

Risk and Reward

One rancher's tale of sacrifice, passion and perseverance.

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



As Dee Johnson got familiar with his surroundings, he may have wondered just what he had gotten himself into.

In 1991, the rancher bought nearly 40,000 acres after a foreclosure in northeastern Wyoming. The country was rugged and in great need of a caretaker.

From the passenger seat of a Suburban, he'd toured a small slice of the expanse with a real-estate broker, but Johnson didn't really learn the land until he moved 500 cows up from a family ranch in New Mexico.

"It wasn't very damn glamorous, but I had a passion not to fail," Johnson says. When he wasn't tending the stock, the cold November days on horseback were given

over to experiencing the plat maps in living color.

At night he'd return to the only building that came with the place — a sheep barn they had shoveled dead animals and manure out of before converting it to a bunkhouse.

"You fought with the rats at night to see who got the bed," Johnson

says, able to laugh about it now. "We ran on so much borrowed money, you couldn't hardly believe it."

Any time he and Gaye, his wife of 48 years, did get some cash, it went back into improvements.

**Commercial
Commitment to
Excellence
Award**

In September, the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand honored the couple's Dry Fork Land and Cattle with its Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award for their perseverance in reaching lofty goals.

The single "laid-down, barbed-wire corral" evolved into strategically located working facilities all across the ranch.

"There'd be times that Gaye and I and our one son would be processing 1,200 head of calves by ourselves, so we got the facilities to where we can do that without stressing the cattle," Johnson says.

In 2000, they built a 1,100-square-foot (sq. ft.) cabin. Still saving and paying down debt, it was another five years before they added electricity.

This frontier lifestyle was a contrast to the ranch where Johnson grew up near



Laketown, Utah, or the small farm there that Gaye called home. There, as the scenery drew more people, neighbors got closer and land values skyrocketed.

With his wife and children staying near



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that home base in Utah, visiting during school breaks and summers, Johnson spent a decade "batching it" until their youngest finished high school. If the cabin walls could talk, they might tell of failed attempts at cooking rice or baking bread.

Not all was uncharted territory.

Familiar territory

"As far as the cattle deal goes, that's where our passion is," Johnson says, "and you have to have land to have cows."

The first 500-cow herd he brought to Wyoming traces back to some of the first Angus in Utah. In 1964 Johnson's dad decided it was time to sell the sheep.

"He went to Montana and bought 38 heifers, and we've never bought another cow in our life since," he says. Those females are also the basis for his brother's herd near the Utah home place.

"In every aspect, from mothering ability to raising pounds to having less health

problems to being a better product when it hits the plate, I've thought it was the most productive breed out there," Johnson says.

Selection always started with phenotypic evaluation, and still does, but today that's coupled with a focus on the numbers. If bulls are "deep-ribbed," with good feet and structure, backed up with "the right muscle structure in the hindquarters," then he'll open up the catalog and check out birth weights and expected progeny differences (EPDs) for milk, ribeye and marbling.

"I don't ever buy a young son out of an unproven sire," Johnson says. "The EPDs are only as good as the progeny that's out there."

Rainfall averages around 13 inches, and although the ranch doesn't get a lot of snow, winters are often cold and windy.

"We have cattle that can look like they are going to starve after a winter blizzard and as soon as they get something to eat they gain so fast; and the mothering ability, good milk,

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good basic structure in these cattle — I don't think we've taken any of that away from the cattle to produce in this environment and still have what we need on the end product," he says, noting a 97% pregnancy rate and cows that are 12-13 years old.

He doesn't emphasize high weaning weights because, "we'd have to tie a bucket of corn on every animal out here to realize some of those numbers."

About 40 Angus bulls per year typically come from the same places his dad first went shopping — the Stevenson and Sitz families.

"If somebody does a good job for us, we stay with them," he says.

Of course bull selection is only half of the equation. Gaye jokes that she hopes to be reincarnated as a heifer because of all the attention her high-school sweetheart pays to them.

"I just believe if you do your homework, and you're a true stockman, and you are looking at the cattle, I think you can make 'em better," Johnson says. "But it takes time to change a cow herd."

Time is wasted without careful study and hard work; he wasted no time.

"I put the ranch and the cattle first," Johnson says, still worried about all the moments he gave up with his five children. "I sacrificed a lot, and not just financial. ..."

It's no wonder he gets a little sentimental looking at a pasture full of apparently great

35 Keys to Success Herd Goals

cattle. It's no wonder he wanted to be certain all of that made a difference.

"The real reward is knowing you've done a good job," he says.

Reaping the rewards

The only way to be sure? Feed them out.

"I felt like I had better than just commodity cattle, and I knew that we were getting repeat buyers," Johnson says. "They were making money or they wouldn't come back."

He didn't want to share profits on a thin margin, and the bank notes demanded success, so the risk was real.

"We decided to forego a sure thing," Johnson says. "We didn't know how they would perform, and we didn't know they would do that well when they got graded. It was risky, but I thought well worth it."

Every time a rancher feeds at Darnall Feedlot, near Harrisburg, Neb., owner-manager Gary Darnall says they have to "have a lot of faith and confidence that we are going to do a good job for him, because this is his income for the year."

Johnson was no different, but he had a good feeling when the relationship started in 2009.

"I met him 20 years ago and thought,

'What a great guy,'" Johnson recalls, impressed by his use of ultrasound and sorting even then. "I said, 'If I ever feed cattle, that's where I want to go.'"

Darnall quickly found what others already knew: "He's very intense as far as decision-making," the feeder says of his customer's consulting numerous experts on the same subject. "He just lives and breathes and is constantly thinking about ranching."

As Darnall often does with new customers, he called the cattleman to share the first carcass results.

"You can't believe what you've got," Darnall told Johnson, noting the cattle reached 27% CAB brand acceptance, which was well above the national average at the time. Johnson then asked what tweaks he should make.

"Don't change a thing!" was the reply.

But he continued to aim higher, and now loads reach up to 80% CAB and CAB Prime. Five years of carcass data shows an average of nearly 60% CAB across all the cattle.

"I've always said you can't be rewarded if you don't put some risk out," Johnson says. "I get a lot of satisfaction out of [feeding cattle], more than the money end of it. The money's a secondary thing."

Simply doing the right thing is an overriding principle at the Dry Fork, where Johnson works to limit cattle stress and improve the environment in tandem.

"I've always believed that if you look at an animal it will tell you it needs something. It maybe can't tell you everything it needs, but it will tell you it needs something," Johnson says. "They look at me with those big brown eyes, and we've just got to take care of them."

He's particular when it comes to handling, and limits who he gets for "day help" during branding or other large tasks.

"There's plenty of time in a day to get the cattle done, and we don't have to get wild and western," he says. They use a calf table and just a handful of people.

To avoid large temperature fluctuations, he moved fenceline weaning up to September.

"Those calves will be in the pasture where they were the night before and the cows on the other side," he says. "They've got good, clean water and good grass to eat, and they're not walking in a dusty corral. We don't even touch them until they've quit bawling and are happy and content and lying in the grass."

Despite a severe drought in recent years, those forage resources have improved since the initial purchase. When coal-bed methane gas extraction took off, it changed the quiet



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nature of the ranch, once only accessible by two-track roads, to one with infrastructure and truck traffic.

Like most in the area, the ranchers didn't own the mineral rights, but Johnson used the new interest in his land to his advantage.

"I said to myself, 'I can't stop them from doing that, but I can control what they do with the water,' so he insisted it didn't leave his land. A reservoir system was developed to allow moving water to different parts of the ranch and operate five pivots to build feed resources.

They now graze 1,600 head of cattle that support three families: all their own.

Family venture

"I think that's probably brought me the biggest joy of anything, is to have them here," Johnson says of his two sons who work in partnership with him. "We really struggle with hired help. They can come here and see they can get a job on an oilrig or pipeline and see they can make triple the money with less hours of work.

"We know we can depend on family, and that's what holds this together — the boys have a passion," he says. Derek, the oldest, and his family live on a farm they purchased 200 miles west that grows most of their feed. Nolan and his family just moved back to another home on the ranch earlier this year.



The Johnson daughters — Angie, Emilie and Amanda — are all married and are scattered from Arizona to Utah.

Some of their 16 grandkids only see this historic and improved ranch a few times a year.

That doesn't bother Johnson. He hopes they're successful in their chosen endeavors and that they, and everyone else, know why his heart called him to this corner of Wyoming.

"It's so far out here, I just wondered how he ever found the place," Gaye laughs. "He loves it here ... and I love him, so here I am."

It's nearing 5 a.m. when Johnson jumps in his Chevy Duramax pickup these days. The horses still in the corral, the plat maps stay neatly tucked in an office file cabinet, as he knows every inch of this ranch by heart now.

"I'll be out driving the pastures, looking at the cattle to make sure things are the way they ought to be," he says.

Thanks to decades of diligence and hard work, more than likely they are.

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



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