

True Grit With a Grin



North Dakota Angus family is 2015 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence honoree.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It must have been the late 1990s. Richard Tokach was out back cutting hay when an unforgiving tornado honed in on his piece of ground.

“I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll make it back,’” he recalls.

An emergency weather alert called for straight-line winds, but those “winds” decapitated a school and leveled power lines in its wake.

“I took off, came up over a hill and I wasn’t going anywhere. I was trying, the [4-wheeler] motor was going, but I wasn’t,” he says.

He had a plan to seek shelter in a nearby grain bin, but the bin was gone.

“I don’t know how straight-line wind can pick up a semi trailer and throw it over a fence,” he says, but the fence was still there, and the grain bin and its cement base were not. “So, I am glad I wasn’t by the grain bin.”



Destroy a row of evergreens out back? Yes, it did. Alter Tokach’s plan for success? No chance.

For lofty goals and the grit to meet them, the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand

► **Above:** The Tokach ranch that was homesteaded on 480 acres now spreads out over 70 miles and has been home to five generations, including (from left) Ben Tokach and brothers Brad and Richard Tokach.

honored Tokach Angus Ranch with the 2015 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

Roots

Cattle roots run deep in the Tokach lineage. Richard and his brother, Brad, were born into the Angus business where their great-grandfather homesteaded near Saint Anthony, N.D., in 1898. Nine years between them, the oldest and youngest of the Tokach boys [five children in all] partner in the seedstock operation their father, Dick, set in motion.

“My dad bought our very first Angus cattle in 1955, and I was born in ’57,” Tokach

recalls. “I was a senior in high school when we had our very first sale in ’75.”

Those in-between years, the Tokaches sold private treaty 2-year-olds that were “a lot smaller than they are today.” That first sale boasted 40 head.

There certainly were better times to jump into cattle than the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Tokach earned his diploma from North Dakota State University. Banking, sales, government service — anything that lent more security, for that matter — pulled many aspiring and generational ranchers from the farm. Unfazed, Tokach graduated early, found his place in the family business and has never left. A decade later, his brother did the same.

“Dad sacrificed and put all his effort into this,” Tokach says, “but I don’t think he was the beneficiary of it. Brad and I have been the beneficiaries of his work.”

If the father was the creative force behind it all, his sons are surely the mind, heart and hands today.

With that grit, along with a dose of gentleness and precision, they grew what was a herd of 225 in 1979 to 750 by the time Richard’s son, Ben, decided he, too, would accept the responsibility of generational cowman.

What can sometimes accompany expansion didn’t happen to the Tokach cattle. As they grew, their genetics got tighter, all in an effort to offer customers proven sires to take back to their own herds.

With those herds in mind, the annual production sale serves as the center around which the rest of the business revolves. President’s Day is etched in stone here, and the



family just celebrated their 40th anniversary sale Feb. 16 by offering 160 bulls and a mix of 70 commercial and purebred heifers.

“After a successful sale, that’s a relief, you know,” Tokach says with a grin. As the brother in charge of breeding decisions while Brad tackles the farming and mechanical side, it can be a delicate dance of building cattle up to peak at sale time and bringing them back down prior to delivery.

“By late March, you’re pulling feed fast. You don’t want them too fat when you deliver them.”

Delivery time, that’s when you’ll find Tokach and his bride, Kathy, behind the

wheel of their truck. April means highway views and time to reconnect with a loyal customer base that can also span generations.

Dave Wanner, Hebron, N.D., has purchased calving ease “heifer” bulls from the Tokaches for 25 years. He’ll call Tokach a business colleague, but not before he’ll call him a friend.

“They have a good history, and they’re honest,” Wanner says. “To me, the person behind the animal is everything.”

Superior seedstock

Not to shortchange the animal, though, look at and beyond a Tokach sale book. You’ll

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see cattle that excel in traits like longevity, structural soundness, fleshing ease and quiet disposition. Cattlemen seeking all-around performance genetics find them in a Tokach lot. That little thing called calving ease, they've got it, too.

"We get some sleep at night," Wanner says. He credits Tokach genetics for the lack of calving issues in his 400 commercial pairs. "I sell replacement heifers to other ranchers and advertise with the Tokach name. I think I do really well with that."

Glenn Gerving, Glen Ullin, N.D., talks about the days when he and his brother used to calve 850 cows before they decided to disperse most of their herd. Realizing a missed opportunity, the men went to building it back from a base of mostly registered heifers they'd purchased from the Tokaches.

"We never skipped a beat," Gerving says. "Basically we had all the bloodlines in our heifers, so we didn't skip a beat. That tells you what kind of genetics they have involved in their operation. We could just about disperse our whole cow herd and bring it back from the first-calf heifers."

Then there's Connor Leier, Braddock, N.D. At 15 years old, he doesn't know if he's the youngest buyer at the Tokach sale, but he knows he'll be a returning one. Leier's dad,

Keith, gave Connor his first heifer when he was 5, but it wasn't until 2009 that he started building his herd with Tokach genes. Today he has eight purebred and six commercial cattle.

"I usually save one or two calves every year, and then I sell the rest and buy more Tokach cows," Leier says. "Their cows have stuck out to me a long time," says the young cattleman, whose granddad first started buying these genetics.

"They're good mothers, and they seem to flourish on just a grass-fed diet."

Then there's the docility factor. The youngest Leier makes sure he spends plenty of time observing the cattle before sale day — something the Tokaches make available for all their customers.

"First, I make sure I'm not going to buy some high-strung heifer, which you can barely find any of them in their herd," he says.

After close examination Leier narrows the pool down to five or 10. "I kinda just bid on them from there. If they go too high for me, I just go on to the next one."

The 2015 sale was his third as a buyer, purchasing two heifers. Plus there's his future to think of.

"It's kind of been my dream for a long time to one day have a purebred Angus bull sale," Leier shares, "so I've been purchasing Angus cattle like that so one day it will be possible for me to raise registered cattle like those."

Wanner, Gerving and Leier are just three among many who also hail from neighboring states like South Dakota, Montana, Wisconsin and Minnesota to buy guaranteed, quality cattle that are backed by proven genetics. There's even the unique sale opportunities like the 100 bulls the family recently shipped to Russia.

Practical determination

What about the bottom end, the steer cuts that a registered breeder culls prior to sale? Terry Beller, Beller Feedlot, Lindsay, Neb., will take those. A longtime feeder and CAB partner, Beller finishes cattle with an end focus on quality. After all, he wants his customers to make money, too. He's fed a load of Tokach cattle every year for five years and sees that relationship continuing long term.

"I really value the Tokaches. Like my own family, they're dedicated to the Angus breed and have a passion for always improving. I think our families are a great fit."

— Terry Beller

Stacked multi-trait selection

When Richard Tokach goes to a bull sale, he makes sure to study that catalog first and mark pedigrees of interest. Since he rarely buys an outside bull, it has to be just right.

"We are stacked in a lot of areas, so I am looking for an outcross

bull or something a little bit different for us," he says. "The second thing I'm looking for is his numbers. He has got to be a 'spread' bull (wide difference between birth and yearling weight) that has good numbers, good scrotal circumference, and I try to stack for ribeye."

Tokach never picks sires on numbers alone, though.

"I try to look at all of the genomic data, ultrasound data and scrotal data, but then you've actually got to go look at him," he says. "We buy a few bulls, one every few years, but otherwise we use mostly home-raised."

He'll look through artificial insemination (AI) books, too.

"Every year we usually have a couple new sires, but it's the same thing. They have to have genomics that are working in the industry right now, have to have some carcass and some growth. Not to mention they need to be born right and have muscle."

As the Angus breed has evolved, Tokach will be the first to say that with more tools comes the ability for one animal to house multiple genetic traits: i.e., high maternal and carcass quality.

"It used to be, in our own operation, that we



“I really value the Tokaches,” Beller says. “Like my own family, they’re dedicated to the Angus breed and have a passion for always improving. I think our families are a great fit.”

Like something that’s proven to be trustworthy over time, a Beller and Tokach deal looks more like a casual lunch than a business exchange.

“Usually we’ll meet in Denver, go to a bar, grab a beer, make a deal, shake hands and it’s done,” Tokach says. “Terry likes that they’ll grow, they’ll explode. He says they perform.”

Data back up Beller’s claim. The most recent closeout reveals 85% achieved CAB or CAB brand Prime.

Besides the fact that the cattle come to Beller healthy and with good dispositions — “we never have problems with them” — the feeder says it’s important for people coming to the bull sale to see that kind of potential in the Tokach cattle.

“These are the ones that he picked that weren’t going to be good enough for bulls, and look how they grade. He’s got a good thing going.”

That good thing definitely hasn’t been without its ups and downs, or “hills,” as Kathy would call them.

April in North Dakota can be a challenging month, both physically and emotionally. Blizzards, the kind that can rise

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► The Tokach family maintains that there are more good times than bad raising cattle and enjoy working with family every day. Pictured here are (from left) Richard, Kathy, Natalie and Ben Tokach.

weren’t able to do that,” he says. “We kind of went one way or the other. Now there’s a lot of great genetics out there that can do it all, and we’d be remiss if we didn’t continually stack those genetics on top of each other.”

Careful selection and an adaption of those genetics to a challenging environment over time leads to cattle that remain at ease in a wide range of conditions, and everybody wins.

“We can have cattle that survive a blizzard up here in North Dakota at 20° or 30° below, and the same cattle can stand 110° or 115° heat in the summer and yet produce a great, high-quality product,” Tokach says. “So the genetics are there. Our job as seedstock producers is to multiply the better genetics, the superior genetics, and pass them on to our customers and consumers.”

That’s where CAB steps in to help the beef community reach greater consistency across the board.

“It just ties everything together,” Tokach says. “When you go to the sale barn, you want feeder cattle that are consistent. People may brag about the ones in the top third, but there’s a middle and a bottom third they don’t talk about.

“If you take a load in and they all look the same, and that’s what the buyer wants, that’s money in your pocket,” he adds. That’s why Tokach spends days studying numbers and checking

bulls before committing to one. This year the family bred all heifers from one specific bull exclusively to another chosen as the best match for across-the-board, consistent improvement.

“That’s why we AI,” he says.

There’s a purpose behind every decision.

“Quality doesn’t start at the feedyard,” he says. “It starts all the way through, long before. It goes through vaccinations, too. You try to do everything the right way, which doesn’t always work when maybe the environment is working against us. But you try to stay on top of things, and try to be progressive.”

Tokach stays true to the high-quality, premium side of production for one simple reason: economics.

“There’s a lot more money there than on the commodity side,” he says. “I mean, you can cut costs to bare bone and some people do that. That is an avenue they want to get into. I am not interested in that.

“Yes, we try to keep our costs low, but we are not calving in June or July to cut feed costs. If we are in the seedstock business, that isn’t going to work.”

It can seem a small world, the cattle business, yet it’s one bursting with science and new ideas.

“To some extent, we like to be cutting edge,” the cattleman says. “We want to be right there with them.”

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up overnight, historically kill more cattle than anything else, and the Tokaches would trade much not to know this lesson firsthand.

1997 was the worst. Thousands of cattle were lost in the state that year, and many suffered entire herds lost. The Tokach family lost a third of their calf crop.

“Experiencing losses is hard,” Tokach says. “You realize that’s part of life if you lose some, but not when you lose hundreds of them.” With tears and a toughness that seems will always get him through, the rancher recalls a memory that’s all-too-present in his mind. “The cow side was hard because they were bawling for their calves, but they were all dead. We learned a lot of lessons that year.”

The storm couldn’t have been predicted. It began with rain and progressed faster and stronger than it had let on. There was nothing that could have been done differently, but it still changes a man.

“Ah, but there’s good years, too,” Tokach says. “We put up more shelters, more sheds, more drift protection.”

With the advancement of technology came opportunity for equipment and ingenuity. The brothers have been recognized for a state-of-the-art calving barn to combat the challenges of February calving, something

fellow ranchers have begun to model. The 40 × 104-foot, heated and insulated barn can house 20 pairs at a time and offers much solace for newborns to get a good start.

It’s this attitude that caused the family to move forward instead of backward after such a setback. It’s the same one that motivates Richard, Brad and Ben to not coddle their cattle, but instead push them to stand on their own without added forage and creep feed, to guarantee they’ll survive extreme temperatures, both hot and cold. It’s the same grit that helps them navigate after the death of their father last November.

“There’s certainly a lot more good times in the cattle business than the other side,” Tokach says. “Otherwise there wouldn’t be any cattle ranchers.”

He notes the old saying, “If you can’t get out of bed in the morning and enjoy your job, you need to find a different job.” Nodding, he continues, “I’ve been here a few years, and every day I enjoy getting out of bed and tearing into the new day. I’m one of the lucky ones that gets to enjoy what he does every day.”

Enjoyment may even be an understatement. The Tokach ranch that was homesteaded on 480 acres now spreads out over 70 miles and has been home to five

generations of families — six when you learn Ben and his wife, Natalie, are expecting their own child come December. The cattle that graze here have it nice, as well.

Stop by the homestead any day and you’ll be greeted by a smiling Tokach face. The family begins and ends each workday gathered around the house that Dick was raised in and now Richard and Kathy share. They grow their own feedstuffs, repair their own tractors, but they’re a family first and foremost — one that works tireless hours to provide for those they refer to as “our consumers around the world.”

“We’re producing a product that other people are going to eat, and we keep that in mind every day. Every step we take along the way has been to make sure that we produce something quality,” Tokach says. “With the tools our breed has today, we can tailor our genetics any way possible and produce the greatest product in the world, *Certified Angus Beef*.”

“I always say if you’re not growing or expanding, you’re going backward,” he adds, “so our intention is to move forward. Every year we try to make our cattle better, and we certainly have that goal. We’re going to continue to make them better all the time.”

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— Richard Tokach



Editor’s Note: *Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

