

Gambling on a Change



Story & photos by
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"You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run," sings Kenny Rogers in a song about a gambler. He could well be singing about the cattle business, as watching the bottom line is often like playing a game of chance. If it doesn't come up in the black, showing a profit, then there is a very good reason to either fold or change hands to a new avenue of operating your business.

This was true for the Hempt family of central Pennsylvania when they made the decision to cease operation of their feedlot after being in the feeding business for more than 40 years.

"We have been in the cattle business in one form or another for

a great many years, going clear back to my great-grandfather in South Dakota," says George Hempt, one of the owners. Along with the feedlot in the East, the company owned a cow-calf operation in Missouri. About eight years ago, Hempt and his dad decided their finances would be better served by converting to a forage-based commercial cow-calf operation in Pennsylvania.

The Hempts currently manage about 300 head of mostly black baldie cows and 14 bulls — 12 registered Angus and 2 registered Hereford — on 800 acres located across the Susquehanna River from Harrisburg.

Officially known as Hempt Bros. Inc., the corporation also owns and operates two companies that have achieved both longevity and success. Their construction company, established in 1925, employs 350 workers. Hempt Farms, a 500-acre, Standardbred horse-breeding facility

has for more than half a century gained recognition in harness racing.

Herd history

Since the death of George's father in 1999, George and his brother Gerald have moved to the forefront of the businesses. Gerald manages the construction company, with George at the helm of both livestock operations with the help of his son, Max. Each operation is managed as a separate entity. Archie Madden manages the cattle herd with the help of two other employees.

For many years, Hempt says, the cattle and horse operations were operated together until the horse operation grew too large and the herd of Hereford cattle was phased out. The family got back into the cattle business in a more serious way when Hempt's father began putting area properties together in the 1950s and 1960s, which was around the time they began feeding cattle.

"We had Charolais cattle at the Missouri ranch, and Archie managed that herd for about 15 years prior to the sale of the ranch and his moving here," Hempt says. "Those cattle were bred to supply feeders to us here at the feedlot after they were weaned and backgrounded. When they were ready for slaughter, we sold them through Bill McCoy at the Lancaster (Pa.) stockyards.

"This all worked pretty good," he continues, "except we all found out that Charolais cattle are notorious for jumping over fences, and it was soon decided to change to another breed."

Madden was familiar with the Angus breed because he had used Angus bulls on some Charolais heifers to remedy calving problems in the late 1970s. The breed had impressed him so much that he recommended making a change.

The present cow herd, purchased from a gentleman at his retirement, traces to Montana. "The man had

sold his farm and the new owner didn't want the cattle, so he needed to disperse 240 head of cattle rather quickly," Hempt recalls. "He and my father made a deal, and I think we sent trucks to pick them up the next day."

The cattle weren't in the best shape, he says, but when they got them out on the limestone grass, "their heads went right down and they filled out very nicely." About a year later they convinced Madden to move to Pennsylvania to manage the new herd.

A new game

Madden says he experienced many challenges in taking over the new herd in a different geographic location.

"I have always been a grass person, and when I came here it was like a different world from Missouri, where our grass is mostly fescue," he recalls. "Here was all of this lush orchard grass and timothy, and yet the operation was still growing about 350 acres of corn. The corn cost around \$200 an acre to produce, not counting the harvest cost. They also tried feeding silage.

"The way I look at it," Madden says, "you are taking a cow that actually has the genetic makeup to be on forage, and now she is going to stand at the bunk eating instead of grazing on pasture, which is the most economical way to feed her. When cows eat corn, they get too fat and that can mean a lot of calving problems, plus I sometimes think feeding them a lot of grain hurts them more than it helps."

The cattle being separated into small groups of 30-40 cows spread out over the individual 40- to 60-acre farms was another obstacle. Although most of the pastures had good water sources, with either a natural water supply or a well, the small groups couldn't readily be



Archie Madden (left) and George Hempt (right) oversee the cattle operation at Hempt Bros. Inc., which also operates a construction company and a standardbred horse-breeding facility.

moved, and they would often overgraze the grass and kill it.

Madden says overgrazing is now pretty much a thing of the past. Old fencing systems, dating back 30-40 years, were replaced with high-tensile fencing and a system of crossfencing. Groups of cattle are now rotated into a new pasture each week. Fertilization has improved forage quality, which appears to have improved milk production.

"We strive to feed our cattle a ration appropriate just to maintain them," Madden explains. "We have about 100 acres of alfalfa mix, and we still grow and grind a small amount of corn and purchase some soybean meal, but the cattle receive a ration that is based on the results of testing the hay. Even if we have poorer quality hay, we still have all the energy we need."

When it comes to breeding the cows, all are bred by natural service since the use of artificial insemination (AI) would be too labor-intensive for Madden and the two other employees to handle, and breeding season also would coincide with the first cutting of hay, which would be difficult to manage.

Bulls are usually bought by private treaty or through the Pennsylvania Bull Test at State College, Pa. Bull selection is done by Madden, with Hempt giving the final OK. To keep breeding and selection top-notch, strict attention is paid to conformation and expected progeny differences (EPDs). They look for those that are above average, especially in weaning since the calves are sold 30 days after. Low birth weights are also a factor, as well as good milk.

"I love the disposition of the Angus; they are real sweethearts," Madden says. "We have an 8-year-old bull that weighs in at about 2,340 pounds (lb.) and is just a big old baby."

Herd management

Replacement heifers from the Hempt herd were kept the first year Madden was with the operation and again last year. In between, heifers have been bought out of the Winchester, Va., sale each April with focus on purchasing calves with good conformation and genetics.

When keeping heifers from their own breeding program, the criteria hinges on calves that are born within the first two to three weeks of the calving season. Then they look at the sire's records and then the dam's records, which are kept on a computer by Madden's wife. Madden considers whether the cow has consistently calved early and milked well, as well as whether she has a good disposition, the correct conformation and good volume.

Whether they purchase or raise the heifers, Hempt and Madden want easy-going cows that weigh 1,200-1,250 lb. and that will do well on their forage program.

"We have some of our older cows from the original herd that go about 1,400 pounds, and most don't wean any bigger calves than the 1,200-pound cows," Madden says. "Why feed the larger cow for the same results?"

Breeding season lasts 66 days, with calving season in March and April. Herd records show that about 80% of the calves are born during the first 30 days, with an average birth weight of about 80 lb. The cows are left to calve in the pasture. Within 12 hours of birth, calves are ear-tagged; their navels are sprayed; they are given oral Scourguard 3 (K)/C[®], plus a vitamin shot

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and a penicillin shot; and bull calves are castrated.

First-calf heifers usually calve about three weeks ahead of mature cows and are kept separate after they calve.

"With our setup of small pastures, we will actually keep groups separated until they are about 7 or 8 years old," Madden

says. "This way we can determine what they need in a ration balance, and they are treated a little better so they will breed back. We will also put the calves on creep feed and have gotten along very well with this program."

In the beginning, calves were marketed by teleauction in Virginia, but in 1999 the

operation began selling by consignment through Lancaster, Pa. Calves are vaccinated 30 days prior to weaning, then given a booster shot at weaning. They are not weighed at weaning, but are backgrounded for 30 days and then weighed just before shipping.

Madden says they try not to push the calves too hard, preferring to just maintain them. In the past, calves were brought into

the corrals where steers were separated from the heifers, but the calves began to go off feed. To alleviate that problem, calves are now gathered and weaned on pasture, which has worked well the last two years.

Last year was their best yet in terms of reaching production goals, says Madden, who adds the herd is about where it ought to be.

"You can only raise so much off of a cow without going to extremes," he explains, preferring to do the least amount of culling. "The only thing I could ask for is a 96% conception rate, and I know that is not possible."

For now, he'll content himself with producing calves that are in demand.

"The people who buy them need to make a dollar, too, he says. "If they don't, they aren't coming back. The same customer has bought our steers for the last three years, so we must be doing something right."

"I think we are pretty fortunate to be in the cattle business," he continues. "If I am not here tomorrow, then I have been able to do what I like to and that is to breed cows and raise calves."

Hempt agrees that business has been doing well and attributes a good part of that success to the Angus breed.

"The use of Angus in our program has certainly made our operation more profitable, and I feel the breed has helped us produce cattle that please the market of today," he says. "You go to a sale and see a bunch of Angus or baldie calves and buyers go crazy over them. You can run a bunch of Hereford calves in there that are almost as good quality and they will bring \$5 less and other breeds even less."

Hempt says the commercial cow-calf sector is faced with many challenges today, especially in trying to meet the demands of the consumer.

"The Angus Association is meeting that challenge and also doing a bang-up job with promotion," he continues. "Without a doubt, they do the best job of public relations of any cattle or horse association, making the future look real bright for the Angus breed."

A clear sign the operation must be breeding the type of cattle in demand, the Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association named Hempt Bros. Commercial Cow-Calf Operation of the Year in 2001. The gamble has paid off.

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