

# Finding the Best



Inspired by ultrasound, these Kansans distill the essence of greatness.

Story & photos by *Kaitlin Morgan, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Roy Soukup knew he had some great cattle. Everybody knew it after Fort Hays State University won the Best of the Breed's \$100,000 top prize in 2003 using ultrasound sorting, and pointed to Soukup as the source for a quarter of the steers.

The Ellsworth, Kan., rancher and Hanston State Bank president did not yet know which cows or sires had helped the local Ag Research Center hit the jackpot. He and wife Carol just sold their steers to Fort Hays ultrasound pioneer John Brethour and received no individual data.

The overall results of 91% *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> or Prime (32%) sure got his attention, though. On average, his steers were nowhere near that good, but now he knew the best of the Angus breed was in his herd, literally.

He resolved to find and replicate those elite genetics.

That's when Soukup started using ultrasound to pick heifers with the most marbling and sufficient ribeye area, always culling from the bottom end of the ranks.

A decade later, he would find time to intensify that focus. Just last January, Soukup retired after 42 years at the bank, 29 of them as president, but in some ways, he never left Ellsworth.

## History

He grew up on the family farm and graduated in business finance from Kansas State University in 1971, but Soukup says his mom pushed him toward finding a job to start the

next year at a bank north of Dodge City.

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**— Roy Soukup**

## 35 Keys to Success

### Herd Goals

His future wife had just graduated from Hanston and went on to get her degree in accounting from Hays.

It was the Bicentennial street dance in Hanston where the two first experienced fireworks and, Soukup says, "the rest is history."

Their home was always in Hanston, but the same year, 1976, Soukup bought a half-section of land with his aunt east of Ellsworth that his grandfather had once rented. He traded labor to use his father Francis's machinery and gradually bought what they needed.

The young banker faithfully commuted 100 miles each weekend to work with the land and cattle. Then it was back to his office on Monday.

"When I was at the bank," he says, "my mind was all bank." As soon as he headed east on Friday night, he was thinking about his

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operation and calculating how to increase his bottom line.

The family had always relied on bulls from nearby Green Garden Angus.

"Years ago, when Dick (Richard Janssen) started on the marbling deal, we bought into that idea, too," Soukup says. "But it had taken a long time just using a natural rotation of bulls and replacement heifers, and we didn't realize what we had until Best of the Breed."

After 2003, the figuring included ultrasound, a proven means of selecting cattle with both muscle and marbling, and then feeding them to meet their potential.

### Proof in numbers

When a banker and an accountant operate a herd, you can bet numbers are important.

"It's like they say, if you can't measure it, you can't improve it," Soukup says.

They typically keep half of the heifers based on records, disposition and phenotype. Ultrasound scans and "another round of disposition sorting" gets that down to 50 or a few more, and the top two-thirds then join the herd.

Gradually, the return on investment has come to light.

"With eyesight there's just no way to tell these kinds of numbers," Soukup notes. "Sometimes the prettiest heifer by eyesight is actually on the bottom of the list."

Even those could be on the top of somebody else's, after 10 years of scanning. This year's 34 replacements scored 500 or above, all capable of producing Choice or better calves for this herd that regularly



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achieves 65%-75% CAB and Prime.

Ultrasound also measures ribeye, the next trait marked for improvement.

"It's reasonable in cost, and it doesn't take long to do," the rancher says, estimating 50-60 heifers take two hours to scan. "For the fee they charge, the heifers we keep give us a multiple-times return on our investment."

Paul Ritter, veterinarian and co-owner of Cattle Performance Enhancement Co.,

Monument, Kan., has been performing ultrasound on Soukup's heifers long enough to see several generations move through the herd. He's seen average scores increase, along with customer profits.

"I've got guys that I've done this for, for 15 years," Ritter says. "I've seen them go from 20% to 30% Choice to 50% to 60% CAB and Prime. That's the benefit of using ultrasound as a selection factor."





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### Low input, high return

What stands out most to him about the Soukup herd is how well they grade with minimal inputs. They graze on wheat and grass pasture year-round with some hay or alfalfa when needed as a protein supplement.

Soukup's bottom-end cutoff for keepers this year, 500 or better on the scan, is higher than most of his top heifers in 2003, and these heifers aren't fleshy.

"The scores are exceptional for grading in such a way on a low-input diet," Ritter says. "Their genetic ability to pass that on should be tremendous."

Progress will certainly continue on all fronts, according to plan.

"Being low-cost producers is still the name of the game," says Soukup. "Our cattle not only have to work for the consumer, but they have to be able to survive on what Mother Nature gives them. Good genetics provide them the opportunity to adapt to the environment we have locally and do what we expect of them."

### The sire side

Bulls provide the next steps upward for the herd, which is why he carefully studies the Green Garden catalog each year, marking three or four as top picks.

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He may not get all his top picks, but others are also noted that fit the expected progeny difference (EPD) range and his goal of "staying in the middle," knowing the bulls will excel in marbling, maternal and calving ease with moderate frame and growth.

Natural service breeds the cows, but now, with time available since "retirement," Soukup says he may start breeding heifers using artificial insemination (AI). Freeze-branding is another suddenly viable option to consider.

The Soukups aim to keep improving their

200 cows and 3,300 acres of land while son Troy works with his grandpa's herd that he recently took over. Some things tend to stay in the family: Troy is also an officer at the local bank.

If opportunities arise, the herds may expand. Even if they don't in head count, other numbers will show growth in quality to fit the bedrock goal: "Make a better product for the consumer."



**Editor's Note:** Kaitlin Morgan is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



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