

The Best Kept Secret in the Commercial Cow Business

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I've been in the commercial cow business all my life. My mother and father started our ranch in 1943. And I'm proud we are still in the cow business. Each new year brings new calves, better bulls, more productive cows. So what's all this about the best kept secret in the commercial cow business? How about ----- "Artificial insemination"---- -NO—that's not the real secret- the real secret is that any of you commercial cattleman can do it. There are 3 myths of an AI program. It is too expensive, too time consuming and you need great facilities. The reality is, it is VERY do able for the average cowman. But it must be a secret because so few of us are using it.

My wife Ginger and I started breeding yearling heifers in 1973 and for us some things don't change, she still heats detects and I stay out of her way. The big difference now is we have children and grand children that help. We got away from AI for many years because there was a lack of information on the bulls. We were limited by lack of progeny data or progeny performance accuracy. We would drive around the cows with my Dad and he would say the natural calves were better and I agreed. AI gave us no advantage. But I always knew that someday, it would be an advantage to our operation. Today, there is accurate EPD data kept on every bull allowing you to get exactly what you want.

So what brought us back to AI? The high cost of good bulls. In the late 80s, Dad and I were still going to bulls sales and not being able to afford the top bulls. Economics told us, it was time to start our AI program up again. We did just that and we have not looked back since.

I think as an industry we have made people think that AI is very difficult. I happen to be living proof that it is NOT! Facilities are always talked about and how perfect they have to be and the better they are the easier it is. But for a lot of us commercial cowmen, we simply don't have an elaborate AI facility. Ranchers may not think they have the time, but really the average amount of time for a synchronization program is 3-5 minutes per cow. That is including 3 trips down the chute, not including the sorting and gathering. Don't let time be a deterrent.

Ginger and I have bred cows in Teco squeeze chutes in snow storms to Powder River panels in a shed and we could always get the job done. Facilities can be whatever you have on the ranch. Any chute set-up that you are presently using can be made to work for an AI program. Over time, we have built breeding chutes at most locations but we still do breed in what I would call plain ole commercial ranch facilities. If you are thinking about starting AI, you should know that there are many people out there from all of the stud services to help you. These people are not only dedicated to your

personal success but dedicated to the industry. One individual has been helping me breed cows for over 20 years and I not only count him as a great personal friend but a great source of information.

Handling the cows is often talked about and it is true that the easier the cattle are handled, your odds for success and a higher conception rate are improved. But when starting out, remember this is your cow or heifers first time too. Ginger and I take the time to train all of our heifers to go down chutes. The heifers know where to go and that training stays with them forever. That means less trouble on breeding day. Over time your cattle will get better and better to handle. As we work to make sure everything is quiet and perfect, I think about that last cow in the herd that comes into heat with 5 bulls chasing her all over the ranch. It makes you realize that a few trips down the chute must be better and easier on her in the long run. So don't let your facilities hamper your decision to AI.

I know that AI not only saves us money but makes us money as well. Herd improvement for the future is one large advantage. There is a pride and a feeling of assurance when calving heifers who are all half sisters bred to the same bull. The prize is "Value Added" to our calf crop. Our steers consistently sell above the average market price and our heifers are sought after. AI has given us the advantage of raising our own bulls and having them be all half brothers. That gives us the consistency in genetics for the whole herd. Another added benefit is we market a few bulls to friends and neighbors who order their bulls in advance. None of this would be possible without AI.

I believe if you are going to be in the ranching business in the future, your very existence will depend on your ability to supply a better more consistent product. The genetic accuracies are there and the genetics proven. This is not a guessing game anymore. I don't know of any other way to get such a superior product except with AI. When I look into the future, I always feel excited about the progress my family can make with this great tool. The genome research that is going on will be one more tool that we can capitalize on because of AI.

I have used almost every synchronization program over time and they all seem to work. One thing I can assure you though, none of them will be as good as you think they should be when you are starting out. Don't get discouraged at first. Be in it for the long term. Over time, both you and your cows will become better and your conception rates will improve. In our operation, we consider 60% conception on the first heat for heifers to be good. In our cow herd, on a synchronization program, 70% would be good. The message I want to convey is that if you start out with heifers, do not be disappointed with 50% on a synchronized program or 60% on your cows. Rome wasn't built in a day. This process takes time to evolve and mature. But the best things are always worth the sacrifice and work. The best conception rates will be with natural heat detecting. It is time-consuming and probably hard to implement for most operations. However, with some planning it can be done. We do one group of cows this way at

home because we get the highest conception rate of any of the methods. Because heat detecting takes a few hours, it is also a great opportunity for training and educating the younger generation. When you synchronize, time is of the essence, whereas natural heat detecting there is always time to train and help new technicians.

Bull selection is one of the most difficult things I do because we are looking at a long term direction for our cow herd. If you are looking at a terminal cross, there are also many options. In either case, the one most important question you need to ask your semen salesman first is "IS THIS A HIGH CONCEPTION RATE BULL?" All bulls are not created equal when it comes to conception rate. We discovered this fact when we did a progeny test for a registered breeder. We bred 100 cows randomly to each of 4 different sires. We got from 38 percent to 70 percent from the top bull. Now it's easy to decide which bull I would breed to. Just think of the loss because that cow went another heat. There is money to be made from a high conception bull. Getting your cows bred on that first heat returns you extra profit more than anything else you can do. Take the time to insure your bull choice has high conception and all the semen reps know this fact. Make sure you ask. *It's* critical to your bull choice.

In my family, we have been doing AI for so long, my children and grand children think it is just part of the operation- just like marking calves or bangs vaccinating heifers. And I'm encouraged by that. Who knows what the future will hold, but I know my family is in a position to not only survive but to capitalize on all of the genetic improvement that is coming to our industry. We must stay on top of innovations to survive not only for our own operations but for our industry. The more efficient our ranches are and our ability to produce a better product, the longer we can stay in the ranching business. If we don't use every tool available to us, will the next generation be able to make it in these uncertain times?

Using AI in your commercial operations takes a lot of planning, but if you have a 60 day calving season, a good mineral program and vaccination program you are ready to go. I hope I have convinced you it is something you need to do to insure your survivability in the future. I know you all have the corrals. Plan to be busy for 3-5 minutes a cow and you will reap a huge benefit in 9 months. You will have the best of the best in beef genetics in your herd. Genetics you can't always buy at the auctions. Let the registered breeders do the leg work of raising the superior bulls, then go breed your whole cow herd to those bulls. High powered genetics and higher profits are within your grasp. Reach for them.