



# Generic to Superior

*Feedlot data helps rancher build predictable quality.*

*Story & photos by*  
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Montana rancher Stan Pelton has fed cattle for 20 years. It's no coincidence that's just one more than the number of years he's used artificial insemination (AI).

"After you feed them one time, you're darn sure aware of what you don't need to do," says Pelton, who grew up in the shadow of the Absaroka Mountain range, where he

and sons Garth and Dirk still manage cattle today.

"I've always known what I wanted to do," Pelton says. Ranching was the plan as he headed off to study animal science and ag business at Montana State University, but his father wasn't pleased to learn he'd lined up a grass lease for just after graduation.

"He asked me, 'What are you planning to do with that?'" Pelton recalls. The obvious answer didn't impress his father. "He said, 'That's going to be a little hard to do when

you're working six or seven days somewhere else. You go and get a job and learn to bite your tongue.'

"He was adamant, and that was the best thing he ever did for me. I'm hot-headed enough as it is," Pelton says, so he set off to "take orders from somebody else."

"I got my master's in the feedlot," says Pelton, talking about his foreman duties at a commercial yard near Powell, Wyo. With that experience, he headed back to continue the ranching tradition on the family land in Montana, some of it homesteaded by his maternal grandparents in the late 1800s and other pieces acquired when his paternal grandfather moved to the area a few decades later.

## **Building from the bottom**

"I bought used cows from everybody — bad attitudes, bad bags, the whole nine yards," he laughs. However, he went right to work upgrading that base. "I always knew what I wanted to do and what I wanted to produce."

For Pelton, balanced-trait selection started with cow efficiency.

"A cow should be able to go

eight to nine months without [supplemental] feed," he says. "God gave them teeth for a reason."

Calving ease is important, and his attention to that pays off. He still remembers that lone C-section

in all his years of raising cattle, and it's blamed on an unusual developmental abnormality.

His herd has been "stringently culled for attitude," a criteria that has taken on even more importance as the years add up. Selection for gain and grade rounds out the list.

"It's been a long learning curve,"

Pelton says, but he credits some great teachers along the way. "Many of the mistakes my dad and grandfathers made — I didn't have to make them, because all I had to do was be observant. I was so blessed."

As times changed, Pelton didn't always have a template to which to compare. A few decades ago he retained ownership for the first time.

"I got tired of trying to sell them. I wasn't willing to accept generic price when I thought I had something better," he says. "I soon learned."

The first carcass data he remembers was on Hereford-cross

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calves that graded 20% Choice, but that didn't sour him on the feeding experience.

"It made me mad!" He can laugh about it now, because Pelton took that newfound herd knowledge and used it to stoke his fire for improvement.

First he switched the bull he was using to create heifers, because it proved to be a little bit "too hot-headed," Pelton notes. "Boy, those dark cutters don't pay too well."

Next he made the decision to breed Angus on Angus.

"I'm probably giving up some heterosis, but I'll put the gain on my calves toe-to-toe with any others," he says. They've been grading upward of 90% Choice, with nearly half of those qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand.

For more than a dozen years the cattle have headed to western Nebraska's Chappell Feedyard, where longtime CAB partner Tom Williams helped Pelton apply the feedlot data to make improvements.

"Tom's a good guy to work with," he says. "He's spent more time with my little deal than he probably does with people who have quite a bit more."

Another key to making better change faster? The use of synchronization, he says.

"Those cattle that are out of the AI matings ... the difference is amazing," Pelton says.

He tries to buy half-sibling cleanup bulls, often tapping into local resources like the Midland Bull Test just down the road at Columbus, Mont., or other Montana breeders who have "the right" genetics.

A few years ago he purchased a bull from Chris Jeffery of Thistledew Land and Cattle, when a line in the sale book caught Pelton's eye: "We are looking for heifers that are moderate, soggy and maternally bred with as much known genetic history as possible from outfits that keep excellent records."

Jeffery looks to connect buyers with high-quality bred females, and instantly knew he wanted Pelton's years of selection represented in his fall sale.

"We've bought his heifers ever since," Jeffery says, noting that they're consistently the top sellers, or close to it, every year. "He's getting purebred premiums on commercial females."

That's evidence of half a century of reputation building, and not just on the cattle.

"Every bull he chooses is based on well-thought-out decisions," Jeffery says. "He's a true Montana cattleman. He's as solid as a rock."

## Rebuilding

Not as many heifers left the ranch this year, as the Pelton family herds are in a rebuilding phase. The 2012 drought caused them to cut culling age in half and send any cows older than 6 to the sale barn.

However, Pelton says optimistically, they didn't have to sell the younger herdsmates.

"I like generation turnover," he says.

"You improve a lot faster that way."

Pelton used to wean in October, but he recently moved that up a month to avoid bad weather and give the cows a little more time to build up body condition. After developing a comprehensive three- to six-week preconditioning program, he rarely has any pulls in the feedlot and he gives a lot of credit to an injectable mineral supplement.

"It's not cheap, but this way you know darn well everybody gets it," Pelton says, noting that a boss cow might keep others from spending enough time at the lick tub.

He appreciates the counsel of his local veterinarian who has Nebraska feedlot experience.

"That lends itself well to what we want to do," Pelton says.

With high calf prices, he says that he

just couldn't afford to retain his 2013 calves, but that doesn't mean he'll back off on his focus of producing the complete package.

"It doesn't cost much more to raise a good one than it does a bad one," he says.



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