

New Ways On An Old Ranch



When Mother Nature gets mean, new technology and high-quality goals gain the upper hand.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Joe Mayer has always looked for better ways. That's second-nature to anyone whose family has made a living on harsh land for generations. All who thrive on the 35,000 acres that comprise Mayer Ranch near Guymon, Okla., must continually adapt.

For his example that proves high-quality ideals and cattle can flourish with enough focus and dedication, Mayer earned the 2013 *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award, which was to be presented at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)

**Commercial
Commitment
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Award**

annual conference at Palm Desert, Calif., Sept. 18-20.

Once part of The Comancheria, Mexico and Texas, the Cimarron Strip may have looked like its 19th century nickname, No Man's Land, when Mayer's great-grandfather rode across it in 1873. Bound from Savannah, Mo., to manage a branch of the XIT Ranch near Texline, Texas, he would cross the strip many times in the years ahead, trailing cattle to Dodge City, Kan.

Some years, timely rains made the plains look so inviting that the Mayer family

established a ranch there in 1883. When settlement was officially opened as part of the Oklahoma Territory in the 1890s, they filed as a homestead and began adding to it. Mayer's maternal grandfather came down from Canada the year before statehood in 1907.

"The land was cheap or free then, so we built up a ranch," he says, back in the present as he looks across bare spots where five years of drought killed the grass. "I hope it doesn't blow."

If it does, Mayer will cope. Wind and drought won't move a clan that endured the Dust Bowl by shifting to less tillage and more pasture rotation. An abandoned 1920s grain elevator on the ranch stands sentinel near

▶ **Above:** Oklahoma rancher Joe Mayer knows it's hard to tell genetic merit just by looking at an animal's appearance. That's why he documents genetics and recently began using DNA tests to help with breeding decisions, as he explains in this clip provided by Certified Angus Beef LLC and the American Angus Association. Digital readers can click on the photo above to launch the video, which is available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5Yf-MRGego.



► After five years of drought, Mayer has sold the herd down to its core. Any cattle left on the 35,000-acre Panhandle ranch require daily supplementation. These first-calf heifer pairs found a little grazing this summer along the Canadian River. The small registered herd (below) relies on the cake truck.

the mostly dry Beaver River. Half of the 72 windmills across the land still pump, while others are replaced by electric alternatives when they wear out.

Mayer grew up on a part of the ranch at nearby Hardesty, Okla., active in 4-H and FFA. He moved to the Guymon ranch to ramrod a new part of the spread while earning a degree at Oklahoma Panhandle State University. That's where he met Mary Anne, whose grandparents had moved to the area from El Dorado, Kan., in the 1920s. Joe and Mary Anne were married in 1971.

Staying current

All the cattle were straightbred Herefords then, but calving ease was a common concern. That led to the first use of Angus bulls on heifers a few years later, though the black baldies were discounted at auctions.

Early adopters of artificial insemination (AI), the family tried most of the continental breeds — from Charolais to Limousin and Gelbvieh — before coming back to exclusively Angus 20 years ago.

“We follow the market,” Mayer says, “and that's why we went with Angus.”

In 1993, he started buying bulls from Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan., with goals of creating uniform performance and quality in calves that would be profitable to feed for the emerging value-based grid markets.

“They were paying attention to marbling before anybody else even knew it was going to be important,” Mayer says.

Before that, he produced for the prevailing commodity market and went about the daily

business of ranching while he and Mary Anne raised Katie, Paul and Margie.

These days, Paul helps run things from his base on the Hardesty ranch, and Margie lives with husband Chad Rice on the Guymon ranch, keeping books for the operation that includes other family and associates across four ranches. Katie is an attorney in Evergreen, Colo.

“I've fed cattle for most of my life and once had an interest in a feedlot,” Mayer says. “We fed a lot of cattle, and all kinds, but that was back before grids and none of that mattered. When you actually got paid for what you produced instead of one-price-fits-all, I started worrying.”

In the mid-1990s, he sold that feedlot interest, and the family began selling calves for a few years, soon getting data back through the Gardiners and U.S. Premium Beef (USPB). A few years later, he was ready to retain ownership.

“By the time I jumped back into feeding, we pretty much had all the bad outliers out of there,” Mayer says. “Of course, we don't mind outliers on the front end.”

He sends calves to Triangle H, near Garden City, Kan., a CAB partner yard that has made feeding Gardiner Angus genetics something of a specialty. Manager Sam Hands nominated Mayer for the 2013 award.

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“Joe has the right ideas on how to work with leading genetics to send us some of the best calves we’ve fed,” Hands says, “and we’re working together to help take that to a new level.”

The straightbred Angus herd of 1,400 cows conformed to plans, as once leading-edge outlier genetics became the norm. From the start, animals showing any temperament problem have been culled.

Calves born in February and March were routinely weaned at 205 days and backgrounded in a nearby refurbished feedlot the Mayers bought in 2007, after it sat empty for nearly 20 years. Heifers are developed there and steers are sent along to Kansas.

Managing through hard times

Mayer tries to keep expected progeny differences (EPDs) balanced, but he pushes the top end of the dollar beef value (\$B) index that combines EPDs for growth and carcass traits with economic data. Bulls for heifers must be in the top 1% for calving ease.

Heifers bred to such bulls may calve a week early, so due in late January means starting in mid-January, when wind chills can be -40° F. The ranch is ready with a sheltered calving corral and individual care in a converted sheep barn the children once used for 4-H projects.

Drought created new challenges by 2010, when culling had to go much deeper than expected. Those first-calf heifers wouldn’t have a future on the ranch.

“We sold the oldest and then the next oldest,” Mayer says. Finally, all the cows had

to leave. “We got a little premium, but it was a sweetheart deal for the buyer as these were only the best, and the calving season was tight. It tore my heart out.”

It still wasn’t enough when 2011 opened up even drier.

“It got down to where it was hurting us to even keep bred heifers, but we had spent too much money and time, worked too hard to build our genetics to just lose that,” Mayer says. “We started looking for some place to go, and maybe we should have left here.”

Anyone would have doubts when grass that survived the Dust Bowl began dying.

“We started driving until we found something green,” he says. The inside insight came from Mayer’s AI specialist, Doug Tenhouse, originally from Liberty, Ill. He knew of a 1,640-acre ranch for sale in the Green Hills near Unionville, Mo.

Mayer liked the region’s name right away, and he would have a ready-to-go manager in Tenhouse, a career AI technician with a master’s degree from Kansas State University who had taken short courses in grazing management.

“We closed on a deal and shipped cows two days later,” Mayer says. Those 2011 first-calf heifers are now the oldest cows in a herd of 1,089, and 624 of them are in Missouri. That’s about half the herd it could

be if drought ends in the Beaver and North Canadian River breaks.

“If we could ever get a rain here — and it would take two or three years for this country to come back — but we could run a couple thousand,” he says. “It has got to start doing a whole lot of raining first.”

Mayer appreciates what his Missouri grazing expert can do, starting in a year when

even the Green Hills went four weeks without a summer rain.

“We’ve got it divided into lots of paddocks, and he can calculate how long 200 cows can stay in each one as they may stay six days in one or four or nine,” he says. “I think Doug was planning this for a long time — it’s his initiative, and it’s a good thing. You can definitely tell.”

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— Joe Mayer

It wasn’t easy with more cows coming in from Guymon and countering the local drought. The grass got ahead of them for a while, and calves had to be early-weaned and trucked back out to Guymon for backgrounding in a land of scarce feed.

This year, the early-weaned calves in Guymon made the trip to Missouri to utilize abundant grass. The contrast in resources is huge.

“Here, we’ve had to feed cake every day for about five years,” Mayer says. When things get back to normal, cows go to cornstalks after weaning, and then onto dormant grass and 3 pounds of 20% protein cubes in January, and work up to 5 pounds during the 120 days before turnout.

“Normally we only feed hay when the ground is covered up with snow, but last winter we fed some just to keep them hanging on till we could wean and ship,” he adds. “When we had first-calf heifers out on a pasture as bare as a desk top, we’d run out there with a feed truck carrying a ration of distillers, straw and silage.”

Meanwhile, in Missouri?

“Every time I go back there I go, ‘Wow, it’s green!’ When we had that grass in December, we didn’t feed cake until February and had new grass by the 20th of April,” Mayer reports.

Resources and results

Resource management is key, however. The Mayer Ranch cows there needed only half a bale each, compared to some other herds in that area that consumed more than three bales of hay per cow last year, albeit without cake.



► One 5-year-old bull used as a cleanup bull this year is backed by three years of data — from birth weights to carcass merit. That’s especially important for a herd focused on rebuilding.



► Mayer's Unionville, Mo., manager, Doug Tenhouse is an animal breeding and grazing expert who had looked after 60% of the ranch cows since 2012 and found room for weaned calves this year, too.

be able to produce a CAB or Prime," Mayer explains. The test cost \$17 per head, but "prorated over the six calves that the average heifer would produce in her life, it seemed reasonable."

He didn't test their own replacements that are backed by five years of carcass data, but used GMX to check several calves this spring. "Most of those were in the high 90s, but one was a 72," Mayer says. That brought up a diagnostic application: "Testing the cow this summer to see what was going on, we found that she was a 46, so she's gone."

Mayer keeps thinking of new applications for GMX testing, which could support a lucrative new enterprise in heifer marketing, he says.

A herd of 19 Gardiner-based, registered-Angus cows are kept especially to generate cleanup bulls for the ranch. Noting several calves this summer with a \$B index above 100 — one at 110 — Mayer says these would cost several thousand dollars more to buy at the auction compared to his cost of production.

He cooperated with the Gardiners as an embryo-transfer (ET) recipient herd for several years, until the recent liquidation. He looks forward to getting back into that enterprise.

The Gardiners are just as pleased at the prospect.

"Joe is one of the very best cattlemen ever at analyzing information, and then using disciplined selection and technology to add dramatic value to his cattle," Mark Gardiner

says. "It's truly a thirst for knowledge to make their cattle better, and it's been exciting to watch."

Getting into ET took "a little more effort to catch birth weights, but we were already doing that in proving up bulls with complete data," Mayer says. More breeding accuracy adds confidence for ranch goals and leads to some bulls being leased by AI studs.

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"We want to keep every heifer we can next year," Mayer says. "We're almost desperate to get enough good females here, so we won't be selling the bull-breds. I'll take every calf I can get from that bull."

Sensitive to charges that he should be crossbreeding, Mayer says, "I'd love to if anyone could show me the data relevant to my herd that some non-Angus bull will make more money here."

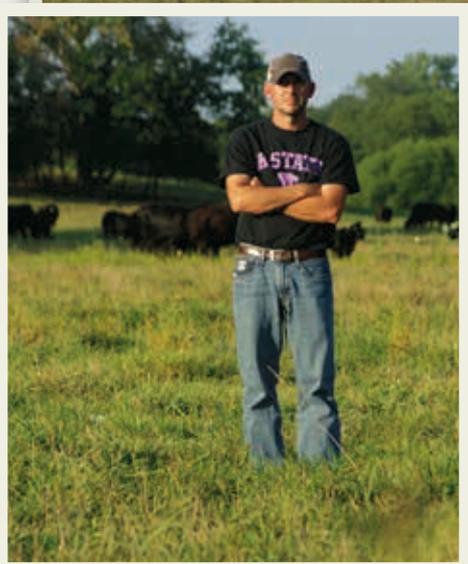
Calves are judged on much more than quality premiums, he adds. Weight per day of age (WDA) is a top metric, with one simple goal that keeps performance on track.

"If not by weaning, then by the time they finish in the feedlot, our steers and feeder heifers need to weigh at least 3 pounds for each day they live," he explains.

When 2,000 cows are in on that plan, producing only CAB and Prime calves, Mayer may allow himself a moment of satisfaction to enjoy the better days. He'll probably order a steak, medium rare.



Editor's Note: Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



That comparison extends to stocking rates, calculated to animal-unit days in Missouri.

"Here in the Panhandle, Mother Nature's been in her mean mode," Mayer says. "Scientifically, we shouldn't have a cow here at all. The rabbits left long ago. The turkeys are down to two or three birds. There are no coyote pups — just wiley old suckers that know how to survive." Several calves were lost to them this spring.

On a more optimistic note, calves from this ultra-culled herd now make 70% CAB and 15% Prime. Mayer plans to push that to 25% Prime in the near term.

He'll cull any cow that can't produce a CAB calf and use technology to ensure that the repopulated herd of 2,000 will have a lock on gaining and grading at the very top.

A pessimistic family couldn't live in No Man's Land for more than a century. Planning for the green-up when precipitation returns to its 18- to 20-inch annual average, last fall Mayer bought 500 heifers from five ranches that did not retain any of their own. When he saw no quick end to drought, he turned to realism and a new tool, the GeneMax™ (GMX) genomics test from CAB.

Gate-cut sampling from each set identified the top two strings, from which all heifers were tested. Only those scoring above 80 on the 99-point scale were kept in each case. "We thought at that level, they should