



15 years after CAB award, Nebraska family is living all segments of the cattle business.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Production agriculture doesn't always allow for many long-distance vacations, so it was the first time they'd ever ridden on an airplane and their first time to see the desert and stay at a large resort. Their mom had special suit jackets made to fit their 12- and 9-year-old statures, and so Tanner and Ty Martin were ready to take in the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) annual conference at Lake Tahoe, Nev.

T.J. and Kristy Martin's small Nebraska feedlot earned CAB honors for their cooperation in the brand's sire evaluation program in 1998, and like everything at the integrated operation, the award trip was a family affair.

"I still remember a head of one of the packing companies was called to accept his award, and before he went on stage, he beelined his way right over to our table. I

thought he was going to shake my hand, but he grabbed the boys," T.J. recalls. "He said, 'You kids are the next generation.'"

That in-the-moment comment may have been part prophecy.

"It was pretty big-time for us to be recognized with all of these well-known corporations," Tanner remembers, noting that it left quite an impression, being the only kids at the event.

Today, all the family's cattle operations have grown, along with Tanner and Ty, who have each taken an active role.

Family operation

T.J. bought his first center-pivot irrigation systems while he was in high school. He married Kristy in 1984, and the year after, they started their registered-Angus cow herd. T.J. credits his strong FFA education for that move.

"Back 30 years ago it was all about, 'You need to weigh individually, and you need to

know your 205-day weights on every calf,'" he says. "I figured if I've got to do all of this, I might as well have the paperwork."

Fortunately for him, Kristy excels in that part of the business, making it a natural fit. She still does all the ranch marketing and bookkeeping.

"I always wanted to have good cows, and I guess I thought it costs just as much to feed a good one as it does a bad one, so we might as well raise as good of ones as we could," he says.

That small feedlot remains at 1,500-head capacity, but serves mainly as a place to feed out their own calves and a few groups from customers.

"This year we didn't buy any," T.J. says. "We saved all the feed for our own calves and for our cows, because we thought if we have to drylot some cows this summer, we are going to want some silage carryover."

Tanner manages all the feeding and farming operations, and by emptying the pens when the calf-feds are finished, he can

► **Above:** All of the Martin family's cattle operations have grown, and today, (from left) T.J., Kristy, Tanner and Ty have active roles in the businesses.

YOUNG
FARMERS & RANCHERS

focus on irrigation and preparation for the next year.

"I like to see our cattle grow clear until they get to the customer," Tanner says. "I really like to see that progression."

Hired hands kept that enterprise going until Tanner got his ag business degree from the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture at Curtis and came home to take over. Then he added his own brand of progression, like changing over the recipe-card ration sheets to a tablet-computer version. He can change rations on the fly and make adjustments down to the tenth of a pound.

"That's one of the advantages of having a smaller feedlot: I can pay attention to all aspects of it," he says. Marketing finished cattle is a combination of that detail-watching and past history.

"Mainly, we are trying to take them as far as we can to get them to grade the best we can," says T.J.

Having "good communication" with the buyers and knowing each packer's preferences helps, too. Most cattle are marketed on Cargill's Angus America grid where they routinely reach 98% Choice, with around 70% qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

The feeding operation is located near the family's original place, homesteaded by T.J.'s great-grandfather in 1886.

His grandfather lived in a tent during construction of a barn in 1913. That barn still overlooks their feeding facility today.

"My grandfather had workhorses," T.J. says. "He built a barn, and they lived in the south side of the barn until they could get a house built."

It's nice to have a son caring for that family history, Kristy says, as they purchased a ranch 75 miles north, near Keystone, Neb., four years ago. Prior to that, the cows were all managed on leased ground.

Today the 700-head herd splits its residence among the new ranch, the leased ground and wintering on cornstalks.

The bigger picture

Ty lives at the house that came with the new location and serves as the head "cowman."

"Ty is really good around cattle," Kristy says. "He has a real knack for reading them and handles them real quiet."

The whole ranch relies on horsepower of the four-legged variety, which they feel is an asset when moving cattle.

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"On a ranch, I think one of the most important things is how you handle cattle," Ty says. "That goes a long way with their disposition."

While studying rangeland ecology at the University of Wyoming, Ty worked for a local rancher and saw the flip side of that philosophy.

"You'd gather those cattle and they'd throw their head up in the air and were gone like deer," he says.

Instead, Ty tries to train their cattle as he would a young horse. "Managing any herd is making them understand that nothing bad is going to happen," he says.

They have a "Bud Box" (after legendary animal behaviorist Bud Williams) at their main barn, and revamped working facilities scattered throughout the ranch for easy processing.

That handling not only helps them, but also their customers.

"Nobody wants to buy a horse or a bull that is not of really good disposition," T.J. says.

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Around 85 to 90 of the bull calves, all from artificial insemination (AI) sires, will be marketed as seedstock at their late January sale. Aside from a few private-treaty bulls, the rest of the progeny are destined for a replacement-growing program or the feedlot.

"We see the bigger picture," T.J. says. "We don't complain about the higher corn prices, because we are selling corn, and we know that it takes higher prices on everything to make it work. Yet we understand the commercial cattleman and the struggles he has to go through, too."

That gives them even more reason to focus on both maternal traits, in tandem with cattle that will work for the next segment. The Martins estimate a third of their customers are farmers, many of whom feed their own calves, and the balance are Sandhills ranchers who may or may not retain ownership through feeding.

"That is one thing the commercial guy has to think about is his customer," T.J. says. "Whoever is buying his cattle, or if it's retained ownership, if he can grid the cattle and get back a premium, that will help his bottom line."

"There is somebody out there who is going to feed your calves out, and when he finds out that not only do they perform, but they grid good, too, that rancher will have repeat customers," he says.

Bart Deterding has bought Martin Ranch bulls for the past seven or eight years, and keeps coming back for "the total package," he says.

Managing cows near Cambridge, Neb., he, too, saves replacements and feeds out his own calves.

Although he hasn't sold on a grid just yet, Deterding says, "I'm very conscious of what my end product is doing. I've gotten data back for several years. I watch that."

His percentage of Choice-grading cattle is increasing, and he credits the sires for doing their part.

"I'm not to the point of culling cows on that information yet, but I'll get there," Deterding says.

It takes a few years to really evaluate a bull's value, he says, but by now he's impressed with how the bulls have held up and with their daughters in his herd.

"They know what they're producing," he says of the Martins. "The numbers are proven. It's good hard data."

That's something for which they like being

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known, says Kristy. “We have tested all of these cleanup bulls and artificial insemination (AI) sires that we’ve used. We’ve run them through from grass to grid, to know if they are really working.”

This year will provide a different kind of test, as Mother Nature continues to throw a wrench in their expansion plans.

2011 was a wet year for Nebraska and the family thought about buying some cows out of Texas to boost numbers.

“Then on August 9, we got a hail storm

that hit half our grass,” T.J. says. By the next year it was looking like a happy coincidence they didn’t take on more cattle.

If last year’s drought holds strong for this growing season, they’ll move weaning up from September to July. They’ve already purchased feed and would consider confining cows, if necessary.

T.J. learned good stewardship from his dad, Kristy says. “They always take care of their grass.”

In their business, managing fewer cows

doesn’t look like the best option.

“When you’ve worked years on the genetics, it’s not like you can just sell your cow herd, or even half of them, and start back over,” T.J. says. “You can’t just go down the road and buy that kind of genetics the next year.”



Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*