

South Devon

Chosen for Base of Program by Nebraska Rancher

by Bob Hough

Jerry Peterson of X9 Ranch represents the fourth generation of their diversified operation. He works with his son and his brother and his brother's son. They run about 450 cows, farm 1,500 acres and custom drill water wells, mainly for ranches and farms. The ranch was settled in 1884 by his great grandfather, and he is proud that the sixth generation of Petersons will soon be old enough to start working on the operation.

According to Jerry, "Although we all help each other out, we break the operation down into areas of responsibility. My son Travis and I take care of the cattle and farming, and my brother Dean and his son Mark are in charge of the well drilling." With so much work to be done, Jerry still has his priorities straight putting faith and family ahead of the ranching enterprise. "We have had some health issues on both sides of our family that has really clarified this. Money cannot buy you health. That is one reason I like visiting with Dave (Nichols) so much, because we share the same values on a host of topics," Jerry emphasizes.

They also share a passion for genetics. "Ever since I graduated from University of Nebraska in 1969, I have been interested in genetics. Luckily, after I served a stint in the Army, my dad pretty much gave me free reign over setting

up the breeding program for the cow herd. I tried a lot of things, from straight breeding to complicated crossbreeding schemes and made my fair share of mistakes. In the early 1990's, I settled on composites as the best way to go," said Jerry. That is because he is a firm believer in heterosis. He especially likes the improved fertility, longevity and production of a crossbreed cow.

He thinks that a three-quarter British cow with one-quarter Continental is ideal for his operation, and really likes the base of his program to be Angus and South Devon. Jerry explained, "The Angus gives us the maternal traits we want, and the South Devon has the muscling of a Continental breed but marbles like an Angus. The nice thing about using composites is we can manage them like a straight breeding program and still retain 65 percent of the heterosis," Jerry explained.

As for priorities when selecting breeding stock, Jerry says, "We want it all, but it all starts with a live calf. Therefore cattle must breed up and calve without difficulty. In typical years that is exactly what they do with a 90 percent calf crop



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per cow exposed. Although they place closer attention to heifers, the cows have to do it on their own. "Last year we put chains on (pulled) two calves, otherwise they do it on their own. Especially, because the vast majority of our cows calve in April and early May when we are busy farming. We just don't have two hours to get a cow in and give her assistance. With the heifers, we do keep them closer to home where we have facilities in case they need help."

The cows also have to make a living on the low cost feedstuffs. They graze on eight sections of native grass in the Sandhills and winter on corn stalks. They do feed when it becomes bitter cold or they have deep snow as well as the beginning of calving season. According to Jerry, "They go to grass the first of May on some pasture we have close to the home place because the Sandhills pasture isn't ready till about the first of June." They do try to maximize the use of the grass they have by following a strict rotational grazing system made up of section (640 acre) lots.

They background their calves till they market them in January fully preconditioned. The calves must be managed to avoid them from getting fleshy because that hurts their marketability since most of the people who buy them will run the calves through a stocker phase by going back to grass. "We always top the market with our calves and if we don't we are right near the top. Buyers tell us they really like their performance and how they hang on the rail, but it is awfully hard to get data back in this segmented industry."

To get a better idea of where their cattle were in terms of feedlot and grid performance, the Peterson's fed a load of cattle last year. "We were very pleased. They converted well and did really well on the grid. We had 94 percent Choice or better with 57 percent Yield Grade 1 & 2's. We keep our cattle black so they are eligible for CAB, and on that load we had 48 percent CAB and Prime," explained Jerry.



Jerry and Travis Peterson use Angus and South Devon for the base of their program on their X9 Ranch in Gothenburg, Nebraska.

As for composite genetic inputs, they started with Rangemakers from Montana in the 1990's before switching to Nichols' composites in early 2000's. "I really like the Nichols bulls because they have full EPDs, ultrasounded and genomically tested for color and horned/poled. Our priorities are calving ease and pay weight, but we don't need the highest performance cattle in the world due to our feed inputs. I buy all my bulls sight unseen relying on Ross Havens, from Nichols Farms, to pick them out. He knows what we like and does a good job for us. Still, I pretty much choose my cattle based on EPDs because they are the best measure of a bull's true genetic value. Some of our cattle might not have the prettiest heads, but you don't eat the head," Jerry said, tongue in check.

Jerry summarizes his operation as low cost and profitable, and he very much looks forward to the sixth generation joining the ranch. Still, he emphasizes his priorities of faith, family, and then business. He needs low input cattle that are capable of doing it on their own with all the economically important traits. "Although we run 450 cows with all we have to do it is almost a sideline. We need trouble free cattle that are highly marketable. The breeding stock we buy from Nichols Farms is getting the job done on all fronts."