

# Angus & Excellence

*The historic Four Sixes Ranch in Texas believes Angus are an important part of their future sustainability and serving consumers.*

Story by  
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What's the key to creating a ranch legacy that has spanned more than 140 years? It's pushing beyond the status quo and striving for excellence, says Joe Leathers, current cattle manager at the Four Sixes Ranch, headquartered in Guthrie, Texas.

The historic ranch is part of the Burnett Ranches LLC, which was founded in 1868 by Captain Samuel "Burk" Burnett when he purchased 100 head of cattle wearing the "6666" brand. Today, Burnett Ranches, which encompasses 275,000 acres near Panhandle and Guthrie, is owned and operated by Anne Burnett Windfohr Marion, the great-granddaughter of Captain Burnett. Superbly bred cattle, champion horses and abundant wildlife grace its landscape.

"This ranch has stayed in business because it is progressive. We strive for excellence in our horses and cattle and have for years and years. We strive for excellence in our people, too," Leathers says.

He tells that as the ranch legacy has been passed through each generation of the Burnett family, the focus on determination, innovation and high expectations has been passed to the

managers (only six since 1870) and employees as well. As a result, the Four Sixes today is a premier example of dedication to a family ranching legacy.

"We have second- and third-generation employees who work here, and they take as much pride in the ranch as the owners," Leathers says.

## Quality quest

The foundation for the exemplary success of the Four Sixes can be traced to its emphasis on superior genetics for its cattle and Quarter Horses.

Within the last 15 years, a transition to a new black Angus program for the herd's 7,000 cows was initiated by former managers J.J. and Mike Gibson and is

being continued by Leathers. The Four Sixes' goal is to produce animals with a moderate frame, good temperament, exceptional feedlot performance and superior carcass quality. Steers are sold as feeders or retained through finishing. The ranch is also specializing in the sale of top-quality replacement females to enhance other breeding programs.

The investment in Angus genetics has added efficiency and end-product quality to the beef produced by the Four Sixes, Leathers reports. "People are standing in line to buy our cattle. I'm proud of where we came from and what we are doing today."

As he oversees the cattle management of the ranch, Leathers' focus on producing quality beef is driven by his sincere commitment to the ranching industry — and American consumers.

"Sustainability of the ranching industry is a key factor for the future," he says. "We have a population that is expanding rapidly. To stay in business, American ranchers are going to have to produce more tons of beef on fewer acres while still providing a safe, nutritious, high-quality beef product. The alternative is increasing use of foreign beef ... it becomes a national security issue."

He adds, "I want the American public to realize this and understand that they are part of this ranch [the Four Sixes] and the ranching industry as a whole. They have a valuable stake in it, and it's called food."

To that end, Leathers' goal for the Four Sixes is to continue

**Above:** Striving for excellence — in its cattle, its horses and its people — has kept the Four Sixes in business, Cattle Manager Joe Leathers says.

improving the Angus genetics of their cows and the productivity of their range so they have the ability to produce more pounds of American beef for consumers.

He shares that through an intensive brush control program during the last several years the Four Sixes has cleared 160,000 acres so that it is once again productive rangeland that can be utilized by cattle and wildlife. Before this the ranch was averaging one cow per 38-40 acres. Now they are able to stock about one cow per 30 acres, meaning they can graze more cows and produce more beef.

## Looking forward

Leathers' vision for the future is to continue striving for excellence — and he realizes this means not only with better genetics and ranch management, but also with doing a better job of informing and educating the American public.

"Most Americans used to have a concept of where their food came from, but we've lost that connection to agriculture. We need to make it a priority to educate the American public and policy makers about what we do in agriculture and how the challenges that face our industry affect us," Leathers says.

He acknowledges that a litany of issues face the ag industry — from environmental issues, GIPSA, Cap and Trade, to the death tax. But he says until policy makers and the American people have a better understanding of agriculture, those issues will remain contentious and there will continue to be new items added to the list.

"With a better understanding of agriculture by the American people and our policy makers," he says, "we could



PHOTOS COURTESY FOUR SIXES RANCH



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## Shaping future leaders

The Four Sixes is committed to helping shape future leaders in the beef industry. They are a major contributor to the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management Endowment Fellowship, which supports students enrolled in the program.

James Clement Jr., King Ranch chairman, compliments the Four Sixes for that vision and support.

“When Anne Marion and I have discussed the future of ranching, it is obvious innovation is critical to success,” Clement says. “Anne acknowledges that nothing can be accomplished without the contributions of a smart, experienced manager and supportive team. The King Ranch Institute is fortunate people like Anne believe as they do and reinforce that belief with their philanthropic support.”

Toward that purpose, Leathers adds, “KRIRM provides an opportunity to teach managers to be visionaries. Future managers must not only manage the ranch but the people as well. If you don’t manage people with integrity; they won’t have integrity in what they do. That’s an important principle in our industry.

“Ranching sends men and

women of character into the world,” he continues. “If you ever had to be in a foxhole, they are the type of people you’d want with you. We need more people who have a knowledge of our industry’s past in leadership roles to

mold the future of our industry.”

Along with that, Leathers recounts the increasing importance for future managers and beef industry leaders to always look ahead, think out of the box, push beyond the status quo, and share information with the American public.

“I want people to realize the deci-

sions we make on the Four Sixes are for the good of the American public,” Leathers concludes. “When I look out across a ridge and see a large herd of cattle, I realize how blessed I am to see the landscape my forefathers and the Indians saw. I wish everybody in the U.S. could experience that.”

alleviate a lot of what comes out of D.C. We as ranchers need to individually take the time to educate others and share the message that American ranchers produce a safe, quality product for the U.S. and the world.”

Leathers has been active in meeting with political leaders in Austin and on the national level, and says he speaks to groups “at every opportunity he gets.” He encourages other ranchers to do the same.

“You don’t have to be a professional speaker; just educate others about what you do,” he says. “There is no reason the everyday rancher can’t tell his story.” Leathers says Facebook and websites can be a valuable tool in sharing ranchers’ stories, as well.



**Editor’s Note:** In addition to its cattle enterprise, the Four Sixes stands some of the most well-respected Quarter Horse stallions in the industry, with elite broodmares that produce individuals for cutting, reining, racing, ranch work and all-around performance-bred stallions. Complementing its horse program, the Four Sixes offers a full range of equine veterinary services at its modern, state-of-the-art medical facilities located at the main headquarters just west of Guthrie. For more about the Four Sixes visit: <http://6666ranch.com/>

The ranch has been featured in the American Angus Association’s “I Am Angus” video series, available online at [www.youtube.com/user/apicreativemedia](http://www.youtube.com/user/apicreativemedia).