



The Ranch with a Plan

The Cornelius family's success on Coyote Ridge Ranch is due to their attention to detail and focus on end goals.

by Bridget Beran

While luck and happy accidents can be helpful, at Coyote Ridge Ranch nothing is left to chance. Just outside of LaSalle, Colo., the Cornelius family bases every step they take on their goals and the plan set forth each year.

“You have to have a goal of what you’re trying to accomplish,” Hampton Cornelius says. “I think a lot of people get into the business and they get kind of scattered and go in different directions. From that goal, you can move in the right direction instead of a lot of different directions. You have to have a plan and a goal. As you evolve you may change your direction but you have to have a plan.”

The Cornelius family has been planning since the late 1970s when they got their first couple

of calves as part of a 4-H project. From small beginnings, Coyote Ridge quickly grew into an operation with 150 head of cattle..

“Herefords just fit for us. We had a family vote and we all liked the cattle,” Hampton says. “Disposition was a big factor because we were all fairly young. As we investigated, we liked the fertility and the functionality the breed provided and they fit the western environment well.”

Hampton’s sister, Katie, says she remembers traveling when she was younger to visit different facilities and breeders across the West to see what breed and what genetics would be the best fit for the Cornelius’ ranch. She and Hampton agreed that Hereford breeders stood out because of their helpfulness, trustworthiness and integrity.

“Hereford breeders had the most integrity and we were the most comfortable dealing with them,” Hampton explains. “We investigated what we thought were the best genetics in the U.S. and Canada. From there we made some purchases and investments in cattle from herds that we thought were reputable and fit our long-term goals. We started there and we’ve evolved through the years, slowly increasing our numbers while keeping a pretty heavy hand on quality.”

Doing their homework

Research has always been a big part of the long-term plan, and Jane Evans, the matriarch of the Cornelius clan, says that she and Hampton do thorough research before making breeding decisions. From expected progeny differences (EPDs) to videos of cattle, they make sure that every animal that enters their breeding program fits their long-term goals of performance.

“We do a lot of research on the cattle we buy with technology, but you have to go beyond the technology and find out if the cattle back the numbers up,” Hampton says. “That’s where I think a lot of people get mixed up because they’ll pick cattle based on numbers but the cattle don’t match the numbers. When you get out in a ranch, it doesn’t really matter what their EPDs are if they don’t work. Cattle still have to perform in real situations.”

Performance is just the first standard on which Coyote Ridge cattle are judged. If they pass the standards set for performance, then EPDs have their own set of standards for cattle to meet. Hampton also points out that it’s vital for producers to know what their customers want and need, while also breeding cattle that they believe in for the long haul.

“A lot of our customers like the same kind of cattle we do, so we try to make sure we’re producing what’s going to work, both for them and for us,” Hampton says. “We’ve got to stand by industry standards on just about everything. We’re working to improve on all traits while still producing versatile cattle that work for the commercial cattleman and are functional in a western ranch environment.”

Even throughout the tough years in the 1980s, Jane says their



commitment to performance and forward-thinking helped their ranch remain stable through those years. Hampton agrees that building a nucleus of repeat customers allowed them to continue culling 15 to 20% of their cow herd even during tough years. Culling allowed them to continue to improve the quality of their herd, even if they couldn’t build up numbers.

“We were able to continue selling our bulls and maintain our prices. We weathered the storm,” says Hampton. “When demand started picking up, our cow herd was in that much of a better place because we concentrated on performance traits, collecting all the data, and we started ultrasounding. We had a lot of years in a row where we had done all the data from top to bottom and our cows got better because of it.”

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Pictured (l to r) are Mackenzie Mayo; Hampton and Kay Cornelius; John Hampton Cornelius holding Brayson Mayo; Jane Evans Cornelius and Katie Mayo. Not pictured are Lee and Lexi Mayo.



Hampton Cornelius says private treaty sales have played a major role in their success.

Paying close attention to the type of cattle they were bringing into the herd was also beneficial. Jane recalls a time when they utilized a bloodline of cattle that they loved the look of, but the feet of the cattle family weren't suited to the mountains of Colorado. These types of issues are quickly weeded out of the Coyote Ridge herd.

Hampton says they focus on keeping cattle functional for the commercial bull market and now predominantly retain their own females, rather than buying from outside sources. A high demand for black baldie calves and Herefords' ability to adapt to Colorado's altitude has helped keep Coyote Ridge selling bulls for the last 35 years.

Power of private treaty

However, one big part of their success is their ability to market cattle through private treaty. From show heifers to herd bulls, the Cornelius family is deeply involved in the sale of each and every animal that leaves its place. Guaranteeing their bulls was something that Jane says pushed them even harder to ensure that every animal they produced was top-notch.

"It teaches you very quickly that you can't have bad feet and you have to have functional traits because the last thing you want to do is drive 200 miles in the mountains to pick up a bull that's lame and replace him," Jane explains.

Hampton advises that producers looking to improve their private treaty marketing ensure that cattle are sorted into management groups so that when potential buyers come to look at cattle, they have an organized buying experience. Coyote Ridge sorts their bulls into three different price groups to help buyers stay within their budget. He also stresses

the importance of understanding what buyers are looking for and helping them find the right animal to achieve those goals.

"You have to be able to understand their operation as well as your own to help them find what will work for their operations," Hampton says. "You have to be really honest. I'm sometimes too straightforward but it's important to be honest about what the cattle can do. If you're dishonest or misrepresent them, as soon as they get them home, they're going to figure it out. Ask what they want and what they want to achieve and try to lead them to cattle that will work."

Utilizing new technology is also a big part of Coyote Ridge's marketing plan. They video each cow with her calf right before weaning so when they market the calf and potential buyers ask about the maternal side, they have a direct reference.

Jane says these videos have been especially helpful when marketing to seedstock producers at the pen show at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver. She says they try to provide as much information as they would want when shopping for a bull. Hampton agrees, saying that it's helpful to step into a customer's shoes and to consider what kind of information he would want to see.

Hampton also says it's important to not make rash decisions and really be sure the cattle purchased today fit into the operation's plan long-term.

"You need to decide what kind of cattle you want to produce, how you're going to sell them, who your target audience is, and make sure the cattle you purchase fit into

those parameters," Hampton says. "When people get in the heat of the moment, they get in over their head financially. Try to deal with people that you're comfortable with that have integrity and you're probably going to end up where you want to be."

Working with the right people is what led the Cornelius family into the Hereford business, and it is still something they stress in their business today. However, their own integrity and honesty have shown through to their customers.

"We try to stay in touch with our customers in a genuine fashion about how things are going. We're always excited when new people come to us but we have a lot of repeat business," Katie explains. "We have a lot of people who for the first five or 10 years that they bought cattle from us, they came and sifted through everything. Now they just call and tell us what they're looking for and ask us to put it on the trailer. They trust that we know what they want and are looking out for their best interests."

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Katie says the most important thing when marketing private treaty is making yourself available to customers. Prior to the NWSS, the family works to pre-market by sending out an e-mail blast to past and potential buyers. The blast covers everything from what animals are going to be at the show to a spreadsheet on all available bulls to a selection of their elite heifers to appeal to each segment of their buyers. Though she says taking the time isn't always easy, it's more than worth it.

"There's nothing more rewarding than other people being successful with our cattle," says Katie. "It's fun to see other people be successful with your genetics."

Hampton agrees saying that to him, success is helping kids who are buying show heifers and guiding them to animals so that they're not buying new heifers year after year; instead they're raising their own.

"If you can get them started raising their own cattle, then they become a breeder for life instead of just a paycheck for a couple years," Hampton says. "That's how you build breed success, raise the right kind of cattle, get them in the right hands and let them build on that success. I think you have to look at the big picture and understand that long-term success overrides a short-term paycheck."

Creating a legacy

Looking at the long-term is increasingly important as Hampton's son, John Hampton, becomes a bigger part of day-to-day operations and as Katie's stepdaughters and son become more involved. A family operation through and through, Katie says family conversations almost always revolve around cattle. Although Katie works away from the ranch, she says she stays in regular contact with Hampton and Jane about what's going on. Most importantly, they have a yearly family meeting to discuss the goals and direction for the coming year.

Involving the next generation to the fullest extent is also important in helping to further the longevity of the ranch. John Hampton now has three generations of his former show cattle that are in the herd and he's become a vital asset in getting things done, especially during calving season. Jane recalls a few years ago when during a snow storm John Hampton brought more than a dozen calves to the barn with his horse and calf sled. He returned to the house, wind and snow burnt, but happy.

"Some things we do are fun, some things aren't fun," says Hampton. "We try to involve him in the fun things but you have to do the not fun stuff to learn work ethic. In the end, if you go through enough experiences you either learn to like it or you don't and so far he's liked it."



Coyote Ridge is a family operation, and the next generation is involved to the fullest.

Katie says that building this type of legacy has always been important to them and it's wonderful to see it becoming reality.

"Over the years, we felt like we didn't have the legacy of some of the producers of whom we think very highly of and didn't have the numbers of other people whom we think very highly of and yet to be able to still be considered among those names, there is so much pride in that," Katie says. "The fact that we have still stuck to our original goals of having a productive cow herd based on the females is also very rewarding."

Though Jane laughs that she's just proud they haven't killed each other yet, she's also proud of the functionality of their cow herd and notes that both the horned and polled champion heifers at the Junior National Hereford Expo had Coyote Ridge Ranch genetics in their bloodlines. Katie agreed, saying that it's fun to walk through the barns at shows and see CRR prefixes on so many animals.

For Hampton, each proud moment is another stepping stone in the plan, and he says they're constantly working to improve their herd and to maintain their long-term goal of staying in the Hereford business. He says their plan for the future is to remain fluid with the industry, to strive to continue to improve, to focus on the performance side of their herd, to make sure cattle always match up with their numbers and to continue having happy customers.

What's in store for Coyote Ridge Ranch? Only time will tell, but the people there have a plan for whatever life throws at them. **BW**