

HEREFORD

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Standing Out From the Herd

Wobig Ranch, Merriman, Neb., seeks the qualities of the F1 red baldy cross to build an elite herd of replacement heifers.

by *Diane Meyer*

Traveling due west along Highway 20, minutes south of the South Dakota border and just west of Valentine, Neb., the clock resets to Mountain time. Cattle dot the grassy hillsides, and it seems every other vehicle traveling along this two-lane stretch of the coast-to-coast highway is a hauler with a trailer full of stock.

Just outside Merriman, Neb., population almost 150, Shane Wobig and his wife, Heather, their son, Austin, and Austin's fiancé, Myriah Fauber, operate Wobig Ranch, a commercial cow-calf operation home to 500 Red Angus mother cows and, most recently, 22 Hereford bulls. The Wobigs purchased this piece

of ranching oasis in 2007 after moving back to the area from Wyoming, adding it to the land already belonging to the family.

Along with their spring-calving cow herd, the Wobigs grow hay on the productive subirrigated meadows of the Nebraska Sandhills. In mid- to late-June, while cows are out to pasture, the Wobigs start prepping for hay season and use the harvest to feed their own herd and also custom hay for a neighbor and another area rancher.

A self-explanatory monomer, the Nebraska Sandhills is a region of grass-covered sand dunes sitting atop the Ogallala Aquifer. With an almost nonexistent static water level, this 174,000 square-mile

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Myriah Fauber, Austin Wobig and Shane and Heather Wobig (pictured l to r) operate Wobig Ranch in Merriman, Neb., a 500-head commercial cow operation consisting of Red Angus females and Hereford bulls.

underground lake stretches from the southernmost part of central South Dakota down through the West Texas Panhandle. “You can dig post holes and hit water,” Shane describes. “You pair water level with native grasses and it makes pretty good cow country.”

Although recognized as the largest sand dune region in the Western Hemisphere, the rolling foothills of north-central Nebraska are most famously dubbed “cow country.” With well over half a million head of beef cattle inhabiting the area, local ranchers are always seeking ways to differentiate their product.

“We’re trying to figure out a way to make our cows more profitable,” Shane emphasizes. “We have the cows here. How can we make more money off them? How can we develop a good product that not only works for us, but gives us more options to market them?”

Mixing it up

The Wobigs kept a black herd for a few years before switching to a solid red-hided program they maintained for about 10 years. With goals of improving the quality of his replacement heifers and weaning heavier calves, Shane began looking into a red baldy crossbreeding program.

“There has been a premium for Red Angus heifers the last eight to 10 years, and I’ve noticed that gap is starting to close,” Shane says. “It was a marketing decision. I didn’t know of anybody who had a red baldy program, so I figured we would be one of the only ones and there would be more opportunity there.”

In pursuit of a single program from which to source bulls, he followed up on a recommendation from a longtime local of the Sandhills and connected with Jason Hoffman of Hoffman Herefords, Thedford, Neb. After plenty of late night discussions on the advantages, as well as the disadvantages of such a major management change, they began actively pursuing their first purchase of Hereford bulls.

“It’s nothing that we did overnight,” Shane says of their decision to completely replace their Red Angus sires with a Hereford bull battery. For almost a year, Shane and Hoffman strategized on

which bulls would best suit the Wobig operation and decided on a group of grandsons out of Hoffman’s 5139 cow family.

“They’re getting the benefits of the hybrid vigor by putting Hereford bulls on those females,” Hoffman says. “With the Red Angus influence and this cow family they bought bulls out of, we’re maximizing maternal traits which will make his program elite compared to others.”

At the time, the American Hereford Association (AHA) and the Red Angus Association of America introduced the Premium Red Baldy program. Seeing a way to further differentiate their replacement heifers, the Wobigs decided to purchase bulls from that cow family which also met the program’s qualifying criteria for the AHA’s baldy maternal profit index (BMI\$).

Adding he does not like to use numbers by themselves, Shane says, “[The bulls] had to fit what I wanted, as far as conformation and disposition — our cattle and these heifers that we’re going to sell are extremely gentle.”

Filling a niche

In the long run, the Wobigs want to become a well-known source for top-notch first-generation (F1) red baldy heifers.

“If we can build a premium with our baldies, then we’re better served from a management standpoint to be able to sell all the heifers,” Shane explains, noting that keeping 50 to 70 replacements would require producing a couple hundred Red Angus calves every year.

“I like this idea of having a terminal herd where we’re selling all the calves,” he adds. “People that are buying their replacement calves are getting the top, not the middle cut or the bottom cut. They can come in here and they can get the very best we have.”

Shane comments there is a lot more that goes into making a quality replacement than just breeding for an F1 cross. “We’re still having to weed through and sort the cream of the crop,” he says. “We want to get to where we have more depth, because everybody has a bottom end. We’d like to be able to sell more percentage quality.”

With every calf crop, the Wobigs seek more pounds of calf weaned. Shane notes the top-end calves in their first crop of F1 red baldies were a lot bigger than those in previous calf crops, and Austin appreciates their gentle dispositions. This year’s calves will be the first to be marketed as Premium Red Baldies.

“A lot of the reason why we pursued it was economically driven,” Shane says. “We wanted a way to be able to market our calves that nobody else does. How can we set ourselves apart, how can we sell something different? [We are] trying to find something that nobody else has, but that will still be in a high demand — so less product, more buyers.”

The Wobigs sell steers off the cow and heifers in January through the sale barns in Valentine and Ogallala. They have also used video sales through the Ogallala market. Recently, they have been selling at Ogallala because of its annual red-influence sale, which takes place at the beginning of January and can have 4,000 to 5,000 head of Red Angus-influenced calves. “That makes a big difference to have that many in one location,” Shane says. “It brings more buyers.”

To Austin the ability to differentiate their program is key. Seeing value in trying something new, he is excited to see how the program will allow them to better advertise their calves. “It is a lot easier to market than if we would’ve just stayed red,” he says. “There’s a thousand other red cows out there, same with those red



calves. You take them to a sale barn and yours have to be flashy, they have to show out.”

Built for success

While their red baldy program is just getting started, the Wobigs know what it takes to grow a successful business. They are not afraid to make a change if it means their operation will be more successful. Heeding advice from his grandfather — who inspired him to return to ranching — and other successful ranchers in the area, Shane is always looking to improve, to be different and to be the best at what he does.

“You can’t run your operation just like somebody else’s — it’s different,” he says. “But you can take things from multiple operations and make it your own, and you try to find examples of very successful operations to do that.”

Out of high school, Shane spent four years in the Marine Corps and studied aviation mechanics while serving as a jet engine mechanic in California and Japan. “I think the military will help shape everything you do,” he says. “It’s just not just with your job. It can be any job. It can be how you live...it’s a higher set of values.”

His work ethic is shared by the entire family. In Heather’s hometown of Camp Crook, S.D., ranching is a way of life. Between growing up in a ranching community and now ranching herself, she says success is dependent on hard work. “Hard work means giving your all every day — getting up no matter what the weather is, what the day is like, what’s happened in your life. Just giving everything your all,” she says.

This mentality is especially important during calving season — which begins March 10th, to be exact, and which is also the peak season for blizzards. With 60 to 70 mile-per-hour winds and snow drifts that have historically reached as tall as rooftops, it takes all hands on deck to get cows and calves in and protected from the high winds.

Still, Heather enjoys the quality of life and the fun times the family has ranching together, while raising quality cattle. In their 27 years of marriage, she and Shane have raised three children — their oldest son, Colton, followed in Shane’s footsteps and served in the Marines and is now a diesel mechanic. Their daughter, Morgan, is in college, pursuing a career as a dental hygienist.

Myriah, who will officially join the family in September, is a nurse at the hospital in Valentine and is working on her bachelor’s degree in nursing. Born and raised in Kaycee, Wyo., Myriah did not grow up ranching but, like Heather, is enjoying helping out



In order to become a premium source of replacement females, the Wobigs have paired Hereford and Red Angus genetics to provide customers with a productive and marketable product.

and learning the ins and outs of raising cattle and draws on a work ethic she learned from her dad.

“When I’m faced with a lot of challenges, especially out here where I don’t know much, I just hear him saying, ‘What’s the worst that could happen? Just go with it.’ So he inspires me every day,” she says.

She and Austin are excited to raise a family on the ranch and to carry on the legacy, and Heather jokes that in the next five to 10 years she would love to help raise quality Red Angus cattle, F1 baldies and grandkids.

Regardless of their diverse backgrounds, each member of the Wobig family appreciates doing the job right. Drawing on previous experience in customer-service jobs, Heather says customer service is just as important when it comes to their ranching business.

“With ranching, you try and raise the best cattle that you can, get them ready for market and try and please your customer with what they’re looking for,” she describes. And with their latest investment in a red baldy program, the Wobig family is set up to differentiate their replacement females to best serve their customers and to find their edge in cow country. **HW**