## Bieber Red Angus-The Culture Behind Retaining Good Help

## Season 1, Episode 32

[Intro music]

**Kiernan Brandt (Interviewer):** Welcome back to Cattle HQ, home of all things beef cattle. It is May 17th. We are outside Leola, South Dakota, at the world-famous Bieber Red Angus Ranch, possibly the Red Angus capital of the world…

**Craig Bieber and Jake Harms (Respondent):** Oh, I don’t know. We work hard at it.

**Interviewer:** Our guest today is Craig Bieber, owner-operator of Bieber Red Angus and we may have a guest or two pop by intermittently, but we’ll just kind of feel that as we go and do the best of what we got.

**Respondent:** Yes, sounds good.

**Interviewer:** Craig, thanks for taking the time to meet with us today. We’ve kind of been running with a common theme the last couple episodes about what it takes from human resources, from a relationship, and from managing the human entity side of operations, large and small. Oftentimes, those behind-the-scenes details define the overall success of an operation.

**Respondent:** It is. Without a doubt.

**Interviewer:**  Maybe just to get us started, talk about where the ranch started and has developed to, both from what you guys are doing, what you guys have going right now, as well as what it was like from a labor and resource standpoint when you started to what you’re currently dealing with today now.

**Respondent:** Yes. So, we’re Bieber Red Angus, we run about 900 cows. We run about 900 registered Red Angus cows. We put in 300 to 400 embryos a year. Well, my dream probably is to have a sale a month, but there are human resource limitations to that. Right now, we have a couple of flagship sales, one in March and another in November. March being yearling bulls and November being mostly females, but a few coming two-year-old bulls, or I should say 18-month-old bulls. Age-advantaged, actually, is the term that is most popular.

**Interviewer:** The industry term for it?

**Respondent:** Yes, yes. Then we have an online female sale in April. We sell 80 to 100 private treaty bulls, kind of April, May, June. This year, we’re trying a little online bull sale. We also have a small sale, about 50 to 70 head in Georgia, in October, and so I guess we’re always kind of busy doing something here when it comes to marketing cattle. When I came back, my dad was the main source of labor. Sometimes he had a one hired man. To be honest, one of the things that happened is I quickly realized that in order for us to feed two families, something was going to have to change. We were going to have to scale it or even three families if we were going to have some hired help or staff as I now call them. We proceeded on learning a lot about that, probably learned a lot from the mistakes we made. I’m not sure we understood how to listen to people about how to manage staff. So, through the years, we went all the way from being a revolving door to the place now where we’re pretty stable in a lot of our positions, although we still have some entry-level positions that are - it’s just going to be the case that people rotate and I’m a little more comfortable with that. Currently, we have five full-time guys working under my cow boss and my son-in-law. They kind of run the day-to-day operations. My wife and I and my daughter handle a lot of the marketing, customer relations, and bookkeeping. I do a tremendous amount of planning. Between my wife and I, we probably largely do most of the human resource stuff. That kind of outline what you’re talking about?

**Interviewer:** Yes. So, you’ve got specialized people in meaningful lever positions to impact the whole [Crosstalk].

**Respondent:** Yes. Craig Howard has been with us 17 years. Him and I have learned a lot about each other but he really - him and I think a lot alike and so that makes it easier when we’re thinking day-to-day, but he’s probably a lot better with the staff than I am. I tend to be a little bit more like a general and not really understand what’s going on. When it comes sometimes to morale, I have to have him stop me and tell me, “Hey, we got to do this.” We have a good relationship. A matter of fact, I think we have a tremendous team effort between him and I and my wife, Peggy, and our management team. Now, Jake, my son-in-law, recently - well, not recently, he’s been with us five, going on six years. At some point, him and my daughter, Kristin, will take over the operation and so we’re trying to work into it learning all levels, which was easier than it would be if he’d grown up here. He didn’t come from an AG operation so…

**Interviewer:** Which is significant.

**Respondent:** Well, it makes a difference. I mean, trust me, he didn’t have any bad habits. Or I shouldn’t say any, but what we considered bad habits.

**Interviewer:** He had nothing coached into him all this time.

**Respondent:** Yes, yes. So, we felt like we could work with him, mold him, and we made sure he’s been involved in lots of good programs to kind of help him understand the industry like BeefSD, and we’ve gotten involved in Learn from the Best with the Red Angus, which is a young breeders group and that sort of thing.

**Interviewer**: Yes. He’s - gosh, the three short years that I’ve known him, he’s really progressed as a cattleman. I mean, to see him start out and - I mean, that’s the whole reason that I’m here today and his relationship was even fostered in the first place. So, just another testament to the great program that is BeefSD and how those connections get established. You never know where they’re going to lead.

**Respondent:** Exactly. Jake actually has a nursing degree, which is an oddity, but he came up with Kristin and obviously I was helping him out as a young man. But he found interest in my passion and I think now it’s become his passion.

**Interviewer:** Yes, that’s awesome, and Craig, it seems like he’s surely found his niche.

**Respondent:** Yes, very knowledgeable. The three of us really do like genetics and breeding cattle, making cattle better so that our customers benefit from the work we do when it comes to making better genetics.

**Interviewer:** Yes, absolutely. Do you think that’s an important part of creating this culture at Bieber Red Angus, is attracting people that kind of share that common objective?

**Respondent:** It is. It is. Not everybody understands it. All of them want to learn more and that’s helpful. I am different from that perspective. I don’t expect him to just do things with no explanation. I try to explain to him what and why we’re doing it, which is not always the case in our industry. Just do it this way, that’s how I want it done is probably the – but the reality is if you explain the foundation behind it and the people can understand, and they can also help you make it better. At times, we had an employee who is probably not my favorite employee, but he questioned me about why we were doing all this breeding back or sorting and to be honest, he really made us think about it. In the end, because DNA was at its beginning, we just decided “Why are we spending?” We used to spend three weeks sorting 35 head breeding - I shouldn’t say it, that’s probably a bit of an exaggeration, but a couple of weeks sorting breeding pastures because you have to sort heirs and so it’s problematic. It just takes a lot of time and then driving them to locations. Because he questioned me, I started thinking about it and I started figuring out ways to make it easier. Ultimately, in the end, we went to a situation where we AI once and then turn out multiple bulls and DNA them to figure out who the parents are. I would tell you that our grass management is a lot better because of that.

**Interviewer:** That’s awesome. Yes, sometimes it just takes that random perspective, it just flips something on its head and -

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** “We’re going to DNA it anyways.”

**Respondent:** Yes. When we were already moving towards that, it made a case. It made a case that that was the smart way to probably go about it and maybe the next step, and consequently, we’ve been doing it ever since then. We don’t separate breeding pastures. We turn out five or six bulls with 125 cows that have been AI’d and we just DNA everything to figure out what the parentage is so we can keep our pedigrees and our data accurate.

**Interviewer:** Sure. So, you brought up something interesting that I just kind of want your opinion on because it was mentioned by, actually, a reference for a candidate that we interviewed several weeks back. She’s a professor in industry and just was speaking about the generational differences between people 20 years ago versus managing people now from a graduate student like a mentor-to-mentee perspective and how it’s a lot - you have to be a lot more sensitive with that general philosophy - like you can’t just hammer on people the way they used to…

**Respondent:** Yes, you can’t just tell them “This is how it’s going to be done.” [Laughter]

**Interviewer:** Right. What do you think about that? What do you think it’s going to be?

**Respondent:** Well, it took some adjusting for me because that’s how I was grown up but I also knew that I was not comfortable with that. I did not always - I was not always comfortable. Part of it is, my father was a real businessman and he challenged us to challenge what we were doing. One of his mantras was “Let’s not grow bigger, let’s grow higher.” Let’s figure out how to make more money off in the acres that we have. We were always thinking about it from - probably, I would tell you, I was thinking about it from both perspectives but we were really trying to make ourselves more efficient in what we do. There are things that we do that I hate. We have tended to phase back the use of horses because it’s so much more efficient to grab an ATV or UTV and go do five things while you’re moving gas like grab the mineral feeders, fix a little fence, check the water, that sort of thing, which would take you all day on horseback, where usually in half-a-day, you could do the very same thing, a whole bunch of things.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely.

**Respondent:** It’s just challenging to think about the resources that you have, and the human resources that you have are valuable. How do you do the most? Look, our people are passionate about breeding calf and we sure have some guys that would come here and – or I should say come and interview and would like to be on a horse all the time. The truth is our business doesn’t work if we’re on a horse too much. We’ve got to be able to work these cattle in several manners that go to a host of operations that work them anywhere from on foot to on ATVs to on horseback. It feels like we’re in a time when we got to get more done with lassos so you have less time. That’s been part of our transition through the years, I guess.

**Respondent:** There are horse trainers and there’s cattlemen and there’s those of us that are somewhere in the middle.

**Respondent:** Yes, I suppose. My dad always felt like he was more of a businessman than a cattle rancher, but we are - him and I, we’re and are, very passionate about breeding better cattle. It’s why we do what we do.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely. I think the animal breeder philosophy in mindset is a - I mean, I notice it in every aspect of my life whether it’s my dogs or my… [Laughter]

**Respondent:** Sometimes it’s what you don’t want to talk about. [Laughter]

**Interviewer:** It’s deep in your blood.

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** For sure, and just using everything that you have available to you. You and I talked about it a little bit while we were driving around, but how important is the coachability of the people that you’re bringing on to be an important team member?

**Respondent:** We found, through interviewing, and we interview a fair number of people when we have a position open, we found that we don’t settle. We find the right person who is willing for the job. Now, does he have the right skillset? Sometimes, not completely, but his willingness is probably more important than the skillset. We’ve hired guys with excellent skillsets who just couldn’t adjust to purebred livestock, how much we have to work them and all the AI and all the working cattle. We recently made a hire and to be honest, the young man doesn’t have a lot of experience in cattle or it’s very limited, probably not very positive from what he’s told us. We’ve talked to him about how that will change or he won’t be here and he says, “I’m more than willing to learn because I felt like there was a better way.” So, I think he’s - first of all, we’ve cultured him from the very beginning. “We’re going to do this differently and we’re willing to train you and teach you if you’re willing to invest the time.” He seemed very willing and so we’ll find out in six months whether I’m right, or whether we are right, because we hire as a team. I think that that mindset with today’s young people is going to be absolutely necessary moving forward in order to expand operations or even maintain sometimes, because as you get older, you can’t do as much. You need to have some people hired.

**Interviewer:** Time is seriously your most valuable resource at the end of the day and if you have employees leaving and the turnover is high, that’s just more time that you have to take to retrain and it ends up…

**Respondent:**  Retrain, interview, retrain, screen. Yes, all that stuff takes a lot of time and we’re surely more efficient when we have a stable group.

**Interviewer**: It becomes a snake eating its tail…

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:**  Over and over again.

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** So, what are some of the things that you guys do within - just to provide some perspective for those listening, obviously, with the exception of Jake who’s married in life, or at this point he’s not getting [Audio Gap] the longevity and retention is…

**Respondent:** I’d say I don’t have enough daughters…

**Interviewer:** The retention is super high and obviously has to come with an understanding and a willingness to accommodate what people are looking for out of this simple lifestyle, maybe dive into that a little bit.

**Respondent:** There’s lots of components to that but it’s almost becoming a human resource manager. One of the things that we talked about a little earlier before we started the podcast was people that want to work here want to live in the country and that’s sometimes problematic. We’ve added on enough places that we’ve rehabilitated old farmhouses and made it so we have housing for these individuals and a little place that they can kind of take care of and do things and that sort of thing. I am a big believer in education. I push my guys and usually, after about six months, I get them enrolled in some sort of added education. So, you’d recently had an interaction with a couple of them. One of them had been here just like a year-and-a-half. The other one has been only six months but we came across an AI course to kind of work for us for timing and they both wanted to try it and they’re excited about that opportunity. I don’t know if they will actually be the kind of guys that we will – a little bit like Craig Howard and Jake will let breed a lot of cows, but they’re learning a new skillset and they’re happy about that. I do include them in some of the - we have a discussion every morning about a little something. Sometimes it’s just about what’s happening for the day, but for instance, this morning, we sold some feeder cattle yesterday. Basically, some heifers that were freemartins and some bulls that didn’t make it for performance disposition and fertility, and we discussed that paycheck. We discussed what the market was doing and some of that and why I chose to do what I do. It was probably not as interesting this morning as it was two weeks ago when we sold the fat - the open cows. It takes some time doing that because in order to turn white fat, it takes a bit of time, but explaining all that to him and then explaining to him why we marketed so late because the white fat market this time of year gets pretty good. I think they found that interesting. Now, sometimes, I feel like I don’t get much response, but in the end, I think they value it that I include them in some of the things that I’m thinking about.

**Interviewer:** Right. Whether they’re listening or not, it at least gives them the opportunity to stick it into some part of their brain where they come in useful later on.

**Respondent:** Yes, the truth is what you hear when you’re in your 20’s and early 30’s is less - you’re not always paying attention like you are when you’re later 30’s, 40’s, 50’s. I do think some of these guys don’t have a large ag background. One of them comes from a small farm and the other comes from a little larger ranching area. This young man, actually, that’s coming to us here most recently, he’s grown up in town but worked on kind of small farms all his life, or since high school, which has not been long. Just keeping them interested by keeping them informed is something ideal and then trying to make sure they have opportunities for education that fit them.

**Interviewer:** That’s super awesome. Yes, I remember talking with Jackson, right?

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** He had very minimal experience and was just so - he was wide-eyed and just trying to be that sponge and just soaking everything you were saying and remember. Because, I don’t know, going into an AI class, you have to just tell those kids up front. Like, “Their semester-long class is taught just on this, so don’t worry, relax a little.”

**Respondent:** Yes. One of the things here is we give them some experience.

**Interviewer:** Yes, sure.

**Respondent:** I mean, we do feel that they deserve the opportunity if we’re going to put them through that to do. That’s sometimes hard because our guys have AI’d a lot of cows and so you could stick to just the same guys. But at some point, somebody’s going to have a broken arm or be laid up or sick, and so if you can have somebody step up and fill in and do an okay job, it’s a lot better position than…

**Interviewer:** Yes, or the one that you want bred on time before you go on vacation the next week is standing, but there’s no one around a breeder besides so and so…

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:**  Do they have the coherency to go get that cow settled? It really does become systemic, like from the cattle handling aspect all the way down to the shoot side. Just really seeing people grab those components and all of that, it makes him a better breeder. It makes him a better team member. It helps the whole unit in motion.

**Respondent:** Yes, and then there’s lots of things. We were talking about breeding cattle and AI but we need people that are passionate, and this is probably not our best passion, but passionate about maintenance on equipment or at least interest in getting it done so we don’t have as many breakdowns as we might have. Yes, we talked about an AI course but getting them involved in a maintenance course from New Holland or one of those is also on my mind, and watching for those opportunities is important.

**Interviewer:**  Thinking outside of the box. I was going to toss in there just since you brought it up, the bull cow white fat market, would you like a reference? Currently, it’s not out yet, but it will be out probably about by the time this episode goes live. SDSU Extension will have a cost economic analysis calculator for a cull cow enterprise.

**Respondent:** That would be interesting.

**Interviewer:** Yes. I’ll send you a copy and be sure to check.

**Respondent:** No matter what - I mean, I will guarantee you that I’d benefit from length of ownership just by market appreciation even if I don’t make them white. The truth of the matter is, this time of year, and we’re talking in April-May, is when we’re visiting, there’s a big surge in the market generally and those cows are going to provide hamburger for that summer grilling market and trim. There’s definitely something to be said for doing that whether you make them white fat or not.

**Interviewer:** Yes, absolutely. Just being aware of that, those overall market conditions and fluctuations and supply and demand.

**Respondent:** We push so hard at production and it seems the most productive to get your open cows that long and down the road. But the reality is, if they’re thin, you’re taking a beating. Okay? If you just leave them - even if you were in a range environment, unless you were sure to feed, but if you had some extra feed, you kept them with your cow herd and just made sure they gain weight during the winter, which you do on most of your gestating cows. You’re probably benefiting from some market appreciation.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely. You guys are right in the middle of breeding…

**Respondent:** Yes, about done breeding.

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Respondent:** We’re done. Heifers, we’re on second cycle. We’ve already done second cycle. We’ve time-bred our two-year-olds that are actually out the grass. The way we end up doing it is we time-breed everything and we go to grass when we breed. It’s maybe not perfect, but it’s the situation we’re in because of when we think we need to calve and how our workflow goes and that’s sort of thing. Then this week is kind of the final week of breeding what we call spring calving cows. A lot of people call it late winter, our January, February, and early March cows.

**Interviewer:** Then you got to still have some that are string out [Crosstalk].

**Respondent:** Yes, then we have a second calving group that starts not until the end of April calves, mostly in May, early June. They’re synchronized in late July, early August. We actually market those bulls as age-advantaged bulls in October, November, and then we have a few private treaty bulls coming into the spring from that. Some people want some age-advantaged. Different people want different things and if you’re going to sell more bulls, in my opinion, you’re going to have to bury what you can market when.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely. I think we touched on it earlier. So, what I want to ask is, if you get what you want and get a sale every month, will you quit?

**Respondent:** [Laughter] I’d probably have a divorce coming with my wife.

**Interviewer:** Not just calve year-round?

**Respondent:** No, no. I’m not - no, we can’t do that from a workflow perspective. No, I wouldn’t envision that we would calve much differently. There could be a deal where we’d add a fall calving component and maybe calve, but I’m not sure how you sustain that with a crew. Really, one of the things that I’ve always taught is, you need to have enough to make it work. When we started - so, it’s funny how we started, we started with fall calvers, found out it wasn’t working because the feed resources were - maybe we were feeding them all during their lactations, which from cost perspective - well, from a cost perspective in the very bad winters, was a huge loss. I would think it would be even a little bit tough even in an average to blow our above-average quality winter. Funny thing, we turned out bulls while they were calving. We moved 70% of those cows up to a May-June timeframe. We didn’t cull them over. We moved them up. This was a little challenging than what I thought, but Roy Wallace was a mentor of mine at the time. He said, “Craig, just turn out a bull while they’re calving and you’ll be surprised.” And we were. We were surprised. We sold the fall calvers that year and then moved into May-June. When we moved into May-June, that just made more sense. We were calving out on grass. Ultimately, that was a good fit for us. Those calves come in a lot lighter. They take a lot more time to get to – we’d wean them usually in mid-October. We’re weaning our what we call our spring calvers, or January, February, March, we’re weaning them in usually late August, early September, and then those summers will come off kind of in the middle of October. I guess we feel like we got a lot more time. I don’t know, people ask me all the time, what system is better? Well, it’s kind of what fits you and your personnel. I don’t know from an economic standpoint that we do that much better. We have more live calves, but we also sell our yearlings higher, so I think in the end - and we don’t have as much time investing from a feed and yard-age perspective because we do have a lot of time and money invested in those age-advantaged bulls that are 18 months when we sell them, because we have them for a longer period of time and there’s going to be a charge for either the feed and yard-age or the pasture or whatever. Trust me, from a pasture perspective, having 140 young bulls out on pasture, it’s a lot more man hours just keeping them in.

**Interviewer:** Oh, I believe it. That’s something that I think I sure wouldn’t hate to see the industry start to transition to seeing more of those age-advantaged two-year-old bulls. As someone who is trying to see producers by bulls, sometimes it’s a sight unseen and have success, that just makes me feel so - I’m glad they’ve had an extra year to develop and grow up. They should be able to service more cows. You should feel more comfortable paying a little bit more [Crosstalk].

**Respondent:** I do think, herein, it’s a wash because I think in the yearling bulls, you expose more cows for one more year. I have customers on both sides of the fence and I will tell you, what works in their operation is different. I have customers who will only buy yearlings because they think they get one more year. Now, I think maybe when they really figure it out, they lose more and so maybe there is an advantage to the age-advantaged bulls. Ultimately, it’s a personality thing, what fits you best is really what it comes down to.

**Interviewer:** The gentleman who taught me how to breed cows, he’s a veterinarian. That was his whole deal, was he’d buy 30 yearling Charolais bulls and just toss them out and it worked for him and it was a very low input system. He was selling red heifers and sending them down the road and…

**Respondent:** Yes. Ultimately, every operation’s going to be different. How they manage that and how they manage that with people is a different scenario and a different way to how you’re going to approach things.

**Interviewer:** Quite a balancing act, maybe touch a little bit on balancing that dynamic of, yes, we could probably pedal to the metal, push the gas and sell more bulls, but also, we’ll end up frying people.

**Respondent:** Yes. I mean, look, we have some young men, we have some young men with young families and the old – so, here at Bieber Red Angus, we work a bit more corporate hours. We found that that’s necessary, that their wives want to know when they’re going to be home. I mean the old adage, “we work ‘til dark,” and we get guys who apply and say, “I’ll work as long,” or I even had one guy tell me, “I’ll work you under the table,” but the problem is we got to be here 365 days a year and we’re not – this is not a construction deal where we can get summers or winters off or what have you. It's every day, day in and day out, so we work – I mean my guys know, depending on the time of the year, what time they’re coming to work and what time they’re going home for the most part. I won’t tell you it’s to that minute every day, and there are days when they end up going later and we try to make sure that they get comped for that, but the reality is we’ve tried some things where it was pedal to the metal, and you burn the crew out and in time, you’re either replacing them or everybody’s shot, and so you got to think about that from a staff morale and just an overall mental health and wellbeing perspective so that you make sure you can keep them fully engaged. I mean, to be honest, this winter was a classic one. It was even tough for me to stay engaged and energetic. I mean it was an everyday, week after week, blizzard and challenges, and equipment repair costs. So, figuring out how that works for your operation, as a young man I probably thought there was one way to do it, but as I have matured, everybody’s got to figure out their system, and hopefully, it works for them. Some guys are only going to be owner-operators and probably have no staff, and I get that. I mean actually, there’re times when I’m probably jealous, but for us at the time, the direction I was led is if we’re going to adequately fund multiple families, we’re going to have to do something different, and that’s kind of where that journey’s taken us.

**Interviewer:** Well, you’re a grandpa now. If you ever want to actually spend time with your grandkids…

**Respondent:** Well, yes, I’m lucky because they come to the office, or some of them come to the office every day and so my wife and I get lots of opportunities, and Peggy, if she claims she can’t get much work done, we’re there, but if you hear her laugh, it’s infectious when the grandchildren are out there coloring beside her and working. We’ve had Hartley up here. She’s got her desk behind my desk and she has all of her stuff and she gets on the phone and she’s trying to sell bulls and make a mess for Craig Howard and her daddy and all kinds of things. [Laughter] So, I mean I sometimes wonder if these kids aren’t getting a work ethic built in at age two, but…

**Interviewer:** The next generation’s already in school.

**Respondent:** It’s good to have them around, and it does give me a lot more energy when they come.

**Interviewer:** So, something that I know can vary hugely just in how it’s done and whether it’s allowed to be done at all that I know you’re an advocate of is employees having an independent – with cows of their own.

**Respondent:** Yes. Well, they run cows here, in most situations. They get to run so many cows. After a year, they get an opportunity to run cows. It’s a limited number based on years of service, but – and then we don’t charge them anything for that. It’s kind of how we scale salaries, add to salaries. They get to sell those individuals or the progenies through those sales, and then we do take a 25% kind of fee for anything we sell through our operation, but some of that’s to cover sale expense and a little bit of the feed. It doesn’t cover all of it, but we do keep that figure. So, what I would tell you is that it gives them skin in the game. Through my years, I’ve heard lots of pros and cons to why you should or shouldn’t. I think if the culture sucks, they understand that all the cattle got to perform for their cattle to even sell better. They get that. My crew, for the most part, is not really paying attention to who owns what. They’re paying attention to the overall herd health and that sort of thing.

**Interviewer:** It’s just a neat feeling to be able to say, especially maybe if you’re having one of those general-esque moments of rage and yelling, it’s like, “Well, at least they’re my cows and I’m part of the – we’re fired up on [Crosstalk].”

**Respondent:** Yes, and we had a nine-year employee leave. He’s cashing in his cows and taking that money on with him. Now, he had the option to even take those cows with him where he was going. He went into the banking industry and he didn’t really…

**Interviewer:** Didn’t have a use for them.

**Respondent:** Well, didn’t really want to – I mean one of his deals was he wanted to have some weekends off, or I should say a full weekend, Saturday-Sunday, because we do work a 12-2. So, they’re off two and on 12. We don’t do a lot on Sundays during the summer, but there are a few chores that have to happen, but he cashed out those cows under – we have kind of a system set up for what happens when you leave and I kind of go through that with him in his exit interview, and it’s all been very cordial. Not that it’s going to be that way all the time, but we’ve had other people exit, and look, I’m a man of my word. At that point, we do charge them running costs and that sort of thing, but they can move out with some money they have invested which we feel they deserve.

**Interviewer:** Right, that’s awesome. You guys have a sale coming up two weeks from today, right?

**Respondent:** Two weeks from today, we’re going to have our first online bull sale. We’ve had turnout sales in the past. We’ve always had kind of 80 to 100 private treaty bulls to sell through the summer, but this year we’re going to go to an online format on a good share of those, and so we’ll have videos up and that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, today they were out there working on videos when you came and we’re getting all that stuff. I mean that’s something we could quickly talk about. So, we’re very more scheduled than the typical operation. We actually keep a Google Calendar. All my guys have access to it. They can’t change it, but they can see what’s going on, and between Peggy and I and Christian, we put in all the events. If they want time off, we get that blocked out for them. So, they know at the beginning of the week or Sunday night, whatever, they can look at what’s going on in the week and they can kind of see in general what’s happening.

**Interviewer:** Yes, what needs to be done.

**Respondent:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** From what it sounds like, you spend most of your time handling the phone calls and all the people things.

**Respondent:** Yes, a lot of feed stock sales and HR kind of stuff, and then just scheduling and ordering and deciding what the best strategy is for us. So, yes, I do spend more than I ever envisioned. I mean a lot of guys would not be comfortable doing what I do all the time, but it’s kind of what it’s gone into, and at some stage in my life, it’s probably all right. There’re times when I’m really – my wife will tell you I really get frustrated and tell her, “I got to get out of here, I’m going out to get in the payloader and scrape pavements” or something like that, but for the most part – and I do help them feed on weekends over the winter. A lot of times I’ll take Sundays. It depends on our staff, but a lot of times when we’re a little short, I would work every Sunday so that the off crew could all be off and then I would take Saturdays. My wife is so great about that because we made that work. We got to see the grandchildren that don’t live on the ranch that day. We always went and did something with them, and so I’m very blessed with a very understanding wife and a wife who understands that what we do is important to me.

**Interviewer:** That’s great. You guys did a couple of those online sales this year on the female side, didn’t you?

**Respondent:** We did. So, this online female sale on the third week of April was actually our fourth online female sale, and so we have ventured into the online sales. We have broadcast our sales since the very beginning on DVAuction, but we just think it’s – COVID changed all that. As a matter of fact, I wish I had bought DVAuction before COVID, but COVID changed that people are more engaged in online auctions, more…

**Interviewer:** It definitely [Crosstalk], for sure.

**Respondent:** Yes, and they’re more orientated to look at the videos and the data. Part of what I did was we did go to – in 2010, we ran video and ran the bulls to the ring, and in ’11, we went to just video. My dad didn’t give me any other chores. Some things happened at the sale that made it apparent that they were watching the video, because we had that bull come in the ring and a different bull was on video and a lot of buyers looked up and said, “That’s not the right bull.” [Laughter] So, we knew they were watching it, so we went and tore the posts out, the cement posts that we had for the ring out, and we went to a format where we broadcast online and we don’t run the bulls through the ring. So, that’s been kind of interesting, that transition.

**Interviewer:** I think that’s good. That’s a good segue into somewhere that I wanted to get to anyways. We do have Jake in here now.

**Respondent:** Yes, Jake just joined us. Jake is my son-in-law, as I talked about earlier, and so we’re going to get his perspective on some of the things that I’m doing wrong or right.

**Interviewer:** Having this well-oiled machine that’s just running and letting you take care of the behind-the-scenes stuff and keep it chugging along, what are some of those things that are going to – every different catalog page has a different thing that’s going to drive this dollar this year and going to be the most important thing up and coming. What are some of those things that just, time and time again, have been important for the last decade or generation of cattle production and will continue to be important?

**Respondent:** You mean like traits in the catalog?

**Interviewer:** Traits in the cattle, members of the team, robotics and machinery, and automation in the industry. Any of you want to go first?

**Respondent:** Well, so I think the simple thing we do is we set up the schedule well in advance of the sale. That way, everybody kind of knows, “Okay, so by this date, we got to have the bulls picked out, and by this date, they got to be lotted,” or the first date is we got to have all the data. The second date is probably we got to pick out which bulls are going to be in the sale. We schedule this. Kristin sits down and we basically back into it from when we think we need to build catalogs, and sometimes I push her a little hard on that, but I think one of the things is you think about it from a work perspective, if you know it’s coming, it’s a lot easier to get everybody onboard what needs to happen when. So, yes, between Kirsten and I, we do a lot of scheduling based on how quickly it can be printed and then we just back in the dates. When the bulls got to be clipped? When do they got to be videoed by? When do they got to be semen-tested? Cows got to be preg-tested before the sale. Just all that stuff gets more scheduled, and I don’t know, you can comment on this, Jake, but we also try to put that in the calendar, so consequently, all the staff kind of knows that that’s going to happen.

**Respondent:** I think to sum it up in one word, it’s consistency. I mean each year’s different, but it’s also the same. So, we don’t need to do it leading out to the sale and it’s just getting that laid out far ahead of time so we know what’s going on, but each year it’s consistently the same, and I think that helps the whole crew just work better because we know we need time off, we kind of know what’s coming up, so we need to really talk about when we can or can’t be gone or just what’s going to happen. So, I think for me, that’s really what’s helped.

**Interviewer:** Right before you walked in, we were talking a little bit about just making sure that that communication is there and how you guys share a calendar to make sure that everybody can see what’s going on. I think me and some coworkers like to make the joke a lot of times, especially when we get into the estate transition planning and stuff like that, that everybody typically things of that stuff telepathically. They just assume what everybody else is thinking and…

**Respondent:** So, we’re going through some of that right now. Of course, the original generation of Bieber Red Angus, my dad has passed away, but my mom’s still alive, and so obviously, she holds some of the land, but then Peggy and I are actually working on – and I hope I know that frustration. It’s probably not moving as fast as Jake would like to, because I know what I was like as a young man, but the reality is that we’re trying, and it’s a slow process, and I’m trying to keep him informed, but I’ll let him talk.

**Respondent:** Yes, I mean, I think it’s been – again, you always [Audio Gap] what’s going to happen from the first stage of the game. You have your idea of what the big goal is, but the nitty-gritty, you don’t really have to fine-tune things, and then that can be daunting, all frustrating, all scary at the same time, but I think now we’re kind of moving in a space and I think Craig and Peggy have been communicating with us all. “Hey, we don’t have all the answers yet, but we’re trying to figure it out,” and I think for us, that’s just good to know that it is being talked about. It’s not just being set aside like, “Hey, we’ll talk about it later, we’ll talk about that later.” No, we are having conversations, and for me, that brings a lot of [Audio Gap].

**Respondent:** Part of it was we set something up when you came back here at a certain point if you decided you were going to stay. We said we’d start moving through this, and I forget the exact timeframe.

**Respondent:** Two years.

**Respondent:** Two years, and we’d start working on that process. It probably took us another year to get going on it, and then it took us all of that to find what we thought was the right people to help us with that. I think we went down some paths where we weren’t sure the people that were helping us understood what we wanted, and then it took us a while to get what we think are the right people, and I’m not convinced. This summer, we’re hoping to move in further down the road and what that’s looking like and how we incorporate Jake and Kristin into that, and Peggy and I want to [slow up] some. So, it’s all that.

**Interviewer:** That’s awesome. What I want to know is what bulls Bieber Red Angus is breeding through the spring.

**Respondent:** So, one of the things that we do here is we try to limit the number of sires. So, on 900 cows and the embryos, it’ll be pretty much down to six to eight sires from an AI perspective. Now, there are some cleanup bulls, but I’m a big believer that increases generational consistency because you have your females out of less sires. So, we really do try to tighten it down. That’s not always easy. We’re still using Stockmarket and Energize; those bulls have done us a great job. We always try to find an outside sire every year. We want to be well-referenced to the database, and we’re using some young sires. I guess the young sire particularly that I can think of we’re using is Checkmate who is the…

**Interviewer:** From Select?

**Respondent:** Yes, the Paycheck son that Select Sires bought. There was another one, but he hasn’t [froze] semen as of yet, or I think he’s close or I haven’t heard that he’s froze semen, the Paycheck K102 bull that Alta bought, but…

**Interviewer:** Was that the one that his grandpa was black, [can you remember him]?

**Respondent:** No.

**Interviewer:** I couldn’t remember. There was one that sold this spring that had a black bull in his pedigree and I remember seeing that – was it at Pieper’s?

**Respondent:** Oh, yes, so Confidence Plus.

**Interviewer:** Yes. I’m new enough to the seed stock deal that I didn’t know that…

**Respondent:** There’s always breeders who take the opportunity to use black genetics, and Tate Bieber found that – once he found a black/red carrier that was a Confidence Plus - that was a pretty good bull – bred him into a limited number of cows and then he died, and they produced $400,000.00 red bulls, and they had some black ones that probably didn’t bring as much. Well, they sold one $20,000.00 black one, but most of the black/red carriers bring a discount to what the reds would [Unintelligible].

**Interviewer:** Just due to the lack of consistency?

**Respondent:** Yes. Well, and lack of interest. Guys who want black ones don’t necessarily want red ones unless they’re running a mixed herd. The guys with mixed herds, generally they’re looking for value from that situation, so they’re not probably paying top prices, but – you’re going to get a kick out of this. So, we did buy a brother to that bull, and three weeks later, he did something in the pen and died, dropped over dead. So, we aren’t going to be seeing any calves out of him.

**Respondent:** But he looks great.

**Respondent:** He looked great and we were really…

**Respondent:** He and I were really excited about him.

**Respondent:** Yes, and we don’t generally insure bulls under $50,000.00. I just think self-insurance, you know what I mean? The reality is you probably take it over a period of time. I think you can self-insure and be just as well off because the cost is the same or going to be about the same, unless you’re a high-loss outfit, but that’s part of the business.

**Interviewer:** Yes. Well, I don’t want to take too much of your time. I know you’ve done some work in the past with US Export Board and some stuff like that.

**Respondent:** Yes, I was on the USMEF, Meat Federation. I’ve been on the South Dakota Beef Industry Council, I’ve been president of the Beef Improvement Federation, I’ve been on their board for five or six years, been on the Red Angus Board twice. I’m actually doing my second stint. I did one back while I was president in 1999-2000 and I did five years on the board before that. So, I’ve been involved in the industry. I’m also on the South Dakota Cattlemen’s Board as vice-president of membership. I mean part of it is I’m passionate about the business. I believe we need to be involved to protect our industry. I also think we need to be informed and you can’t necessarily be well-informed sitting at home.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely, and sometimes you have to advocate for yourself.

**Respondent:** Yes. Now, I do think there are good people who advocate for us and sometimes it requires funding them, but yes, I do think you do at some point need to be responsible for getting out there and doing a little bit of a – it’s something I’ve hopefully cultured my kids to do. I don’t know that maybe we’ve done the best job on staff, but that depends on interest level. Some people don’t like politics. I maintain that you play politics every night with your dog by trying to get them to go in the kennel or not bark or whatever, so I think you’re involved in politics in every part of your life. It’s just a different level.

**Interviewer:** Oh, that’s funny. Now, the reason I bring it up, I saw something the other day online, and given current market situations, 2014-esque high, high prices, [Unintelligible] board looks good, pounds matter, you need to maximize the pounds that you’re taking and getting paid for, and I’d just love to hear your thoughts on capitalizing and setting yourself up to capitalize on a good opportunity without single trait selecting and maybe compromising some other things like fertility and potentially some other long-term longevity characteristics just to make a quick buck.

**Respondent:** I mean look, we’re in it for the long haul and so that’s on the top of our mind all the time, is producing cattle that work in a commercially-orientated environment. So, I mean look, we joke around here sometimes, what do they like better than a fat one? It’s a fatter one, but I mean I want these cattle to go out and be successful for people, and I really think that we got to have stacked generations of good genetics that will grow on forage and then go to feedlot and can consume harvested feeds efficiently and quickly in order to get – look, the basis of some of what I think is that consumers, especially through COVID, found that they like beef, and they like high quality beef. As a matter of fact, export numbers would show you right now that we’re actually not exporting as much as we were because we’re consuming it here in the US, and I think part of that is through COVID, people learned how to cook steaks, grill, and I think that’s made a difference in the marketplace. Now, I get a little cautious because we could get ourselves into a situation where the lack of supply hurts consumer demand. Maybe not, but I’m cautious that if meet gets too high, we could have challenges from pork and chicken. So, I don’t know that I got to your questions. I probably need a much more macro answer, but…

**Respondent:** I think in between that, I mean we want cattle to perform in the feedlot just as well as those females are going to produce those calves to go there as well. I think - yes, I mean, we’re big on performance in carcass traits, but I think we’d gotten our female herd to a point where they’re pretty consistently raising good calves. I mean we’ll find the outliers, but the biggest thing is just making sure they’re doing their job and most of them go and have those [daughters] all do the same for them.

**Interviewer:** I think that’s just such a cool – and I want to make sure to emphasize that here, but being extremely picky on those six, eight, small number of sires, I’m assuming besides the novel ones that you likely purchased or raised yourself that are just young by themselves, the rest are probably pretty high-accuracy sires and just how much of a difference that makes in creating that pasture full of cookie-cutter females in contemporary groupings.

**Respondent:** It does. I mean, it really improves overall quality and it does it quickly and we can make progress quickly, in my opinion. Your thoughts, Jake?

**Respondent:** Yes, and I think you can kind of figure out what you like and don’t like about a sire pretty quick too. You have a good grouping and you can figure out which ones really performed, which ones you’re going to use next year, and which ones that we’re just like, “Hey, we’re not going to go forward with it.” I think it gives us a good idea for that.

**Interviewer:** Awesome. So, you guys got a sale two weeks from now, going back to Georgia this year, and then what else in the fall?

**Respondent:** Yes, so the female sale in November and then…

**Respondent:** We’ll probably have one in between that.

**Interviewer:** Yes, maybe an embryo sale scattered in there somewhere.

**Respondent:** Well, you never know. We’ve had occasionally – or an online semen sale.

**Interviewer:** Yes, you haven’t cleaned the takeout [Crosstalk].

**Respondent:** Christmas is a good time to do that because people are sitting around thinking, “Hey, I’m just going to get this for myself for Christmas,” some of the older, rare semen stock. Who knows. We’ve done that. I mean also, we’ll balance that. Back to our original subject, you can’t push the crew too hard to do everything that I envision, so you need to be careful about what you can handle and what’s the most profitable.

**Interviewer:** You got to give Jake some time off.

**Respondent:** Yes. [Laughter]

**Respondent:** They enjoy being out here too. That happens a lot.

**Interviewer:** How do you see it from – maybe try to remove the son-in-law side, but just as the employee side, coming into an operation and being able to communicate what you need in terms of maintaining your life outside of the ranch and just being able to communicate your overall success.

**Respondent:** Yes. I mean, like anywhere, it gets easier as you kind of have a little bit more seniority and you have a little more say in things and understand how things work. Like January through March, Kristin and I both know it’s kind of a time where we aren’t going to go anywhere and we’re just going to be working late and that’s just how it is. Summer is opening up. We already have some things planned and I think as long as you communicate ahead of time that, “Hey, I’d like to have this time off,” it’s not just a last-minute thing, then we can schedule around it, and I feel like the staff around here, with interns and more help in the summertime, it allows us to take a little more time away as well, but yes, I mean – I don’t know, I don’t like to say work-life balance. I kind of call it a harmony because in the end, family’s always going to outweigh the work, but it’s trying to just play those two together. I think right now, young kids and everything, it’s going to be hard, but this summer’s going to ease up and it’s going to be better. It’s the way of ranching, I guess. You love what you do every day, there’re going to be harder days and that’s okay.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely. What do you see is the key to keeping good people that want to stay and live this lifestyle enticed to live it for the next – after you’ve inherited the reins?

**Respondent:** So, from my experience, I guess the biggest thing is making sure those people who come here want to actually learn. I think that’s the first step. Howie and I have [Unintelligible]. We are willing to teach, and I’ve learned a lot from Howie and Craig, and that’s because I wanted to learn. I was asking questions, and yes, there’re some hard talks that need to be had, and that’s okay. That’s how you learn. As long as you’re willing to take those as not a failure, but a learning experience, I think that’s what’s important. Yes, I mean as long as, as a culture here, we’re willing to say, “Hey, you made a mistake; that’s okay, we’re just going to build off it and move ahead,” I think that’s been the biggest thing that I learned from Howie and Craig. I’ve made some big mistakes here and costly ones as well, but they just said, “Hey, it sucked, but let’s move on.”

**Interviewer:** Short-term memory.

**Respondent:** Well, I’ve always maintained you learn way more from your mistakes than you do your success. You remember how devastating they were to financial morale, all that sort of thing. So, I mean just wading through them or getting through them and explaining how you do it differently the next time is important.

**Interviewer:** Sometimes that’s that coachable moment. You almost don’t even need to say anything, you can just let them there. You know how much it sucks, but you discuss it in a calmer manner later.

**Respondent:** Yes, that’s where it starts, if you’re willing to learn and recognize that you did make a mistake. I think sometimes [Unintelligible] on everyone that hasn’t recognized that they did make a mistake.

**Respondent**: True.

**Respondent:** So, going forward though, again, those people who want to do this, I think – I mean I loved being out here. I mean I’ve never regretted my decision to get out of corporate America and into this lifestyle. You got to want it.

**Interviewer:** Cat’s out of the bag, he already sold you out on your degree.

**Respondent:** Oh, yes. I’m great at getting [Unintelligible].

**Interviewer:** Who would’ve thought.

**Respondent**: I know. I never saw that one coming. My parents never did either and here we are.

**Interviewer:** Yes, whatever. Medical training came in handy one way or the other, whether it’s on a calf or on yourself when you nick something.

**Respondent:** Yes, exactly. Duct tape’s an amazing thing. [Laughter]

**Interviewer:** You guys got anything else? Any shoutouts you want to give?

**Respondent:** Oh, I’d like to thank my wife. Peggy has been amazing through this journey of helping me build this and that sort of thing. I mean Peggy Bieber is an incredible woman and I think she deserves a lot more credit than she gets.

**Respondent:** I mean first, I love Craig and Peggy for raising Kristin and then bringing us back here, but Kristin is – she’s the rock at home. I mean we’re working a lot of hours and she just takes care of the kids and doesn’t complain, has everything done at home, and I can’t do without [Crosstalk].

**Respondent:** Well, when we talk about Craig Howard’s wife, Linley actually was an intern here, but Craig and Linley have been incredible to us and I mean we make an incredibly powerful team, him and I, but he couldn’t do it without the support he gets from his wife as well. I guess that’s coming right off of Mother’s Day, a week after Mother’s Day. Honestly, we couldn’t do it without their support.

**Interviewer:** No better time, and all the folks that keep buying the things that keep things running.

**Respondent:** And all the guys here. I mean…

**Respondent:** Yes. Through the years, some of them aren’t with us anymore, but we’ve had incredible staff and I’ve been honored to know almost of them. Occasionally, there’s been some things that didn’t work out, or personalities didn’t fit like we thought, or situations changed, what have you, but we’ve had a lot of good people work for us through the years.

**Interviewer:** Well, that’s awesome. It’s always a pleasure to come up and get to drive around and see you guys. Hopefully, I’ll be back a little sooner than the last hiatus, but…

**Respondent:** We got branding in July for you.

**Interviewer:** Deal, sounds good. This has been another episode of Cattle HQ by SDSU Extension. Make sure to check the show notes and tune in next time.

[Outro music]