle we feed, and this year it was a lifesaver. Compared to just selling on the live market, we're talking around a

6¢-per-pound difference that we gained putting them on the rail."

The sort that sell themselves

It turns out, new relationships are easier to come by with the right sort of cattle and a good reputation.

The next year, another buyer sought out Massar's cattle, based on the bulls he'd bought from a local seedstock producer

who implied genetic potential in his herd. The buyer offered him a premium equivalent to the advantage he'd earned selling cattle on the grid the year before, and they struck a deal.

"That right there shows a 6¢ premium because somebody thought these calves would meet their program. They were confident enough they would work," Massar says. "I know we talked earlier and

said everything was on the average, but it really isn't if you get to know the right sort of people, looking for the right sort of thing."



Editor's Note: Former industry information specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC, Laura Nelson currently owns LCN Communications, Big Timber, Mont.

up copper, which is very, very necessary to build up a strong immune system in calves."

Some of that is just experience now.

"I used to do a lot of grass testing. I feed a different mineral group in the spring than I do in June than what I do in July. I change it as the grass changes," Massar says. "A cow might fall out of the herd because of health issues, but it's likely that started with a nutrition issue.

"If you're looking for just a little more production, you have to go beyond minimum requirements."