

Dare to be Different
Cornbelt Cow Calf Conference 2008

Henry Langstraat Jr.
Otley, Iowa

Dare to be different. I have chosen this title for the presentation because our cow-calf operation though similar to a lot of cow-calf operations, has some aspects about it that are quite a bit different. To begin with, I was 32 years old before I ever lived on a farm. I graduated from Oskaloosa High School in 1957 and went to work for a construction crew as a laborer, and continued in the construction world for 40 years until I semi-retired in 1998. I married my wife in 1960, and like so many middle-class families dreamed of having a place of our own in the country. Ten years later with a family a 3 little girls, we purchased a very poor, run-down, neglected 160 acre pasture farm in the Otley area. We went to the sale barn and bought 13 Hereford range cows that were definitely someone's culls. Looking back, we refer to them as the 13 Herefords from hell. To say that we knew nothing about farming or livestock would be the biggest understatement in time since Noah looked at the sky and said, "It looks like it could rain." But, by reading everything we could get our hands on, going to field days, seminars, asking a lot of dumb questions and making a lot of mistakes and taking some huge risks, we slowly grew our management abilities along with our expanding cattle operation.

Today, Woodland Estates includes 4,000 acres of land with an average on-hand inventory of 1,000 cattle. We do no row-crop farming, but cash rent our 2,500 acres of corn/bean ground that we retain all grazing rights on the crop aftermath. The remaining 1,500 acres is mostly grassland or hay ground. We have a good line of haying equipment, but otherwise try to keep our investment in iron at an absolute bare minimum. When we began farming it soon became clear to us that we were never going to be able to afford the iron and the land both, so we focused all of our efforts on expanding our cow herd by keeping most of the heifers as replacements and buying land to accommodate the growing cow herd. Our original Hereford cows were bred to an Angus bull and the resulting black baldies soon became our base cow herd.

Then in the late 70's and early 80's the continental breeds came on the scene and we soon became convince that we had to get on the band-wagon with the British-continental cross. We purchased two yellow and white belted Simmental bulls and promptly produced a crop of curly haired gray rat-tails. Needless to say, two years of that and it became painfully clear we had made a big mistake, but the Simmental had some traits we really liked, such as good bone structure, sound legs, perfect udders and good dispositions. After much looking at different breed combinations we made a visit to Loonan Stock Farm near Corning. We were very impressed with their red-angus – Simmental crossbred program. We bought several bulls and used them on our crossbred cows and eventually changed our cow herd to 200 red baldy, simmy-red Angus cows. The cows were moderately framed, highly maternal, easy keepers that weaned big calves.

But once again change came on the scene when the Angus Association came out with the C.A.B. (Certified Angus Beef) program and the world went black. We had always maintained a small group of black baldy cows and an Angus bull. As the C.A.B. program gained momentum the black calves would almost always out sell the red calves that were raised on the same program. In 2000 we reluctantly made the decision to aggressively expand the black baldy cow herd and slowly phase out the red cow herd. After forty years of constant culling and painstaking herd improvement, we have come full circle and back to the black baldy cow herd that we started with when we knew absolutely nothing about the cattle business. Proving that although time brings about change, the basic principles of reproductive efficiencies and economic incentives remain the same.

Although we are in the process of changing color our long term goal Remains the same. Numerous studies have proven the benefits of a well structured cross-breeding program. Due to the advantages of heterosis, the crossbred cow is like an insurance plan with greater longevity, better immune response, higher fertility, lower maintenance costs, and increased lifetime production. Due to the fact that our steers go the feedlot and most of our heifers will end up in a breeding program, our genetic program is required to be a delicate balancing act. The females that will match our environment need to be of moderate size, have a good disposition, be easy fleshing and be highly maternal. Meanwhile, on the steer side, we need a calf with moderate birth weight, outstanding growth performance and carcass traits that meet the demands of the marketplace.

Fortunately, there are bulls out there that can do it all. However, they tend to be very pricey, but through the use of A.I. it is possible to slowly incorporate all these traits into the cow herd. When choosing an A.I. bull we use only old bulls with high accuracy ratings that have stood the test of time. We may not have the hottest new bull on the scene, but we will never be wrong. When we choose heifers for our own replacements we pick heifers from the middle of the herd, and sell the tallest and the smallest. When you use high performance bulls, the tendency is for the replacement heifers to gradually increase the mature cow size. By taking replacements from the center cut of the herd, it is possible to maintain that moderately framed cow when developing a breeding and management program. We have tried to concentrate on what we do best, improve on our weaknesses and form objectives and long-range vision to achieve goals that are realistic, while working within a window of acceptability (most is not always best). We try to focus on traits and practices that will increase the value of our calves. These practices include pre-conditioning, age and source verification with electronic I.D., using a recognized and structured health program, such as the Merial Sure Health Program, and aggressive marketing with forward contracting and private treaty arrangements. This way of selling avoids trucking costs, commissions, and sale barn sorts and shrinks. All calves are weighed at weaning and again the day before being shipped, thus giving us individual rate of gain and cost of gain. All calves are tagged at birth with the bull calves getting white tags and the heifers getting yellow tags (which make it easier come sorting time). All birth dates are recorded and we have a premise number so we can age and source verify. By weighing each calf at weaning and analyzing the data we have noticed that after a cow reaches ten years of age her calves weaning weight will decline with each successive year, and drop dramatically after twelve. Therefore, we sell every cow when she reaches twelve, with baby at side around the 1st of May. We usually get enough money for the pair to pay for the replacement heifer that will take her place in the herd. This almost eliminates the depreciation and replacement costs for the cow herd. We sell very few pound cows by selling them when they still have value as a mother cow.

Our replacement heifers are all home-raised through a heifer development program, synchronized and A.I. bred, for four days only, then ten days later clean-up bulls are turned in. Thirty days after the A.I., all heifers are ultra-sound tested to determine which ones were bred with the artificial insemination technique and which ones the bull bred.

Our replacement heifers, the two year olds and the three year olds are all kept in separate groups so we can use specific bulls on each group and better manage their nutritional needs. A young cow will be four years old before she is placed in the main cow herd.

We begin calving heifers the last week in February and the main cow herd three weeks later. We have five barns for calving so if the weather gets bad we can put the “close-ups” inside. As the heifers calve they are moved to another farm and turned out on clean ground where we have shelter for the babies. By isolating the heifer pairs from the main herd there are very few health problems. The main cow herd is all calved outside in a large timbered pasture that we ride twice a day checking for problems. We start processing pairs and moving them out to grass as soon as we can catch the calves. In the fall, we leave on e paddock in every grazing unit unglazed so we have tall stockpiled grass to move the new babies to. Thus, giving them a good warm place to lay, even in bad weather.

We use a 70 day calving season, beginning the middle of March and ending June 1st. As of June 1, we will usually have about 20 cows left to calve. These cows are put in a separate pasture and will calve later. They are then sold in September as pairs that will fit into fall calving herds. These pairs always sell very well and always bring enough money to pay for a top quality heifer to take her place in the herd. By using this strategy, we have very few open cows and very rarely sell pound cows.

The pastures have 12 grazing units with each unit carrying from 20-90 pairs. Most of our grazing units have been sub-divided and utilize four to eight paddocks for a rotational grazing system. The pastures are well watered by numerous creeks and 43 ponds. There is approximately 50 miles of fence, so fencing is always on our work schedule. We do not tolerate poor fences, so most of our boundary fences have been replaced in the last 10 years. The interior paddock fences are generally solar powered hot wires. Fly tags and back-rubbers are used for fly control, and occasionally spray a group if the flies get really bad. Mineral is always available and during the hot summer months we will spike our mineral with a Vita-Pak which greatly reduces eye and foot problems and increases the conception rate. We try to set up our rotational grazing schedule to move cows once a week, depending on the number of paddocks in each pasture. We gather all the calves the first week of September and give the first vaccination and implant the steer calves. Then in the first week of October the calves are weaned, weighed, vaccinated and poured with insecticide. The steers are back-grounded for 60 days before going to a feedlot.

Normally, all the steers have been forward contracted sometime during the summer months with a delivery date around December 10. The heifers will be placed in a heifer development program using corn silage, hay, and wet distillers grain. This no-grain menu holds the cost down. Meanwhile the cows remain on summer pasture until fall harvest provides an abundance of crop after-math. They will winter on 2,000 acres of crop land until about January 1. After the 1st of the year, the cows are all gathered and concentrated on our winter feeding place, which has 500 acres of crop after-math and 200 acres of stock-piled fescue. We will also feed some hay if conditions require. The middle of February the cows are brought home, divided into four groups and put in calving pastures where they are fed 10 lb. of mixed hay, 10-12 lb. of wet distillers grain and 35 lb. of corn silage. These cows begin calving March 15. April 1st we will start processing pairs and start moving them out to summer pasture, where they stay until October weaning.

Our pastures are almost all fescue that is endophyte infected. However, we try to maintain a strong presence of red clover and birdsfoot tree-foil to offset the problems associated with the infected fescue. By not grazing one paddock in each unit until mid to late summer the legumes will produce seed and maintain their presence in the stand.

We try to attend cattle tours to different parts of the country to broaden our over-all perspective of the cattle industry and pick up new ideas from other producers from different environments. We live in changing times and successful producers will be those that recognize and take advantage of opportunities created by the changing face of agriculture. Change is inevitable. Adaptation and survival are optional. The way we have always done things in the past will not necessarily be the way we will do things in the future. But, changing things just for the sake of trying something new is a dangerous road to travel and must be approached with extreme caution. It is necessary to stay abreast the latest technology and practices, but let someone else be the guinea pig. With the mad cow disease fiasco and the numerous ground beef recalls this past year, we are going to need to make a concentrated effort to make sure we maintain beef's image as a wholesome, safe food for the consumer. Whether it be as an industry as a whole or as an independent producer, we are being watched and it is crucial that we use practices and procedures that are acceptable to the consumer for domestic and foreign markets.