



Big Goals Require Big Plans

South Dakota couple brings consumer focus back to the ranch.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It's a bold goal, spelled in black and white: 75% Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand qualifiers in 10 years.

Kotton and Abbey Krull, of Chamberlain, S.D., want to transition to 100% retained ownership, too.

When the couple returned to Abbey's family ranch after earning ag business degrees from South Dakota State University (SDSU), they didn't have that formal outline.

"Every producer needs to have a goal," Abbey says. "Otherwise we just get lost."

There's always a fence to fix, oil to change or another ranch improvement to make.

"There's a million things you can find to do, but if you get lost in the production side of it, you can forget about the management side," Kotton says. "With input costs the way they are and rent the way it is, the management is what's going to make or break everybody."

It took a formal class for these cattle

producers to take the time to put it down on paper. Created in 2011, the beefSD program gave the ranchers an extensive look at the beef industry. They toured backgrounding yards and feedlots, placed calves in a feedout program, and were matched with seasoned industry mentors. They also traveled to Washington, D.C., and the 2013 Cattle Industry Convention & Trade Show in Tampa, Fla.

The Krulls applied and were accepted after Kotton's mom alerted them to the opportunity.

"We were just a couple of South Dakota kids who hadn't been anywhere," Abbey confesses, though they couldn't imagine all the perspective they'd gain, or how it would change their business. "We've always been beef producers, but this has taken us to a whole new level."

Whether it was visiting with importers and exporters in the nation's capital, or learning

about consumer purchasing in Chicago, they identified a strong theme throughout their learning: "As an industry, we do an awful job of following through to what the consumer is really looking for," Kotton says. If auto manufacturers just built what they preferred regardless of consumer demand, "they'd go out of business in a hurry."

Carrying through

Taking that realization back to the ranch, they started implementing changes.

"The first year we ever got carcass data, it was ...," Kotton pauses.

"A wake-up call," Abbey finishes. "We needed to do something different."

Their first carcass data showed mostly Select and low-Choice, so they scrutinized the genetics and started individually identifying calves back to their mothers.

They praise Abbey's parents, Bill and

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Kathy Randall, for the freedom they've given them to implement those changes.

"We are as progressive as we are because my folks do let us have choices, and we feel very blessed to have that opportunity," Abbey says.

Kotton continues, "I can't say enough good about that. I see a lot of the kids our age that are back on the ranch that have no decision-making power. They're basically a hired man."

"Not only are they lagging behind, but the industry therefore is lagging behind," Abbey adds.

The Krulls made facilities upgrades, adding a hydraulic chute with a scale under it.

"It's changed the way we work cattle," Kotton says. "We can start trying to weed out the 1,700-pound (lb.) cows that are raising 500-pound calves."

As they transitioned the Simmental-Limousin-Angus base to primarily Angus, they watched the herd become more uniform.

"We have the calves come off weaning at 550 pounds and then they grow with each other," Abbey says.

Replacement heifers are easier to pick, docility is improved and the cattle just plain work.

"Because of the more moderate-framed cows and better feed efficiency, we're running more cows on the same acres," Kotton says. As they bought into the farming and ranching partnership, buying out an uncle, he notes it's helped them "kind of pay our own way."

The couple buys bulls from various local seedstock producers, always looking for cattle that are adapted to their environment. They have also used artificial insemination (AI) on some of their top females.



"We try to find cattle that are going to work everywhere," Kotton says, noting that they spend a lot of time studying catalogs. "I believe you can have it all. You can have the moderate-framed, highly maternal cow out of the same bull that can produce a Prime feedlot steer."

They're interested in commercial DNA technology such as the GeneMax™ Focus test for gain and grade as a culling and selection guide and marketing tool to give feeder calf buyers more information.

"I think that's going to change everything," Kotton says.

While they build up the consistency and predictability of their herd, they are looking for a feedyard that's the perfect fit.

"I don't want to be in the game of

sending cattle to somewhere in Nebraska one year and somewhere else the next year," Kotton says. "We want to find a long-term partnership, but in the meantime we're trying to get our quality where we want it so they are willing to keep feeding our cattle."

The Krulls have increased quality, not just because it makes sense for their business, but because it makes sense for the beef business.

"We're beginning with the end in mind," Abbey says. "We've got to remember that what we produce ends up on somebody's plate."



Editor's Note: *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

