A Nebraska commercial ranch has capitalized on hybrid vigor over several decades.
“We’ve had a longtime tradition of crossbreeding dating back a couple of generations,” says Chad Buell (rhymes with mule) of the Shovel Dot ranch, located on the eastern edge of Nebraska’s famed grass-rich Sandhills.

“That started well before I was born — my grandfather, dad and uncle had a base herd of registered and commercial Herefords, mixed in some other breeds and even bred our heifers to Longhorns. They added Angus in the early 1980s and really liked what they got from those baldy cows,” he continued. “They’d attended various university extension events over the years, understood the value of crossbreeding and all the advantages gained from hybrid vigor. Our cattle were almost all English origin at that time.”

In 2002, Chad’s dad, Homer, and his uncle Larry, who had been running the ranch together, began to think about retirement. “Both of them were in their late 50s and they decided to split the place and let the next generation take on the responsibilities,” Chad reported. “Uncle Larry turned his half over to his daughter, Devon Nelson, and her husband, Kelby, and they have now switched to straightbred Angus.

‘Dad and I came to the conclusion that we wanted to incorporate composite bulls into our share of the herd. We figured that we’d not only increase hybrid vigor, but it would make pasture management easier than a two-breed rotation,” he says. “As a result, we had more live calves weaned per cow exposed.”

Buell recalls that they had discussed using SimAngus™ bulls for a number of years, but didn’t make the ultimate move until 2009, when they purchased several halfblood bulls.

“Initially, we chose halfblood bulls to use on our Angus/Hereford baldy cows, aiming at producing quarter-blood females. Now, we’ve started buying quarter-blood bulls because we have quite a few quarter-blood females in the herd and think that’s a level we want to maintain,” he explained.

“Our longterm goal is to establish a completely crossbred cowherd, a process that is still in progress because the first replacement females out of those halfblood bulls were born in 2010 and are still among our youngest cows,” he says. “Also, we’ve still got quite a few baldy cows in our herd. Hopefully, in another five years, we’ll have a herd of one-quarter Simmental females, with the other three-fourths from British genetics, a combination that fits our low-input production system.”

Buell has purchased his SimAngus bulls from a wide range of prominent area breeders, including John Christensen, Wessington Springs, South Dakota; Loren Berger, Stapleton, Nebraska; Dick Helms of Flying H Genetics, Arapahoe, Nebraska; and Darby Line of Triangle J Ranch, Miller, Nebraska.

Six Generations and Counting

The Buell ranching operation traces back to 1883, when Chad’s great-great grandfather homesteaded just a little north of their present location. “My kids are the sixth generation here in north-central Nebraska,” he said. “We’re in the north-central part of the state on the eastern end of the Sandhills.”

Although the Buells live in a remote sector of Loup County, their mail is delivered from Bassett, 40 miles to the north in Rock County.

Buell and his wife, Tricia, are the parents of three daughters and a son: Julian, 12; Brooklyn, 11; Carter, 8; and Ireland, who is 5.

Chad and Tricia met when she was teaching in Bassett. Raised on a cattle ranch at Thedford, she had earned her secondary education degree from the University of Nebraska-Kearney. She has also picked up a Master’s Degree in Library Media and Instructional Technology.

“She taught for five years, then stayed home for a time after our first two daughters were born. Now she’s gone back to work for Rock County schools,” he explained. “Our children formerly went to school at Taylor, 26 miles south of here, but now she takes them with her to Bassett, which works out very well for us.”

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Chad’s folks, Homer and Darla, remain actively involved in the ranch day-to-day operation. Homer helps out during calving while handling most of the paper work and record keeping.

Chad picked up his education in Agricultural Business from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and is a fervent Cornhusker football fan. “I was there between 1994 and ’98, and during that time, the Huskers won three national championships,” he said. “As a family, we have five season tickets that have been passed down ever since my grandparents bought them.”

The Shovel Dot brand was originally adopted because “they thought it would be a hard one for cattle thieves to alter or mess with,” Buell added.

Managing the Herd

The Shovel Dot cowherd is bred predominantly by natural service. “We used AI more extensively back when we had the registered Herefords, as well as on our commercial herd through the mid-90s,” he says. “For the past four years, we’ve only been AIing our replacement heifers. We synch them using CIDRS, keep the technician around for two days and then do a mass breeding at the end on those that haven’t come into heat. At first, we used an Angus bull on the heifers, but have bred them to a halfling SimAngus the past couple of years.”

A year ago, the Buells calved out 750 females, including 120 replacements. Calving season begins about April 20, and calves are taken off the cows in late September or early October, at 5-6 months of age by fence-line weaning. The cowherd then goes directly to grass, where they stay until the following spring. “Ideally, we don’t want to have to feed them through the winter,” Buell said. “During most winters, the only extra feed they get is in the form of a little alfalfa and a protein supplement.”

Steer calves and cull heifers, which are spayed when it becomes evident they do not measure up as replacements, are held over and sold as yearlings. They are over-wintered on feedbunks, and fed a ration of hay and distiller’s grain from November through May, when they go back to grass. The distiller’s grain is delivered twice a week, direct from an Archer-Daniels-Midland plant in Columbus.

“We’ve been selling yearlings as long as I can remember,” Buell reports. “We aim for the summer market, which is typically a good time for prices, at about 15 months of age. We generally get a 900- to 950-pound average on our steers and sell through the Auction Sale Yard in Bassett.”

“Last year, we fed about 600 March-born stocker steers that we had purchased and backgrounded. We cut off three loads of the heavier ones in April, and the middle cut of six loads went to grass near Lynch a couple of hours to the northeast, to be delivered in August,” he said. “We sell them through the Western Video Auction and have had very good luck with them.” Recently, their ranch was named to receive BEEF magazine’s prestigious National Stocker Award for 2015.

Farming is limited on the Shovel Dot. One center irrigation pivot was put in in 2007. Corn was produced under the pivot the first three years, followed by a year of soybeans, but it has been used exclusively for forage over the past three years. “We plant oats there in March, cut it for hay in June and then double crop it by planting a Sorghum-Sudan grass cross, which we graze,” he added.

“We’re convinced that we are on the right path with our continued emphasis on crossbreeding. Our cattle perform extremely well,” he summarized. “It has been a very good couple of years for those of us in the cattle business.”

Buell cattle on belly deep Sandhills grass.