

ANGUS

BEEF BULLETIN®

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

Volume 25, Number 3 • March 2010



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

They Came Back

Two sons reinforce long-standing commitment on South Dakota ranch.

Story by
MIRANDA REIMAN

Much can change in a decade. In the world of politics, there's at least one new president. Technology has gotten exponentially faster, yet fits in smaller gadgets. Families have experienced births, funerals and weddings.

For the Gebhart Ranch, winner of the 2000 Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award from Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), the past 10 years have also brought significant changes — expansion to the ranch, cow herd and family tree, all while maintaining that quest for quality.

When Mike and Jane Gebhart, Meadow, S.D., received CAB honors, they hoped sons Travis and Dalton would soon join the ranching operation, but the South Dakota State University

students had degrees to finish. And the ranch was about to head into one of the worst droughts in the region's history.

"I never really left," Dalton says of his rejoining the family business. "Even while I was in college, I was home a lot of weekends. During spring break I calved out heifers and we put up hay in the summers."

"The big reason to go to college was to have something to fall back on, but I always thought if I could make it work, I'd come back," he says.

Travis also shared that childhood dream of working alongside his dad.

"I wanted to do that for a long, long time ... basically forever," he says. "When you have it in your mind that early on, it's hard to say why."

They both just knew what they had to do to make it happen. Travis graduated in 2001 with a degree in

range science. Dalton followed suit in 2003, earning an animal science degree. They picked up nearly half a dozen minors a piece, ranging from business and range science to ag systems technology and marketing.

"It doesn't matter what occupation you go into, whether you're a mechanic or carpenter or whatever, eventually you're going to need business," Travis says. "It's good to know some basics on range and animal science, but as you go through life, business is pretty important."

Mike says Travis tends to be the "numbers guy," while Dalton adds his mechanical expertise.

"Our ranching operation has expanded some to have both the boys at home," Mike says. They now calve

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Above: Dalton Gebhart, Meadow, S.D., sees his future in the ranch he grew up on, working alongside other family members.

They Came Back *(from cover)*

and background at the ranch, before sending cattle to the CAB-licensed Darnall Feedlot, at Harrisburg, Neb. — a connection that was made at the brand's annual conference in 2000.

"They won a feedlot award that year. We got to visiting with them and have fed cattle there ever since," Mike says. "They do an excellent job feeding cattle. They're honest and keep informed as to everything that's happening."

Building up numbers wasn't without challenges, however. In 2002, rainfall totaled less than 3 inches (in.) for the entire year.

"Our grass didn't ever really turn green and most of the trees didn't even put leaves on. In '02, '04 and '06 we didn't put up any hay," Dalton remembers. "The other years we didn't put up a normal amount of hay because of the drought."

So they added land, slowly built up numbers and continued to perfect the type of cattle they produce.

Genetic emphasis

"We're always trying to improve our genetics," Mike says. They're trying to moderate frame size while inching up quality, which is already routinely above 90% Choice and upwards of 40% and 50% CAB on the highest percentage Angus cattle. They match the easy-keeping, Angus-based herd to the northwestern South Dakota native range.

"Carcass traits are important, but they're not the only traits," he adds. "Growth is important, but it's not the only trait; we try to put a balanced package together. We want them to have a good disposition, moderate birth weight, good performance and good carcass traits."

The Gebharts continue to use artificial insemination (AI) on all of their replacement heifers, and buy most of their bulls from Woodhill Farms, Viroqua, Wis. Recently they've collected two purchased bulls to increase genetic uniformity and cut expenses.

"When we AI heifers we'll heat detect for a couple days and then at 84 hours, we'll time-breed everything that's left and give them GnRH (gonadotropin-releasing hormone)," Travis says. "Because of the reduced cost of semen, we'll use the collected bull on the GnRH heifers."

They try to stick with bloodlines they know will work.

"From start to finish on the heifers, the sires we use have a pretty close genetic relationship, not much variance. They're all three-quarter or better brothers," he says.

They rely on Brian McCulloh's expertise to help them refine their breeding program.

"We look to Brian for advice. He knows the strengths and the weaknesses of all the bloodlines," Mike says. "We study the numbers and look at the cattle and make the final selection, but it's always nice to include Brian's opinion in the equation."

Working together

Of course, with three families involved in the operation, the Gebharts have plenty of opinions to take into consideration whenever they're making ranch decisions. Mike says they have to communicate more now.

"They don't have to be official family meetings where everybody sits down at the table and discusses it, but you have to get together and talk about things, even if it's on an informal basis," he says.

Luckily, they often share the same opinion.

"It's not usually hard to come to a consensus on where we're going," Dalton says. "We've got the same direction we're moving toward."

That like-mindedness not only helps in the bigger picture, but it's also how they accomplish the day-to-day ranch tasks.

"Everybody just does what needs to be done," Dalton says. "If it's not done and you have time to do it, you just do."

Although they tend to divvy up tasks, like during haying Dalton and his wife, Sara, do the cutting, while Travis and Mike bale. In the winter, Mike feeds calves while his sons care for the cows. Having three people to share in the workload has its perks, including the ability to leave the ranch more easily.

"That's probably one thing that's changed as much as anything," Mike says. He's now able to serve on boards for the Farm Bureau, South Dakota Beef Industry Council and the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF).

"I have the opportunity to get away from the ranch and be involved in industry organizations to give something back."

Travis and his wife, Renae, are also very involved in the Farm Bureau and serve as the chairpersons for the Young Farmers and Ranchers Committee.

Outside involvement has reinforced Mike's outlook on the type of product they should be producing, but he's been ingraining that attitude in his boys from a very young age.

"As long as I can remember, we've always aimed toward the quality end of things," Dalton says. He remembers being in junior high when the family started selling cattle on a grid and since then it's been a narrow focus on producing the best.

"We have to be able to stand behind the product that people are consuming," he says. "We're not raising calves to sell at the sale barn — we're raising a steak that goes on somebody's plate. They've got to be happy with it if we expect them to come back and buy it again."

Since returning, both Travis and Dalton have gotten married and had children, adding the next generation to the Gebhart Ranch. There are likely to be many more changes in the next decade, but a commitment to quality seems to have staying power.



From left, Travis, Mike and Dalton Gebhart know all about commitment to the way of life that lets them earn a living at what they love to do, while pleasing beef consumers at the same time.

Founded March 1985

ANGUS BEEF BULLETIN

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

Produced and published five times per year by Angus Productions Inc. in cooperation with the American Angus Association and Certified Angus Beef LLC.

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