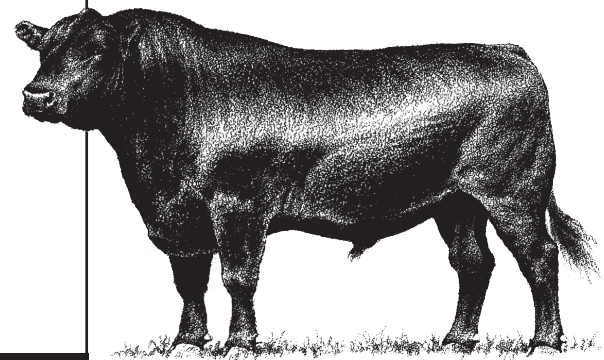


ANGUS

BEEF BULLETIN

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

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High Standards

Nebraska ranchers produce what they want to eat.

Story & photos by
MIRANDA REIMAN

Omaha, Neb., isn't the culinary center of the world, but the variety of dining options can train discerning taste buds. That's how Art and Merry Brownlee developed an appreciation for fine food.

Returning to Merry's ranching roots near Ashby, Neb., they now produce beef that will pass those high standards.

"We decided we wanted to produce something we would want to eat," Art says. "We like a tender and tasty product, so we thought Choice and higher is where we wanted to go. We started making changes in the breeding herd."

The couple took over the JHL Ranch 13 years ago. Moving from the city was an adjustment.

"I liken it to taking control of a 747 while it's in flight," Merry says.

Art worked in telecommunications and now brings computer and analysis skills to the operation. Merry, whose father leased the ranch they now own, had a passion for the animal science side of it. The couple and their sons, Edwin and Ethan, packed up and headed to the ranch with plenty of ambition and work to do.

"It was leased or rented for most of the last century, so there wasn't much put into the place," Art says.

The JHL Ranch came with a cow herd, which they mixed with some of their own cows. The first year they retained ownership on calves from primarily the established Simmental-Gelbvieh crossbred herd. The cattle graded 25% Choice.

"I can remember the first time we made money on the grid," Merry says. "It was only \$3 or \$4 and we were like, 'Yes, yes, yes!'"

As they changed their breeding program to an Angus-Braunvieh cross, they initially sold on a grid that rewarded cutability. In recent years, they've switched to a quality-based grid.

"We got good money for the muscling while breeding toward a marbling increase at the same time," Art says.

Today, their calves typically grade at more than 90% Choice, and nearly half of those have enough marbling to qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. In 2006, the Brownlees received an award for the top premium

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High Standards *(from cover)*

on all cattle sold on the Cargill Meat Solutions' Angus America grid.

Tracking for progress

"We have a very, very extensive analysis that starts from date of birth through weaning. And then we keep track of growth patterns after weaning," Art says. "Since we retain ownership to the rail, we can incorporate that back to each cow."

The data is stored in computer spreadsheets. Once they know enough about specific sires and cows, they can individually mate them.

"We're always trying to track the outliers," Art says.

Days of age at harvest is one area where they place selection pressure. If they know one cow consistently has calves that are 18 months old before they go to harvest, they'll try to mate her to an earlier-maturing bull.

"After all our tracking, we've identified bulls that will shorten up time in the feedlot. They seem to be earlier-maturing and can shorten feed time two months or more," Art says. "The bottom line certainly improves when you can harvest a pen of animals a few months sooner."

This tracking became easier as they increased their use of artificial insemination (AI) and extensive DNA work.

"We'd find the unique animals, and then we would DNA the blood types and find out who the sires were," Art says. They still use that technology on the calves sired by cleanup bulls but find it more convenient to track AI-sired animals.

"We still use purchased bulls, some of which we collect and test AI," Art says.

Mating decisions

Merry follows pedigrees and picks out which bulls will fit their program.

"When the historical analysis of an individual cow's needs and the AI bull battery's individual strengths and weaknesses are pulled together, Merry does the individual matings," Art says. "She enjoys going through the bull catalogs and does most of the legwork on what we consider using."

It was an interest that began on the Sandhills ranch while going to bull sales with her father.

"While I was away from the ranch, I usually came home for calving and weaning, but I wasn't involved in the management decisions," Merry says. "When we assumed ownership of the JHL, we wanted to pursue the carcass end, and we wanted to improve our cattle."

So she started to study expected progeny differences (EPDs).

"I took the big *Angus Sire Summary* and got my colored highlighters out. I went through it page after page after page. Then I tried to find families and trends," she says. "Once the computer came along, it was much easier."



"We have a very, very extensive analysis that starts from date of birth through weaning. And then we keep track of growth patterns after weaning," Art Brownlee says. "Since we retain ownership to the rail, we can incorporate that back to each cow."



The 14- and 15-year-old cows serve as mentors to the young cows when they are grouped together, Merry Brownlee says. "It turns out the granny cows teach the younger cows how to be mothers, how to graze."

AI and purchased bulls must pass the Brownlees' rigorous evaluation.

"We had good, solid ribeye size and didn't want to lose that. We don't want to use a bull with a tiny ribeye that is going to drag down the herd," Art says. "At the same time, we don't want to bring a bull on the place that can't produce Choice."

It all goes back to keeping their dining experience top of mind.

"If it isn't edible, we don't want it on our place," he says. "That isn't the only criteria, it's just the first hurdle before we'll even look any further at an animal."

After they've looked at EPDs on their sires, they turn to ultrasound data and linear measurements on the replacement heifers.

"We'd just as soon have them short and wide as tall and narrow," Art says. "We like wedge-shaped cows showing plenty of flank."

Ratios are generated by comparing hip height to hip width or the circumference around the heart girth to that around the flank.

"We are looking for femininity, and if they're showing signs of early maturity with flank and width in the rear, that's what we want," Art says. "We also look for large-volume cows as a selection criteria."

The Brownlees figure volume is a predictor of what's inside their chest wall.

"With more volume they can have a bigger heart, liver, lungs and rumen and therefore process more feed," Art says. "The heart has more capacity for stress, too."

Linear measurements have not been widely embraced by the industry, they note.

"We're not trying to make too much out of it, but it's better than doing nothing at all, and we can make year-to-year comparisons," Art says.

Merry points out that it gives numbers to what are otherwise visual evaluations.

"It's not so much the top end from the bottom end," she says. "You can tell those, but it's those middle animals. Are you going to keep them or not? The tape measurement makes it not quite so subjective."

The heifers must also pass their disposition test.

"They have to come to a quiet stand between us 20 feet apart in an alley," Art says. "That's how we guard against bringing disposition problems into our herd."

That's not only important on the ranch, but also when the cattle get to the custom feedlot near Rushmore, Minn.

"We want our cattle comfortable and as quiet as can be in whatever surroundings they end up," Art says.

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To be accepted into the Brownlee herd, heifers must pass a disposition test. "They have to come to a quiet stand between us 20 feet apart in an alley," Art Brownlee says. "That's how we guard against bringing disposition problems into our herd."



High Standards *(from page 2)*

Handler-friendly

Tom Erxleben, ranch manger, also works with the cow herd to try to "train" them.

"When you're doing pasture rotations it doesn't take long for these cows to realize they're getting fresh grass," Merry says. "They get all excited and some leave their calves behind. When Tom came to the place, he thought that was unacceptable."

If the cows don't bring their babies along, Erxleben will refuse to open the gate for them until they do.

"Each person has brought something unique to the place," Merry says. Both past and present employees have left their mark. One of the first had a take-charge attitude and eased the Brownlees into ranch management. Another came from a seedstock operation and helped enable the extensive recordkeeping and identification. Erxleben, a range science graduate, has fine-tuned their grazing program.

"We run in three herds, four if you count the replacement heifers," Art says. "The paddock sizes are pretty similar, so we keep the herds about the same size, then the moves are spaced more evenly."

The 400- to 450-head herds, named the A, B and Teen herds, are rotated between 650-acre pastures every six to 10 days. Adding heifers to the tally, they keep around 1,500 females.

Herd assignments are made based on where they fit for mass breeding: the early-cycling cows, later-bred cattle, and the younger cows and "grannies" together.

"First- and second-calvers need a little special attention," Merry says. "They're still growing, so we like to make sure we wean them first."

Some of their cows are 14 and 15 years old, so the Brownlees put them with the youngsters (Teens) to keep an eye on them.

"It turns out the granny cows teach the younger cows how to be mothers, how to graze," Merry says. "It's a mentoring program."

Angus cleanup bulls are placed in certain pastures, and Braunvieh in others, but Art estimates their cattle are about two-thirds Angus and one-third Braunvieh.

"We work hard at consistency," he says. "That's something we really have to focus on since we have a crossbred herd."

By taking moderate cattle from both breeds, they've made it work, along with ultrasound sorting on the feedlot end. Selling on a value-based grid, their target is the upper two-thirds of Choice or Prime.

"I believe the CAB marketing program is one of the things that allowed beef to differentiate itself," Art says. "That's key to somebody who cares about what they're producing."

And the Brownlees do care. They think about it every time they open a gate, select a bull or cook a prime rib.