

New Mexico's

This family-run outfit involves plenty of country and multiple cattle enterprises, but most of what they do revolves around Angus genetics.

Story & photos by
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Place one index finger on the map midway along New Mexico's northern borderline, and put your other index finger at the midpoint of the state's southern boundary. If you slide your fingers together, the point at which they meet marks Claunch. A tiny village on Highway 55, Claunch lies in the corner of Socorro County, little more than a stone's throw from the Lincoln County line.

Old West aficionados will recall that Lincoln County was the stomping grounds of storied outlaw Billy the Kid. The infamous William Bonney's career grew out of the Lincoln County War, a violent struggle for control of area rangelands. Residents aren't so rowdy and rambunctious these days, but ranching remains the area's leading industry.

While you're still pointing fingers at the New Mexico map, let one digit stray a little to the east of Claunch until it crosses that county line. Whoa! Stop right there. That parcel of rangeland is undisputedly owned by 99 Cattle Co. Operated by the Harral and Brandenberger families, "The 99" is involved in every facet of the cattle business — stockers and grass yearlings, commercial cows, seedstock and cattle feeding as well. Actually, the firm's reach extends well beyond the confines of Lincoln County.

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— Jeff Brandenberger



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Plenty of well-worn maxims and mottos have been used to describe business philosophies. When asked what adage best articulates this outfit's management style, a grinning Jeff Brandenberger says "Don't get too far out in left field," might fit. When you look at how Brandenberger and other 99 Cattle Co. principals manage their varied enterprises, it's clear that several sound credos could work as well.

All for one, and one for all

"This is a family deal," states Brandenberger, who lives with his wife, Alena, and children on the Lincoln County ranch. "We're in business together with Alena's parents and her brother, Jerrod, and his family. My folks (Bruce and Judy Brandenberger) help us here on the ranch, too.

"We're each responsible for our own department, you might say, but we work together a lot," he continues. "That's not just on the business planning end of things, but the labor, too. We don't hire much outside help for mechanic work, building improvements or cowboying. We do nearly all of it

ourselves, as a family crew, despite being strung out over a lot of miles."

As the crow flies, it's about 150 miles from Estancia down to Roswell, and 99 Cattle Co. has multiple holdings along the way. Brandenberger says his father-in-law, Ronnie Harral, is general manager and the one who really holds it all together. Of course, he helped put it all together, too. Harral's grandfather started piecing some country together more than 65 years ago, with subsequent generations adding acreage throughout the years. Living near the company's northernmost reach, Harral and wife, Sharon, call Estancia home and look after yearlings that graze near there from April through November.

Jerrod Harral and his wife, Brittani, reside at the company's southern end, near Roswell, where Jerrod tends a preconditioning facility and grazing operation. The Roswell connection allows 99 Cattle Co. to take advantage of that region's typically mild winters, as well as the irrigated Pecos Valley's ample feed resources. While in the Roswell yard, calves from the Lincoln County

ranch and additional purchased calves are fed rations comprised of locally produced grain, silage and alfalfa hay plus distillers' grains, corn gluten feed or cottonseed hulls.

Once they're preconditioned and readied for the subsequent grazing period, cattle typically go to wheat pasture. Alfalfa and other grazed forages are used when available. In the spring, some cattle will go to 99's northern summer ranges, while others will continue to graze Roswell area resources. Most of the cattle are marketed as heavy feeders. Steers generally sell at around 800 pounds (lb.), and heifers at 750 lb. However, retained ownership is an option that 99 Cattle Co. exercises to collect performance and carcass data on a percentage of home-raised cattle. When retaining ownership, the cattle are sent to custom feedyards in Texas.

Back at the Lincoln County ranch, Brandenberger takes primary responsibility for the commercial Angus cow herd. He's in charge of the breeding program and has some definite ideas about what fits the central New Mexico environment. It's rough and rocky, and while it

99 Cattle Co.

yields pretty good feed, the supply of forage is never overly abundant.

All things in moderation

“A lot of producers seem to be pushing to improve carcass quality,” Brandenberger says. “I’m a big fan of high-quality beef, but our first concern is breeding cattle that will function in this high-desert country. We’re pretty careful not to overemphasize any traits — carcass or growth traits — that might hinder a cow’s ability to do her job. And that’s to reproduce.”

Brandenberger says an 1,100- to 1,200-lb. cow [when at body condition score (BCS) 5 or 6] is about right for the arid, short-grass prairie, provided she has sufficient body volume and can travel up to five miles a day. “There isn’t enough feed here for anything else,” he adds.

So when considering the genetic potential of bulls, Brandenberger generally looks for moderate expected progeny differences (EPDs) in a moderate package — about a frame score 6. He prefers that the birth weight EPD not exceed 3 lb., but the yearling weight EPD should be at least 90 lb. Weaning weight matters little to him since all steers and heifers not saved as replacements will be owned all the way through the feedyard.

A milk EPD of 14 to 20 lb. should result in daughters that give enough milk, but not so much that reproduction is jeopardized. He rounds that out with positive carcass numbers. In short, selection is all about avoiding extremes.

“I think EPDs are useful tools, but cowboy logic says you have to see how cattle are made and how they move, too,” Brandenberger adds.

“I want cattle to have a lot of capacity and be structurally correct. I want them to have big feet, because they absolutely have to travel. There aren’t any numbers for those things,” Brandenberger states. “And eye-appeal still matters when you sell cattle, especially breeding stock.”

Save it for a rainy day

While time and distance separates the various 99 Cattle Co. enterprises, Brandenberger claims there is an advantage to not having everything concentrated in one area. Since New Mexico precipitation events tend to be rather localized, Estancia, Claunch and Roswell seldom get wet at the same time — nor is it likely that all will dry out at the same time. Still, Brandenberger says, each location is subject to frequent dry spells. Range management is applied accordingly.

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explains. “We’re cutting the encroaching cedars, piñon and cholla cactus to encourage more forage production. Cedars are a big problem. They shade out grass and rob our scarce supply of soil moisture. We’re also trying to promote better grazing distribution through water development.”

Most of the ranch’s old windmills have been replaced with pipeline systems fed by submersible wells. Bulk storage tanks along the pipelines help assure a consistent supply of water flows to watering sites. Construction of more and better-located watering sites is helping keep cattle scattered, promoting more even utilization of available forage.

“Our grass is pretty strong, and our cows graze year-round,” Brandenberger says. “We stock the range conservatively and we take a conservative approach to supplemental feeding, too. Cows on winter range typically get high-protein cubes from January through May or June. It depends on how much spring moisture we get. We don’t feed any hay — just protein cubes. In an average year, we’ll feed \$50 to \$60 worth per cow.

“We start calving in mid-February and go for about 100 days,” he continues. “And we start weaning during the first week of September. By weaning fairly early, the cows have time to flesh up before winter sets in, so they don’t need as much supplemental feed. And feeding a calf directly is more efficient than trying to do it through the cow.”

Weaned calves go to Roswell to be backgrounded and readied for a grazing period. But many of the ranch-raised heifers, as well as select purchased heifers, will be developed and marketed as bred heifers.

“We raise heifers for our own herd replacements, but we sell a lot of bred heifers, too,” Brandenberger explains. “We like to know the genetics and management history behind purchased heifers that go into that program. We develop them with our own heifers, and breed them to calving-ease bulls for a defined breeding season. We sell them in packages to suit the buyer, usually in October. We also offer a calf buy-back program to producers purchasing replacement females from us.”

Don’t put all eggs in one basket

Range management and water development have benefited wildlife populations that provide another ranch revenue stream. Mule deer and pronghorn antelope are plentiful on the ranch, along with more modest numbers of elk, so Brandenberger hosts a limited number of trophy hunts each year.

Sportsmen are anxious for access, but Brandenberger maintains an exclusive guest list. The few hunters who participate are willing to pay handsomely for the experience. For those seeking more exotic quarry, the ranch has propagated a small population of oryx, an African antelope. It all lends greater diversity to the family business, but Brandenberger has diversified even further.

“My wife and I own a place near Willard, where we run some registered cows,” he explains. “We market approximately 100 bulls annually, the

majority being Angus, but we sell some Charolais and Maine-Angus bulls, too.”

Brandenberger also works as an order buyer, for the Texas-based Vann-Roach Cattle Co. The association has been beneficial to 99 Cattle Co. marketing efforts, but also to producers who buy its bred heifers and Brandenberger bulls.

“I try to work with customers on their genetics to help them produce for certain markets, and then help them package and sell their calves, feeder cattle or replacement-quality females,” Brandenberger states. “Of course, we’re always looking for heifer calves of known genetics for our 99 Cattle Company heifer development deal.”

You might say 99 Cattle Co. is sort of a renaissance outfit. It’s certainly diversified, but the Harral and Brandenberger families have recognized opportunity to serve specialized markets, too. They are aggressive marketers, but their resource management reflects a conservative approach.

“We’re always tweaking things and trying to make them better. I guess we’re never quite satisfied,” Brandenberger says with a grin, “but we don’t go to extremes.”

After giving it a little more thought, Jeff Brandenberger thinks the motto that best describes their management style is, “Keep it in the middle of the road.” That, he says, might be the best way to stay on course and keep things rolling. **A**



Calving begins in mid-February and weaning occurs the first week of September. By weaning early, cows have time to gain condition before winter.