

HEREFORD

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WORLD

The Road to Performance

Returning to his “routes,” fifth-generation rancher Luke Kovarik capitalizes on heterosis to boost demand.

by *Brooklyn Adam and Diane Meyer*

There is something uniquely rewarding about growing up on a family ranch and learning the ins and outs of cattle breeding. A lesson often passed down from previous generations, understanding genetics and how to raise functional cattle, is a staple of an industry shaped by heritage and good genetics. Following graduation from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2010, fifth-generation cattle rancher Luke Kovarik returned home to continue his work to build and to improve the family’s cattle operation.

“All roads lead to Ord,” Luke says of his close-knit hometown in central Nebraska. The headquarters of the Kovarik family ranch sits overlooking the North Loup River on land purchased in 1946 by Luke’s paternal grandparents. Back then, it was a single quarter of ground and home to chickens, pigs, dairy cows, beef cows, horses and a big garden. While not a full-time rancher himself, Luke’s father, Duane, still worked

hard to add adjoining land to the homestead throughout the ’90s and early 2000s. In 2009 a joint land purchase between father and son nearly doubled the current size of the operation, finally allowing Luke the opportunity for which he had been waiting. Equipped with a bachelor’s degree in animal science and a master’s in ruminant nutrition, he returned home and began his work to build Kovarik Cattle Co.

Driven to differentiate

Although experienced, after college Luke lacked the equity needed to run his own cattle ranch. Sitting in the driver’s seat of Kovarik Cattle, his first course of action was to lease land and some cows from his father, as well as additional land and roughly 250 cows from a nearby cattleman. Leasing was a good way to build numbers, to keep some heifers and to get the wheels rolling.

In addition to equity, Luke knew he needed to add value to his herd. Building on successful breeding strategies from previous generations, he combined the ideal genetics of two British breeds to reap the valuable

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Committed to carrying on their ranching heritage, Tad, Luke, Jaks and Natalie all play a role in the daily tasks of running a beef cattle operation.

benefits of heterosis — he turned to the Hereford breed and has not looked back.

“I was just starting out and I had a really good set of Angus cows I was working with, but I didn’t have a name — I didn’t have the reputation. I needed some way to differentiate my heifer calves,” Luke explains. “Hereford was a logical choice — F1s [first generation crossbreds] usually bring a premium over black heifers. So I started down the road and I really liked the cattle. I kept going with it and the premiums kept coming.”

For Luke, this successful production system was nothing new. In fact, it was around way before his time. “Heterosis was really popular in the ’50s and ’60s with the onslaught of Angus cattle, and then it went into kind of the extreme continental cattle for a while,” he describes. “Now it has come back to where the Hereford influence still gets you back to that cross that was working 60 years ago. With the F1 and two English breeds, roles have reversed, but we’re still using the same genetics that were working a long time ago.”

Pairing experience and education, Luke describes how Hereford genetics supplement the genetics of his Angus cow herd, noting how crossbreeding has been instrumental in improving calf vigor, survivability and health. “We just don’t have near the problems with health that other people do,” he says. “In my animal science education we understand the benefits of heterosis, especially maternal heterosis, in reproductive efficiency. My customers buy my F1 heifers for that reason — for their reproductive rates and stability.”

Luke adds as much value as possible to his cattle, namely through genetics. “We’ve invested in genetics on both the Angus and Hereford side, which in my opinion, makes for an unbeatable combination. The spring-calving Angus cows bred Hereford is a system that I think is going to last.”

Sourcing Hereford bulls from Cooper Hereford Ranch, Willow Creek, Mont.; Upstream Ranch, Taylor, Neb.; and Hoffman Ranch, Thedford, Neb., he bases purchases largely on the qualities which have afforded him success: udder quality, fertility, fleshing ability, performance and structure.

“Number one is udder quality,” he states. “If people buying my replacement heifers are milking cows out, they’re not going to be returning customers.”

With a focus on maternal traits, Luke uses breed average as a minimum on carcass traits. “The four most important qualities I

value are: structure and udder quality as well as disposition and fertility,” he says.

A strong artificial insemination (AI) program also ensures quality genetics remain in the herd. Cows are mass-bred to a Hereford bull and then exposed to cleanup Hereford bulls for 60 days. Any open, young cows are put into the fall herd. Of those, some are used as recipients to build Luke’s registered Angus herd, while the others are exposed to bulls for a fall-calving herd.

Beyond growing and improving his own cattle, Luke assists others in increasing the quality of their cattle by specializing in developing heifer calves. As an independent contractor for Genex, he also provides AI services for nearby operations.

The ranch roadmap

A decade in the works, Kovarik Cattle now runs about 625 spring-calving cows and 100 fall-calving cows on 5,500 acres of rangeland. Breeding typically takes place at the end of June, with calves hitting the ground at the beginning of April. Calves are weaned in the first week of November, but Luke notes he is transitioning to a later schedule to help ease the workload.

Calving earlier requires more feed — and therefore, more labor and costs. “We calve later in the spring because of labor and economics,” he explains. “Because I delay calving, I am also able to graze cornstalks which helps offset feed costs.”

In true Nebraska fashion, cattle can graze on cornstalk residue for longer than in other parts of the country. “Generally, I can leave those cows until about the 10th of March grazing corn stalk residue, leaving me three weeks until calving,” he says.

Where many breeders in different regions fight challenges ranging from mycoplasma to fly infestation, Kovarik’s ranch is housed in a mild climate zone that provides an exceptional environment for cattle to thrive. Luke observes, “Nebraska is a pretty nice place to run cattle. We don’t have a fescue challenge or a fly overload or an internal parasite overload.”

With the outstanding weather and climate Nebraska provides, Kovarik cattle can graze throughout most of the year. “Because we can graze for such an extended period of time, we are able to limit harvest feed to our cattle,” Luke says. “A moderate milk, moderate framed, easy fleshing type of female is what we need to fit our environment.”

When it comes time to market cattle, Luke utilizes Erickson-Spalding Livestock as well as private treaty arrangements.

“I market about 70 percent of my heifers as replacement heifers — weaned and Bangs vaccinated. They usually outsell my steers,” he says. Achieving that goal is a huge advantage compared to selling heifers off the cow, usually for \$150 behind the steers.

“I wean [the heifers] and add value to them and find a market for them — the people who want F1s,” he adds.

Heifer calves are marketed after the first of the year in January or February and are sold to either heifer developers or operations using terminal-cross Charolais bulls. “They want the F1 heifer because they don’t keep any of their own heifers,” Luke notes. Steer calves are weaned and sold in late winter or early spring as non-hormone treated cattle (NHTC) grass calves.

Merging paths

In March 2015, Luke ventured to the annual Cooper Hereford Bull Sale in Willow Creek, Mont., where he would meet his now wife, Natalie Cooper. “We like to tell people he came for a bull but left with a wife,” Natalie jokes.

Born and raised in southwest Montana, Natalie later relocated to Nebraska after the couple was married in the summer of 2017. Like Luke’s, Natalie’s roots run deep in the beef industry. Her grandfather, Jack Cooper, turned the original ranch homestead of 480 acres into the current Cooper Hereford Ranch when he invested in his first set of Line One heifers in the 1940s. “My grandpa really believed in the Hereford breed and worked hard to build a reputable and trustworthy line of cattle,” she says.

With a sixth generation now in the mix, Luke and Natalie are imparting their family’s legacies onto their two boys. Tad (13) shows a true passion for ranching and avidly enjoys helping on both the Kovarik and Cooper ranches — where he usually spends part of his summer break. The newest addition, Jaks Domino (7 months) — who Luke says does a lot of “sleeping on the job” — is the namesake of his great-grandfather, Jack, as well as the



Baldy calves are a mainstay at Kovarik Cattle Co. because of their quality and potential for profit.

sire name given to all Cooper Hereford Line One bulls.

Although Natalie did not pursue an ag-related degree in college, her grandfather and father, Mark, instilled in her passion and a work ethic and the importance of applying those to any operation. Natalie maintains off-ranch employment as a part-time pharmacist, but true to their belief that ranching is a family business, she also helps her husband out daily when she can.

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In the fall of 2017, she embarked on a new business journey with her best friend, JaTanna Williams, as the two cofounded their own ranch-direct beef business, Ranch Wives Beef Co. “The idea for Ranch Wives Beef Co. really stemmed from our mutual desire to be further involved with agriculture,” Natalie says. “We wanted to do something that would bring added value to our existing operations, while simultaneously progressing the industry we love so dearly.”

Operating exclusively online, the company carries out a mission to bring trust and transparency back into the food system by providing quality homegrown beef to families that would not have access to it otherwise. They ship nationwide and hand-deliver locally. Prior to harvesting their first round of cattle in the summer of 2018, Natalie and JaTanna funneled all of their time and resources into building their brand and developing a personal story. The duo created a social media page, designed a website and did all of the back-end work necessary for a company to build a solid foundation on which to grow.

Natalie comments, “While providing access to quality ranch direct meat will always be at the core of what Ranch Wives stands for, both business partners are very open to what the future of RW Beef Co. holds.

“We love that our company provides us a chance to advocate for the beef industry and hope to show other younger generations the impact they can have by doing so,” she adds.

All roads lead home

Having both come from family-oriented cattle operations, Luke and Natalie are determined to lay a foundation that will continue



Kovarik adds value to his herd by pairing high-quality genetics with a strong artificial insemination program.

to stand the test of time, and one their own children can return to if they so choose.

“We feel very blessed to have the upbringing we did, and are extremely fortunate to be passing it on,” Natalie says. “It’s a lifestyle we enjoy, and are proud of, and if our kids are interested in it, well we’d love for them to continue living the family legacy.”

Luke describes the sense of community he has experienced with the Hereford breed since getting to know Natalie’s family. “Hereford breeders are a pretty tight-knit group. They really work well together,” he says. “They are excellent at marketing their customers’ cattle and promoting the breed. They’re Hereford first, and there’s no doubt about that. That helps open up marketing opportunities. It’s different than other breeds and it’s a really neat thing.” **HW**

Editor’s note: Brooklyn Adam, Lathrop, Mo., is a junior at Iowa State University studying agricultural education and life sciences-communications. She also serves on the National Junior Hereford Association board of directors.

