LONG HAUL

Shooting for carcass premiums on a family ranch provides opportunity for next generation to return home.

by **STEVE SUTHER** *&* **JESSIE HENSHAW,** *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Dale Long is a lifelong student of the beef-cattle business. He admits, however, that his learning curve quickened since he started aiming for *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand premiums. Then an extended drought came along.

Growing up an only child on a commercial Hereford operation near Gate, Okla., — a gateway to the state's Panhandle region — Long enrolled in college partly just to get away. Yet, after graduating in education with a history minor, he chose to return to his ranching roots.

"There are days that I wish I would have taught school, like in the blizzards and droughts," the 64-year-old quips.

Drought weighs heavily on Long's mind these days. Normal annual rainfall is 14-17 inches, "but we haven't been near that," he notes. "Six to 7 inches is average for the last three years."

It's an obstacle, but Dale and Betty Long, in their 44th year of marriage and farming, do not take a short-term view. If anything, such obstacles only intensify the need for planning as a team with sons Scott and Nathan.

Their return (Nathan in 2001 and Scott in 2003) came after the two had actually used their degrees for a while, both teaching and coaching in Amarillo. Homecoming was a catalyst for a new game plan targeting a higher level of beef production.

Instead of just selling feeder cattle, they wanted to create cattle good enough for retaining ownership in feedlots and all the way to the packinghouse. For years the ranch had generated black white-face calves and replacements, but only from generic black bulls from local sale barns.

"My dad believed that if it had four legs and a tail and it was alive, then you were ahead of the game," Dale says. "But we found out that the consumer demands more from us today. They are not going to eat just anything."

From fine dining to fast food, everything was going branded.

"This is not from a Hereford or a Holstein; this is from Angus. We realized that the consumer was demanding a better product, so we thought we should try to provide it. The Angus breed is where the quality is, and if that is your goal, that is the way to go," Dale says.

"You've got to get quality to get the premiums," Scott adds.

That's why Long Ranch started using only registered-Angus bulls a couple of years after the boys came home, turning to Gardiner Angus Ranch, just 40 miles to the northwest at Ashland, Kan.

"We have learned how to read EPDs (expected progeny differences), focus on those things that matter to us and buy a bull accordingly," Dale says.

Using Angus resources

Calving ease direct (CED), docility and various maternal traits boost reproductive efficiency, and the American Angus Association's weaning ($W), feedlot ($F) and beef ($B) dollar value indexes help point the way to quality.

Dale Long (middle) and his sons, Scott (right) and Nathan, work as partners on their Oklahoma Panhandle ranch. Their new game plan uses Angus genetics and the latest tools to bump up quality and uniformity in the herd and feedlot-bound calves.

Cows graze on drought-stressed buffalo grass range on the Long Ranch, near Gate, Okla. The region's annual rainfall has been only 6 to 7 inches for the past three years, forcing the ranch to downsize the herd even as they plan for expansion with higher quality.

"You've got to get the best genetics if you want to produce the best," Dale says. "That's what we are shooting for, but it's a slow process."

One step along the way was age- and source-verifying calves that the Longs sold at a local auction market.

"We didn't realize any benefit from all that work of tagging calves and keeping records," Scott says. "Meanwhile, in the feedlot you could get $45 on top for age and source. When we put that with the margins available, we thought it was a good time to see if feeding cattle would work.

"We could get some background information on our herd and use that to make decisions on our cows, too," he adds. "The better quality we get in our cattle, the more we can be a price maker instead of just going to the sale barn and getting what you get."

Dale couldn't help but recall what he used to say as a young producer of commodity cattle: "If I want to go broke, I'll put cattle in a feedlot — and now here we are putting them in the feedlot."

That has been going on since they sent a load to CAB partner Buffalo (Okla.) Feeders in 2009. Much has changed since the days of unknown genetics.

"We didn't just jump into the feedlot," Nathan says. "We talked to other guys who had done it for years and had a lot of success. If we had heard a bunch of train-wreck stories, we probably wouldn't be doing it."

"It is a gradual process, because we can't afford to just go and look at all our cows and say we sell her and sell her and then we buy back," he explains. "You just can't do that and, especially with the drought, it has slowed down the process, changing over our herd, or incorporating the better genetics."

Another step was artificial insemination (AI), starting with replacement heifers a few years ago. Then the drought took away pasture and feed resources just as AI-sired heifer calves were coming of age.

The Longs swallowed hard and let them go, sometimes just getting what they could get. Unable to find room for any female without a calf for three years, their herd dwindled from 200 to 147 head in 2013.

They took heart that a well-known heifer developer paid a premium to buy their last heifer crop, and even with no rain in sight, the family took another step up by AIing all cows last spring.

Motivation was partly linked to the lower number of bulls they would need in the pastures, Dale says, but results in 2014 will surely bring a dilemma if there is still no end to drought. Perhaps a load of AI-sired replacement heifers can be custom-developed elsewhere in another form of retained ownership.

Using data

Data on steers fed has helped establish

a benchmark that has been slowly increasing from 65% USDA Choice to as much as 30% CAB at Buffalo and another CAB yard, Shaw Feedlot, near Ashland, Kan. Scott points out, "We don't know about all of the herd yet because we have never fed all the calves yet."

"The Longs take pride in their ranch and their livestock, but had never received feedback and data on their cattle performance before," says Tom Fanning, manager at Buffalo Feeders. "When they began feeding cattle here in a retained-ownership program, we helped them acquire individual weights, individual feedyard performance, and individual carcass data from the packer.

"By gathering individual data, you are able to identify the high performers and the low performers in cow herds," Fanning adds. "The Longs can now make culling decisions based on facts and real data. Averages and group information from cattle pens do not allow you to do that."

They sell on the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid, earning rewards for producing higher-quality beef, and they know there is much progress yet to be made as rain and technology permit.

One immediate goal is to get back into "normal mode," Dale says. Keeping the best AI-sired and GeneMax™-tested heifers to replace aged cows would let the family "cash in on genetics from both sides of the herd. We often mention the advantage of not just relying on the bull side."

Scott says fixed-time AI will help reduce the calving season to 60 days or less, leading to more-uniform calf crops.

"It should allow us to feed bigger pens of cattle instead of 30 here and 30 there," he says. "It also helps pinpoint nonperforming cows so we can weed them out."

Living on land that once suffered through the Dust Bowl brings many lessons, and Dale has always studied them with a sense of history. Maybe that helps explain his college education track.

Without question, the entire family believes in the power of education and learning by doing. Like all who live off the Panhandle land, the Longs never give up hope.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else," Dale says. "It's quite a life, but it's been rewarding, and really neat that our sons decided to come back and be a part of the operation."

Editor's Note: *Steve Suther is director of industry information and Jessie Henshaw is industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*