

A STORY OF A
STEAK
RESPONSIBLE BEEF

- PART THREE -

Advancing Leaders

By Martha Mintz

Dawn paints the vast, open skies of Northwestern Nebraska a delicate, fleeting pink that quickly gives way to pale blue as the sun peeks over the legendary Sand Hills, illuminating the Krebs Ranch. A crew is preparing to gather and wean a set of striking Angus calves, obviously the fruit of a herd built through decades of meticulous management and stewardship of genetics. Thanks to those efforts, these calves have been set on a path for greatness, likely to significantly transform the herds they join. Kami and Jake Scott, part of the family team who own and manage Krebs Ranch, hope they've helped lay a similar path for the interns they hosted at the ranch this summer.

Among those mustering for the day's work is Reese Tuckwiller, a University of Nebraska senior, member of the UNL livestock judging team, National Junior Angus Association Board member, Lewisburg, W. Va., cattleman, Krebs Ranch intern and, by all indications, a current and future leader in the beef industry. After a summer of introducing him to many facets of purebred beef production and observing him in action, he's just the type the Scotts hope to keep in the industry herd.

"There is this really amazing crop of kids out there who have a passion for production agriculture and livestock in general," Kami says. "We have an amazing opportunity for new leaders, we just have to cultivate that passion and keep them in production agriculture. There's such a wealth of knowledge and talent out there and we need to keep that in the industry and not lose them to something else."

Retaining and Recruiting Quality

While a city kid may have a tough time breaking into production agriculture, it's all too easy for talented kids from agricultural backgrounds to be poached by non-agricultural industries. The Scotts are working to not only retain those who already have a passion for the beef industry, but also to help bring in some fresh faces from outside the industry, too.

Jake was once a bit of an industry outsider himself. Growing

up in Eastern Oklahoma his parents had a very small operation geared more toward horses and both had full time off-farm jobs. He gained more interest in cattle through FFA and showing which eventually led him to livestock judging. His exposure to quality cattle through judging and the encouragement of his livestock judging coaches at Connors State College and Oklahoma State University continued to fire that growing passion. He went on to work for several industry leading Angus breeders before he and Kami were given the opportunity to return to the Krebs Ranch, Kami's family operation, in Gordon, Neb.

"I learned so many life lessons and skills through livestock judging that have impacted me and influenced what I do through today," Jake says. "But beyond that, I've been really lucky, really fortunate, to work with some really influential people in the business. My father-in-law, Eldon Krebs, would certainly be one of those."

Those mentor relationships helped build his confidence and knowledge, giving him the tools he needed to rise to their level and serve as an influencer and leader in the beef industry today. He's also now in a position to help cultivate the next generation of leaders, which he feels will be critical for the industry's success from day-to-day ranch work all the way up to being a public face for the industry.

He notes that farms and ranches are getting larger and larger, which means a husband, wife and hired hand probably won't cut it in the future. "If you've been around agriculture for more than five minutes you've heard the discussion about quality help and how difficult it is to find," he says. "What we can do is work with young people who, like me when I first started out, want to learn and get better. Even if they don't have a huge background we can help them reach their maximum ability. Not only will that help us in our operation for finding help, but also help the industry as a whole."

Grabbing Opportunities

Tuckwiller is another livestock judge who has developed

a passion for quality Angus cattle through producing and showing cattle from his family's 350-head purebred Angus and Hereford herds. A frequent reader of bull catalogs, he was very familiar with the Krebs Ranch and their industry-leading herd.

When his judging team stopped by the Krebs Ranch to practice on their way to the Denver Stock Show, he asked his judging coach about potential internships with the ranch. Being proactive paid off for Tuckwiller, and a few months later he was showing up for his first day on the job.

"We were setting up recep cows and Reese jumped right in. I remember being pleasantly surprised at how much knowledge and ability he already seemed to have," Jake says. While working cows was similar, there were some stark differences between Tuckwiller's Greenbrier Valley cattle operation and the vast expanses of the Krebs Ranch.

"We're more condensed and compact. We can run a pair and a half per acre, it's definitely not the wide open spaces of Nebraska," Tuckwiller explains. Before arriving he had built up some anxiety that he would be doing a lot of work horseback. "It popped into my head that I would be riding a horse every day and I hadn't ridden a horse in so long!"

It turns out he did most of his work on ATVs, just like at home, and had to pester the guys at the feedlot in order to get some of that much anticipated horse work under his belt. While horses may have been a minimal part of the job, Tuckwiller was given a vast range of experiences in beef production. The Krebs Ranch, founded by Eldon and Louisa Krebs in the late 1970s, has many working parts. There's a feedlot for developing bulls and heifers, a sizeable purebred cow/calf herd, a bull stud—Western Sires Service—which Kami manages, along with farm ground to help support the enterprise.

"Going from the feedlot to the cow/calf operation gives you a totally different perspective on what different sectors of the industry are doing. Gaining those different perspectives can make us stronger as an industry because, as a leader, I can understand more about what's going on and give an opinion," Tuckwiller says.

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Advancing leaders

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The learning opportunities for Tuckwiller were ample and earned both through sweat and tapping into the years of livestock experience surrounding him.

"We were sorting cattle and Eldon was running the gate, not just looking at numbers in a book, but doing a pheno analysis of each heifer. I asked him to call out what he did and didn't like," Tuckwiller recalls. "He was giving me a keen eye of what to look for and gain perspective. If I can pick apart a specific animal and tell you why that can help me out in a judging contest or on my operation at home."

He notes his time at Krebs helped him differentiate cattle and have a more critical eye for what the industry is currently going for. Also to recognize what styles of cattle are becoming popular and which are being dropped based on current production needs. "Their management practices are incredible in terms of animal husbandry and how they manage their cattle in terms of mineral programs, vaccine programs and just day to day operations," Tuckwiller says.

These are all lessons Tuckwiller hopes to take back to his own farm. Agriculture isn't a leading industry for West Virginia and Tuckwiller sees great opportunity for him to advance his own genetics and management skills, setting an example for those who surround him to emulate. He's also interested in working with youth.

"I don't think I'm a leader, I'd rather be behind the scenes pushing someone in the right direction," Tuckwiller says. "I want to follow in my dad's footsteps. He was our county judging coach for 26 years and was able to help out a lot of kids, influencing them and helping them out down their career path. I think that's a great way to be an ambassador for ag."

Helping form a leader that may not want to be thrust into the national spotlight is just fine with Jake. "We want to expose kids to the opportunities that lie right here on the ranch at the grassroots level and to understand how important and how rewarding those things can be," Jake says. "I hope we can contribute to some of the leaders taking advantage of that."

Building Skills

Tuckwiller says interning on the Krebs Ranch has helped him further connect with the ag industry in a meaningful way. "A lot of my classmates are seeking a degree, but not a future employer. They're learning all these things, but they don't have the fire to get out there and talk to producers and make connections. It's just chasing a degree and a letter grade, it's not necessarily preparing for a life after school," he says.

Tuckwiller, on the other hand, collects connections like breeders collect genetics. And from those connections he also collects some valuable life lessons.

"One of the main things I've learned from judging, going to college and working at Krebs' or at home is that life is full of decisions

and being able to make and execute decisions, to call it how it is and not go back on your word, is important. So is accountability. If you say you're going to do something, do it," he says.

It's that drive that made him a good fit at Krebs Ranch and a good fit for the future of agriculture, just like Jake was when he was in college.

"I certainly wasn't born with the knowledge. I didn't come from a big ranch background and there was a lot of stuff I had to learn from the bottom up," Jake says. "What was so valuable to me was having someone who wanted to take a chance on someone who was wanting to learn, and was willing to put in the work

and the time to learn.

"Seeing a young person like Reese grow up and evolve and develop into a leader is something that is pretty sentimental to me. You pretty quickly remember the people who helped you and it certainly makes me want to pay that back. You see someone like Reese who wants to take a chance, wants to better themselves and grow their knowledge, it's hard not to want to help them. And it's not just for a summer. We want to continue to have a relationship with Reese and folks like Reese as they continue on in whatever direction they go, hopefully in the cattle business."



Eldon Krebs, Reese Tuckwiller and Jake Scott take a break from weaning calves at Krebs Ranch near Gordon, Nebraska.