

Bred for the Target

Combining the right genetics with good management brings premiums.



Story & photos by
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The rolling plains between the Yellowstone and Bighorn rivers have been home to ranchers and cows for generations. In a time and place of cattlemen, Steve Siewert grew up knowing he was a beef producer.

"Starting back in the 1970s, Dad was using AI (artificial insemination) on both cows and heifers," he says of his father and partner, Walt Siewert, Huntley, Mont. Maybe that legacy came from Walt's having been reared on a dairy farm before Grandpa traded up to purebred

Angus in the 1940s. Steve's mom, Maggie, came from a beef tradition.

"We used to talk to our parents about beef," she says. "My mom and dad always told us we're raising beef, not just cattle." When Steve began taking an active role in the 1980s, the Siewerts' occasional steer feeding results encouraged them and laid a foundation for replacement heifer sales.

By the time the family had assembled 400 commercial Angus cows on what grew to be the 12,000-acre Siewert Ranch, it was one of the most product-focused, predictable and productive herds in the county. Steve, wife Michelle, and their young sons, Spencer and Jacob, are in a limited liability partnership with his parents.

With 2,000 acres of cropland included in the place, "We don't have a lot of time to sit back and ponder the mysteries of life," Steve jokes. Still, while drilling wheat between cottonwood-lined draws or checking the cows while the doves call from their box elder roost,

there's always time to evaluate goals.

The weather can force hard decisions, like cutting the herd back to as few as 320 cows to survive drought. No setback is long-term, however. The Siewerts decided to take back 1,000 acres from

sagebrush encroachment by spraying herbicide three years ago. The prairie is responding now that rains have become a bit more regular.

"We're heading back toward 400," Steve says of his cow herd. Even expansion is more a matter of quality

than quantity, however.

"We don't aim for 700-pound (lb.) weaning weights, or even 600-pound," Walt says. "We tell our replacement heifer customers not to expect that. What they can expect are cows bred to do well in this terrain. They will produce calves that keep growing after weaning and earn premiums in the end," he adds. "We're more interested in what's under the hide."

"My mom and dad always told us we're raising beef, not just cattle."
—Maggie Siewert



"Proving our cattle on the national scale doesn't hurt the heifer sales, either," Steve says.

Heifer priorities

"We have stayed with Angus mainly because of the strong demand for heifers," Steve says. "For the last 10 years, though, we have had even more reasons. When the market began to reward high-quality beef, we started a regular AI program on our best 50 to 70 heifers and included carcass traits in sire selection." Herd bulls are often sons of the AI sires or carry similarly balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs).

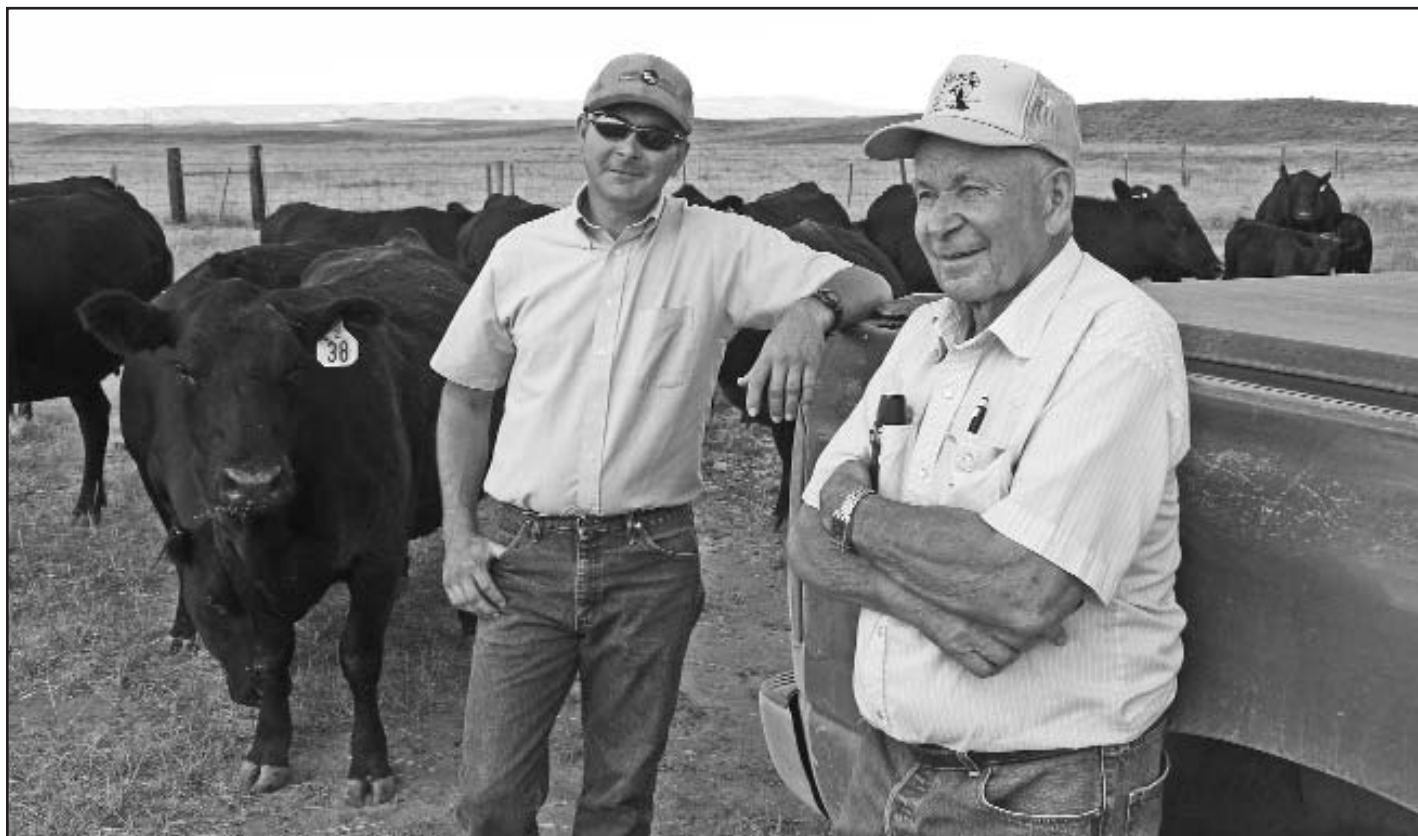
Last year they sold most of the heifers to an Idaho producer and then bred an elite 50 head. All but four showed heat after a melengestrol acetate (MGA)-Lutalyse® synchronization, and all but three turned up pregnant. Heifers remain in drylot for 25 days after AI, where cleanup bulls can easily cover any returns to heat. A ration of mixed alfalfa and crested wheatgrass hay, along with ground barley supplement, ensures plenty of energy for breeding.

After the roundup for preweaning shots, cows stay close to or in corrals for a couple weeks so calves are accustomed to the routine and water. "The last couple of years, we have been taking the cows away, rather than taking calves away at weaning," Walt says. To avoid stacking stress, they wait a few days to give weaning booster shots.

Only heifers' calves are individually tagged. "They have to prove themselves right away," Walt says. "We have culled hard for so many years that pretty near all our cows are good producers, but we watch them over the summer and write down anything that is starting to fall off. We especially stress good disposition in our cattle, and that's another thing the heifer customers appreciate."

The Siewerts have fed nearly all steers since beginning the carcass-focused AI program, getting data back every year since 1997.

Average daily gains (ADGs) have been as high as 3.8 lb., but they are more generally near 3.6 lb. With such a strong Angus and AI focus, quality grades are no problem. "We



Father and son partners Walt (right) and Steve Siewert focus on quality rather than quantity at their 400-cow Siewert Ranch.

can get 90% to 100% Choice and Prime any time," Walt says.

Proven premiums

One entry in the 2002 Best of the Breed (BoB) contest backs that up, winning the top regional prize of \$5,000 for 80 steers that went 83% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) and Prime. He admits there was one Select animal in that bunch, but the next year's 100% Choice or better steers returned a \$93-per-head premium.

"Our goal is a \$100-per-head premium on every animal we sell," Walt says.

Although the Siewerts have years of feeding experience, the operation has been at several feedlots. Late last fall, they were narrowing their list to a few family-run Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed yards in Nebraska. That would open the door to the 2006 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). "Proving our cattle on the national scale doesn't hurt the heifer sales, either," Steve says.

The CAB feedlot that wins their confidence will be feeding healthy cattle that are also eligible for the CAB Natural program. "We haven't implanted on the ranch for years. When we did one year, we really paid for it on the grade. And with our vaccination schedules, the calves don't get sick," Walt says. "The natural premium could be our key to hitting that \$100 level."

When the family took aim at the CAB target 10 years ago, premiums were rare. "We knew they would come, though. It just had to happen," Walt says.

Maggie adds, "We have waited a long time for the market to reward us for carcass." Now, just the CAB component of a marketing grid can return \$40 or more per head.

Angus cattle are better as a rule today, Walt says. "It used to be our calves really stood out as some of the best ones around, but the competition is

getting really good now," he says. "All we need is a good relationship with a feedlot that goes beyond selling feed, and a packer that won't try to make us wait longer when we know the cattle are ready. I think our records say that if our cattle are sorted to outcome they can go 70% CAB and Prime."



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Raising high-quality beef is a family tradition for the Siewerts.