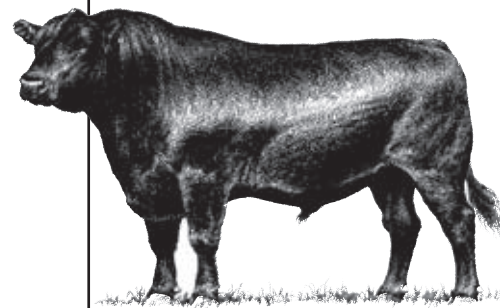


ANGUS

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"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

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PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

Ladies First

Nebraska rancher focuses on females.

Story by
MIRANDA REIMAN

Pay attention to the cows and the rest will fall into place. That's the mantra Harold Johnson lives by on his ranch near Hyannis, Neb.

Johnson manages nearly 300 commercial Angus cows with his wife, Teresa, and their two children.

"My approach is working with the females first," he says. Keeping only his own replacements, Johnson explains, "I can't buy them as good as I can raise. There are too many unknowns."

That's especially true considering all he does know about his own herd, from a list of culling criteria to progeny carcass data.

"When I pick my replacements they need to be out of cows that have produced 100% Choice," he says. Sure, there are exceptions for "a cow that missed one year but it really wasn't her fault."

Experience has led to selection of only early-calving females. "I like to pick heifers from cows that have calved within a 30-day window every year," Johnson says. "If you pick a replacement

off the later end of the calves, pretty soon she's not going to be in the herd."

The goal is to have them fit seamlessly into the herd's 60-day calving season. Replacements also must be sired by a moderate-framed bull with a yearling weight expected progeny difference (YW EPD) in the 70s or low 80s.

"The first things I'll look at are grade and carcass weight," Johnson says. "I don't like to get them too big."

But mostly the dams' stats dictate who stays and who goes to the feedyard.

"I'll run all of them on the computer and then take a printout to the pasture. That's my first criteria — the data before

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Above: Harold Johnson raises his own replacements from among cows that calve within a 30-day window. The goal is to have them fit seamlessly into the herd's 60-day calving season.

Ladies First (from cover)



Working with the same feedyard allows the feedyard personnel to get to know your cattle, Johnson says. As a result, the feedlot can provide feedback to determine what is working and what is not.

the eye appeal," he says. "I would hope the genetics that produced that good data would pass down to the heifer. I've had some awesome-looking calves that have been some of my best steers on eye appeal, but when the data comes back from the feedlot, they don't do as well."

"You've got to have a female that can produce because you're in the business of producing calves. In the end, most of them are going to be eaten, so they also have to produce a good carcass."

— *Harold Johnson*

Consistent feedback

This tracking got easier for Johnson four years ago when he began feeding at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Northwest Cattle Feeders (formerly McGinley-Schilz Feedyard) near Brule, Neb.

As an example, 111 steers from the 2007 calf crop spent some time on a growing ration but still converted at 5.9 pounds (lb.) of feed per pound of gain overall. The harvest data showed 32% qualifying for either *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand or USDA Prime.

"Working with the same feedyard, they get to know you and they get to know your cattle. It takes a little bit of the risk out of it," Johnson says. Consistent feedback helps determine what's working and what's not, like the time he switched from preconditioning to weaning on the truck.

"When I started just sending them to the feedyard, there was more sickness," he says. "Last year, we weaned at home again before sending them. We ended up with zero death loss that way, so we're weaning for 45 days again this year."

He tries to ease the calves into their new situation. "We're pretty lucky. We've got wet meadows here, and there's a lot of green growth in the fall," Johnson says. "I lock the cows in the corral and feed them a little bit of hay for a few days. The calves are on the opposite side of the fence in the meadow, so when I kick them out of the gate, they go to eating right away."

Big-picture view

Typically, the spring-born calves are weaned in October and later sent to the feedyard, with part ownership retained. Due to the volatility of the market, Johnson has considered other options of late, but regardless, he wants his cattle to perform for the next person in line.

"You've got to have a female that can produce because you're in the business of producing calves. In the end, most of them are going to be eaten, so they also have to produce a good carcass," he says.

This big-picture view could be a result of earlier job experiences. Before returning to his wife's roots, Johnson worked for the former Stevenson Basin Angus in his native Montana, and in a retail meat department.

"When I was a meat cutter I always thought if you had a T-bone steak as big as a round steak, nobody is going to be able to afford it anyway," he says. "That's why I try to shy away from the great big cattle."

Plus, he wants to stay within the parameters of most grids and the CAB specifications.

"I'd like to try and collect every little bit of premium I can get," Johnson says. He source- and age-verifies his calves through IMI Global, and even works as a part-time auditor.

Looking to the future, Johnson tried artificial insemination (AI) on 22 heifers for the first time in 2008 and plans to step that up in 2009. He's exploring the possibility of selling bred heifers, too. All plans are part of the greater goal: Lead with the females to produce a product everybody wants.

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