



Potential bull buyers evaluated this year's Topp Herefords' sale bulls at an open house/bull preview held on Dec. 3, 2005. Ryan visits almost every bull buyer's ranch to determine bull performance, herd needs and how to mate Topp cows in the next breeding season.

Pictured below are Ryan and Prairie Topp, owners of Topp Herefords, and their children (l-r) Logan, Lauren and Mariah.



# Topp Herefords' Common Sense Approach to Marketing

*Topp's provide customers more than just the bull.*

by Teresa Oe

If you ask a Topp Herefords' bull customer why they return year after year, you're likely to hear, "Ryan does something I've never seen another seedstock producer do." Yet there's no secret to the magic of his marketing. A close look at the Topp Herefords' plan reveals unique and meaningful tactics that benefit all parties affiliated with the North Dakota ranch. Before revealing these tactics, let's take a look at how the operation became what is today.

## Ranch progression

Topp Herefords was established in 1945 near Grace City, N.D., by Ryan's grandfather, Woodrow Topp. Hereford cattle were the mainstay of the operation. Woodrow's son, Merlin, entered as managing partner in 1964. Woodrow and Merlin annually sold

about 60 bulls, privately, until Merlin's death in 1980 at the early age of 38.

The ranch remained intact thanks to Merlin's wife, Kathy. Kathy later bought the ranch, and remarried to Larry Erickson. They continued raising cattle. The purebred Hereford herd was eventually moved to commercial status and, to this day, the commercial unit is a large portion of cattle numbers at the Grace City ranch. Three hundred fifty-five commercial and 200 purebred cows run at this location.

While Ryan and Prairie have full ownership of Topp Herefords, Ryan emphasizes that it is only a portion of the total operation. "The farm and ranch are very much run as a team," he says. "Topp Herefords primarily produces and markets breeding stock. My father, Larry, manages the farm production

of small grains and row crops near Glenfield, and he and Kathy own most of the commercial cows. My brother, Paul, and his wife, Holly, are heavily involved in the daily operations and decisions regarding the livestock. They are growing their own commercial herd and are owners/operators of Topp Professional Services (TPS)." TPS is responsible for the majority of the photography in Topp Herefords' marketing pieces.

Ryan and Prairie have two daughters and a son – Lauren (age 6), Mariah (age 4) and Logan (age 2). Prairie also works off the farm as a sales manager for the Sunopta Grains and Foods Group. It's clear that Ryan and Prairie have their hands full. Nevertheless, Topp Herefords takes the time to assure that quality is the program's No. 1 objective.

## Genetics first

Time and time again, we're told that marketing efforts are only as successful as the product is of quality. A tough culling process at the Topp ranch ensures this quality.

Topp Herefords breeds about 200 females and also implants roughly 150 embryos from their best cows. About 80% of the cows are artificially inseminated, utilizing mainly top bulls from the ranch's previous sales, along with some fresh outcross genetics. If a female doesn't breed in 60 days, she is culled.

About 10% of the heifer calves are marketed privately. Seventy percent is retained and the bottom 20% is shipped to market.



Bull calves must endure a three-cut culling process to make the annual sale. In the spring prior to grass turnout, the high birth weight calves and any calves out of cows where udder quality or milk flow is not exceptional are culled. At 7.5 months, weaning weights are taken and bull calves that don't wean at least 47% of their dam's weight are also culled. A third cut is made before sale day on any bull calf not maintaining a minimal daily gain, not demonstrating good health or not sizing up to Ryan's standards for eye appeal. The bull calves that pass the test are sold in the annual sale held the first Monday of February at Farmers' Livestock in Bismarck.

Genetic improvement is just as important in the commercial division as it is on the registered side. Although Topp Herefords started out purebred, Ryan clearly states that the purpose for high-quality genetics is to ultimately improve the consistency, uniformity and quality of the commercial business.

### The commercial herd

The commercial cattle herd consists of 250 F1 Hereford-Angus cross females and 100 Angus females. The heifers are bred Hereford and Red Angus. Topps' crossbred herd qualifies their product for premium programs including Certified Hereford Beef (CHB) LLC and Certified Angus Beef.

The commercial baldie females are bred to Hereford and Angus bulls. Ryan says that this cross gives Topps what they're looking for in a replacement female: "an efficient, low-maintenance, problem-free animal."

The Angus herd is mainly bred Hereford. This wasn't always the case. Five years ago, Topps were breeding the majority of the cows to Angus bulls. "What we found with using a Hereford bull was we were increasing our weaning weights dramatically," Ryan says. "We were putting into the feedlot a more efficient converter. But most importantly, we were able to raise F1 replacement females. We see a dramatic condition difference in our F1s compared to our Angus both on pasture and through the winter months, thus lowering our input costs."

Ryan discovered the benefits of the Hereford bull through experience. The

underlying question grows — how is he encouraging others to try the same? How is Ryan marketing Topp Herefords' bulls?

### Marketing more than a bull

In their May 2004 newsletter, Topp Herefords announced their newly formed beef alliance with Sinner Bros. & Bresnahan (SB&B). Topps had marketed 100% of their commercial calves through the SB&B feedlot for four years and were appreciative of the professionalism, honesty and accuracy of the staff.

Similarly, SB&B was taking note of Ryan's strengths. Tom Bresnahan, SB&B partner, says, "We liked Ryan's understanding of the breeding process and his direction, how he was getting there." Consequently, an alliance was formed, and Ryan was no longer marketing just a Hereford bull, but a bull loaded with the potential to provide a package of valuable tools that customers could use to ultimately improve their bottom line.

When a Topp Hereford bull is purchased, the customer has the option to sell his or her calves to the SB&B feedlot. If the calves are bought by SB&B, the feedlot provides the producer genetic feedback through carcass evaluation and extensive feedlot conversion testing.



*Topp Herefords' bull customer, Shane Prill, likes to see "deep, nice-uddered" cows such as this one in Topps' sale catalog, even though it's bulls that Topps are selling.*

Ryan says that this pasture-to-plate process helps commercial producers increase the uniformity, quality and consistency of their cattle, which, in turn, makes their cattle more marketable and sought after by feeders. "By going through the harvest data and determining what's positive and what's negative, you can really strengthen your overall program," Ryan says.

He goes further to explain that the alliance is a win-win-win situation. The commercial producer gets hard data and a team of industry people working to secure his or her position in the market place. SB&B gets source-verified genetics and producer collaboration from year to year. Topp Herefords gets long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with their bull buyers.

### Maintaining relationships

Russ Stein, commercial producer from Taylor, N.D., hadn't bought a Hereford bull in 25 years. He bought one Hereford bull from Topp Herefords, went back the next year and bought

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*Topp Herefords' bull calves have to pass a three-cut culling process to be sold in the annual sale. Ryan offers a 100% satisfaction guarantee.*

two, and the next year, three. "Ryan comes every year to see how the bulls are doing," Stein says. He adds that there aren't many bull producers who you even hear from after the sale. To the contrary, Ryan tries to visit almost every bull buyer's ranch. "Since he formed the alliance, you can really see what his bulls are doing," Stein says.

Ryan didn't only make a testament for his program, but also for the Hereford breed. Stein says he prefers the longevity of Hereford bulls and that the disposition of his cattle herd has changed greatly since introducing Hereford genetics.

Shane Prill, Wichita, Kan., also is sold on Topp Herefords' bulls. His

relationship with Ryan began in the Yards of the National Western Stock Show in Denver. "I saw the best Hereford bull I've ever seen in the pen show a couple of years ago," Prill says. "I followed Ryan out of the ring and asked if it was for sale." This was the beginning of a strong relationship between the two.

What next attracted Prill to buying Topp Herefords' bulls were the pictures of females in Topps' sale catalog. "Ryan must put eight to 10 pictures of cows in his bull book," Prill says. Prill's loyalty to Topp Herefords is largely due to these "deep, nice-uddered cows."

Prill has since put enough trust in Ryan to buy bulls unseen. Prill speaks of a call from Ryan. "He said, 'This is exactly what you want, Shane.'" Prill bought the bull in trust that Ryan had visited enough with him to understand his herd needs. "It's the best Hereford bull I've had," Prill says. "I've collected 350 straws and he's a good son-of-a-gun."

It appears that many folks are putting their trust in Ryan, Topp Herefords and a vision that drives the operation and alliance.

### The vision

"Ryan is an entrepreneur, a visionary," Prairie says of her husband. She talks of Ryan's commitment to finding new ways to give his customers more return on their investments. "He doesn't follow fads. He follows a systematic program to ensure consistency, predictability and high performance — rather than high profile — genetics." Prairie also notes that Ryan doesn't try to sell the "best bull," but instead suggests sire groups based on specific customer needs and feedback.

Bresnahan further explains what Topp Herefords and the producer-driven alliance with SB&B is all about. "It's about using a culling procedure. It's about consistency. It's about uniformity. It's about predictability. It's about quality improvement. It's about understanding the breeding process. It's about trust and integrity. It's about working together to gain market knowledge. It's about marketing opportunities. It's about building an alliance. It's about using carcass data to help improve the value of a herd. It's about being ahead of the industry." **HW**

## Sinner Bros. & Bresnahan

by Tom Bresnahan, SB&B partner

Sinner Bros. & Bresnahan (SB&B) partnership was started in 1952 by Bill Sinner, George Sinner and my father, Ellery Bresnahan (brother-in-law). Over the years the operation has gradually changed hands to Bob Sinner, Dick Sinner, Pat Bresnahan and myself, Tom Bresnahan.

We farm 4,700 acres, contract additional acres for export and, in 2003, marketed more than 5,000 cattle.

Finishing cattle has been a big part of our operation over the years. My grandfather, Albert Sinner, fed cattle as far back as the 1920s. Our parents fed cattle. And our cattle buyer continues to remind me that he was buying cattle for SB&B when I was in diapers. We have fed many sizes and various breeds of cattle over the years. Calf producers often want us to tell them which breeds we like to feed the most. I like to tell them a story that sort of explains our position.

A few years back, after finishing a day of pheasant hunting in western North Dakota, we stopped at a local tavern for a cold beer. A cowboy who had heard I was involved with a feedlot in Casselton, N.D., came up to the table for a little discussion on cattle. He asked me to tell him what I thought was the best type of cattle to feed. I knew I had, at best, a 20% chance of guessing the right answer. But he kept pressuring me and he finally told me he had some of the best cattle around. "They topped the market in a South Dakota sale barn last year." So I asked him, "How do your cattle grade when they are finished? What percentage are Prime and Choice? What percentage are yield grade 1 and 2?" He responded with, "Oh, I don't know about that, but the guy at the sale barn sure liked 'em.'"

It made us realize that most producers didn't really know how good or bad their cattle actually were. For years we had operated on the same system. The packer would buy our cattle on a flat price per pound with no premiums or discounts. But the industry was changing; grid-based marketing was helping to define which cattle actually earned premiums.

So we focused more on collecting carcass data and doing individual group close outs on various cattle bunches. We learned whose cattle were earning premiums or creating discounts. We started charting the weekly changes in the premiums and discounts. We increased the number of cattle purchased directly from the farm/ranch, and we increased our focus on grid-based marketing. We worked on improving prevaccination programs and reducing death loss. We focused on producers who were willing to do what was needed to capitalize on those premiums.

One of the producers was Ryan Topp. He wanted the information. He wanted to hear the whole story, not just the good stuff. He wasn't afraid to hear the truth. Together we reviewed carcass data, average daily gain, conversion, yield, finish weights and death loss percentage. Together we defined what was working and what wasn't. Together we addressed industry and market direction. Together we started an alliance to ultimately improve uniformity, predictability and quality. **HW**