## Behind the Herd with Totton Angus (Part 1): Charlie Totton and Courtney Tyrrell

## Season 1, Episode 55

[Intro music]

**Kiernan Brandt:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, a podcast from industry experts and progressive producers discussing cutting edge info about the cow calf sector to keep cattlemen and women in the know and positively affect their bottom line.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, brought to you by South Dakota State University Extension. I am Madison Kovarna, a beef nutrition field specialist based out of Watertown, and joining me on this episode are Charlie and Courtney from Totton Angus near Chamberlain, South Dakota. A change of scenery for me to come further south, but never a bad thing to get out of the office and talk with folks about cattle and their cattle management. I spent the morning with Charlie and Courtney touring their operation and chatting up a storm in the pickup, but instead of me introducing you, I wanted to give you both some time to introduce yourself to our audience and for those who maybe have never heard from you before or some new listeners that might be on.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Okay. Well, I am Courtney Tyrrell and [[live on]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=65&duration=20) this operation with Charlie and Tanya, my mom and dad. My husband Jonathan has an off-the-farm job, and then I’m also in the National Gurrd mostly for the health insurance. We are here out in Totton Angus Ranch located north of Chamberlain, South Dakota in the Rough River Hills. We are a registered black angus seedstock ranch. We have a bull sale the first Saturday of May with approximately 80 yearling and two-year-old bulls offered. [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=91&duration=20) about 400 head of cows and rent a couple thousand acres of land. We [[cull]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=99&duration=20) hard and make the cows work hard for us, and that’s why we have stuck with moderate frame and easy-fleshing cattle. We also think that education and continuing to learn is very important, so each year for the last several years, we’ve been hosting The Grazing School and we also try to attend as many learning opportunities as possible. We might be hosting a bird tour later this year and we think it’s important to continue to share with others, and we’re also hoping to experiment with some more things like fire to control cedars and improve the land.

**Madison Kovarna:**

So, I’m sure our listeners can see why I was excited to get out of the office and come down here. There’s a lot of moving parts on the ranch down here between the cows, nature, all of the things going on, so I was excited to come down and then also get them to join me on the podcast as well, but one of the things that we’ll start this conversation with is one of the things that they’ve implemented on the place is swath grazing. They’ve fit it into their grazing and cattle management plans, but one question I had for you is what brought up the idea of swath grazing to bring it in and then how do you even get started into adding that into an operation somewhere?

**Charlie Totton:**

I’m Charlie. I’m the one that started the swath grazing, but you got to understand, I got started ranching in the early ’80s when everybody was kind of going broke. So, the low-input type systems weren’t by choice at first, but after a while it’s just kind of become habit, but we feel with the swath grazing we burn a lot less diesel fuel, we save a lot of labor, and the cows do plum good on it, and then we’re recycling nutrients back into our soil also.

**Madison Kovarna:**

So, with the swath grazing, are there any sort of crops or plants that you like to focus on when you plant for swath grazing, or does it kind of change year-to-year? Or have you found one that makes you really happy and that you stuck with?

**Charlie Totton:**

Recently, we plant cane which is a forage sorghum [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=239&duration=20) what you’re going to call it, but we found a male sterile hybrid this year and it appears like the cow eat it better, but one of the tricks is to plant it a little bit thick and a little bit on the late side so it doesn’t get as big and ripe if you’re going to swath raze it.

**Madison Kovarna:**

So, when the cows go out - I mean you’ve been doing this for several years, but have you found that when you were first doing this, that the cows maybe struggled to take to a swath grazing plan or do you think that they kind of jumped right in and figured it out right away? Or did you see anything on the cow side of the equation to adding this in that maybe some people might see?

**Charlie Totton:**

The cows actually took to it pretty easy, but what we’ve found is after about a month, they get bored with eating the monoculture, and so it would be better if we’ve done more of like your mixes for your – I’m struggling with the word for your…

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Cover crops?

**Charlie Totton:**

Cover crop. We like to figure out a mix, more like a cover crop, and maybe get more variety for cows and be better for the soil yet, but we’re getting awful good tonnage off of pure cane so that’s kind of hard to give it up too**.**

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

A lot of people think that when we do this primarily in the month of February, that snow might be an issue, and really, it’s just a personal issue because it’s cold when you’re putting up and taking down fence, but the cows have no issue with it and they’ll dig through several inches or more…

**Charlie Totton:**

Several feet.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

…of snow. They know that it’s there and they will get it**.**

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think that’s the big thing. You kind of mentioned it in your introduction, but having the cows for us rather than the other way around. They were put here to be able to go out and graze and do the work, so kind of giving them those tools to be able to do that I think is a really important thing moving forward with any management decision, is kind of realizing that they too can go out and work for the feed, not us just kind of bring it to them. On our tour this morning, you were talking about, in the fields, that you chop some of that cane down for silage and put that up for silage to feed when we need to give them some supplemental energy and nutrients and those types of things, and then the other side you cut into windrows. How did that maybe come in with chopping half and half rather than maybe chopping an entire field? Was it a soil health concern? Was it just kind of you were wanting to give them some room to get out of the cane to lay down? What kind of brought that up?

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Well, like most things, it’s partially an accident where we actually a big-enough pile and then as the day goes on, you think about more options, and then it brought a lot of opportunities this year.

**Charlie Totton:**

Yes, it was a soil health thing, but also when you’re paying the [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=422&duration=20) cutter $500.00 an hour, if you can not pay him it’s a good day.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

But it has left a lot of clean ground for the cattle to lay on, and when we have managed it with our yearlings so that they get one windrow – is it even a quarter mile?

**Charlie Totton:**

Yes, pretty close.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Pretty close to a quarter-mile windrow every three days, and to see them walk away from the feed bunk to come eat that is neat, and then they’re obviously distributing their manure a lot better through that field. Then hopefully next year, we can chop the opposite half and swath, just do the opposite so that it’s spread out even more.

**Madison Kovarna:**

It’s really cool. When we drove out there this morning to go out and actually see the evenness of the manure spread throughout the field and where those cattle are actually grazing the cane, how much organic matter has contact with the ground, which in a normal cattle management thing, we’re not necessarily thinking about what’s in contact with the ground. I know I wasn’t necessarily until I got more exposed to things like this, but ultimately, everything we’re going to feed our cows comes from the ground, so what can we do to kind of pay that ground back for all the work that it’s put in for us? That aspect I think is a really cool thing, especially with how they’ve incorporated it and it’s working. When we looked at them, the cows looked really good in terms of condition, and I mean you had some calves; they were kind of dropping out there too, you bringing them some feed, but even the little guys roaming around were pretty happy to be out there. So, anything else about the swath grazing that you want to highlight? Or maybe some challenges that came with implementing it or anything like that?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, we’ve noticed in previous years that cows don’t even like to lay on the bare ground where we cut the silage. They’ll lay on the hedgerows around the edge of the field where there’s still grass, and this year we had such a good crop and we only made them eat two-thirds of it and there was enough there that they laid out in the middle of the field. Anytime they lay there for a while, they’re going to get up and poop. The cane is a deep-rooted crop, so in theory, they’re bringing nutrients from way down the [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=563&duration=20) and they’re putting it back on the surface, and then the economics is probably the most fun part of the whole system. I don’t know if we can go through the numbers, but we think we’re probably wintering cows for half of what it would cost normally.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I mean in the business, we’re – and when cattle prices are good like they are now and they will be for seemingly at least a little bit more in the future, if we can take the most expensive part of owning a cow, the feed cost down, why wouldn’t you over something that lets them go out and do their cow things? One of the things that you had mentioned when we were running around is that you have some more moderate-framed cows. Do you think that that has some play into your success with at least this sort of management of the swath grazing, is having a more moderate-sized female out there?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, the moderate-framed and the deep-bodied, the more [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=630&duration=20) your cow has, the lower quality roughage you can get fat on. So, we select for deep body and moderate frame, and with even our herd sires, we kind of select for a lower end of the milk EPD too. I mean we try to stay around 20 on the angus milk EPD.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Kind of keep those low-input females around that hopefully can kind of roll with the punches with whatever happens in the future. I’m going to jump ahead a little bit here since we’re talking about just your management strategies. One thing that you guys have implemented is the fence-line weaning, so weaning across whether that’s a barbed wire fence line or an electric fence line, whatever that looks like, rather than a hard wean. You’ve grown to appreciate it and have seen the value of it just over several years of doing that, but walk us through that process and maybe how that idea started, maybe your first go at it and maybe what you saw coming out of there.

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, we were just as skeptical as everybody else, so the first go at it, we took 20 bull calves and put them out back where the neighbors couldn’t see it because we knew it wasn’t going to work and we didn’t want to be laughed at. Anyways, we weaned these 20 bull calves and they never got sick and everything was good. Before that first fall was over, we’d weaned 500 head. In the past, we might doctor 10% of the calves post-weaning, and doctored one out of 500 that fall. So, it’s just the best thing since sliced bread. It bothers the cows worse than it bothers the calves.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

This was, I believe, 2003, so it has been many years and we’ve changed our methods a little bit to make it easier on us, mostly, where we used to wean them out in the actual pasture. They got sorted, cows went this way and calves went the other way with the fence in between them, and now we sort the cows up the calves, vaccinate them for weaning, and then trail them a quarter mile out to the pasture and then come back and get the cows and trail them to their pasture. It just works very, very smooth.

**Madison Kovarna:**

That’s one of the things that I love about fence-line weaning, is you kind of mentioned it, Charlie, of it bothers the cows more than the calves. Really using this, it allows the calves to go out into whatever pen you put them into and allow themselves to kind of go out and be a little independent, but still know that they can come back to that fence line and mom’s standing there, but a lot of times the cows don’t leave that fence line for a little bit until the calves come back from their romping around, but there’s a lot of benefits everywhere that you could find of health benefits, performance benefits, all of those things. So, I was excited that you guys have seen those kind of play out here. Were there any challenges up front when that first year went through, or anything that came up afterwards where you were like, “Man, why wasn’t I doing this sooner?” Maybe those pros or cons of that first time that you went around.

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, I mean I looked back before we started doing it and inevitably, they tore a fence out. They tore our [[cradle]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=828&duration=20) down when we weaned in the [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=829&duration=20). We used to roll out grass hay across the whole cradle to almost cover it, and then we had a mess all winter because then it would freeze in. We wouldn’t get it cleaned up until spring, and it’s just unreal how nice our cradles are since we weaned out in the pasture. Like I said, the year the Atlas storm went through, we were on the edge when we got rained. We got two inches of rain the night we weaned and it didn’t hurt a thing, whereas if they’d been in the cradle, it’d been a muddy mess, but cradles are never just right. They’re either too dry or too wet. There’s no such thing as a cradle that’s just right, and out in that pasture, it's always just right, but the trick is to have them wherever you’re going to wean them. They need to be there the day before. They need to be used to the same – so the only thing that’s different when you across-the-fence wean is their mother’s not beside them. They’re eating the same thing, they’re drinking the same water, and so there’s very little shock to their system versus putting them in a cradle in a strange place. We even found that they stayed gentler all winter. When we weaned them in the cradle and they broke out once, they were goofy half the winter, and when you use the low-stress weaning, we [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=905&duration=20) wean them. I could trail [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=910&duration=20) 100 cows into the cradle by myself.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Yes, so like he said, we put the pairs out in the pasture where the calves are going to go at least the night before so that they’re there with their mother, familiarizing themselves with the area, and that helps a lot. Then you might think that we have some fancy fence for this, but really, it’s two barbed wires and two high-tensile hotwires, the top and a middle. It’s really not that special. We started this so long ago that some of the posts when we put in this fence are even rotting off already, and we still don’t have problems with them crawling the fence at all.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Do you feel that kind of implementing this strategy – you mentioned how they are calmer. We talked about earlier, you guys have a bull sale every year. Do you find that it impacts their behavior, those bulls that you maybe bring back or even heifers that come back? Do you find that long-term, that same kind of calm nature follows them through from this?

**Charlie Totton:**

Yes, but we still sort a lot of cow for disposition**.**

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think inevitably there’s always the few or the several that are the problem children in the group, but…

**Charlie Totton:**

There’s always that one apple.

**Madison Kovarna:**

[Laughter] With this fence-line weaning stuff too, I think it’s important to remember that it doesn’t always have to be something fancy. Courtney, you brought this up, of it’s not that you put in an iron fence that’s cemented into the ground or anything. It’s a regular fence that you guys use year-after-year out in the pasture system anyway. So, I think that’s another thing, is that the change to implement this doesn’t have to be a huge overhaul of your facilities, and I like what you brought up earlier, Charlie, of that first year that you did it, you only did 20 or so head I think you said. So, it doesn’t have to be going whole hog and doing everybody at the same time and really baptizing yourself by fire for that, so that was a good little tip for everybody with that too, but anything else?

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Yes, we’re continuing to change even where now we calve half of the herd in March and the other herd in May – or the rest of the herd. We made them into two herds, and the May herd doesn’t actually get weaned until around the first of the year, where our March calving herd gets weaned in mid-October. So, that was a learning experience, but ultimately, we started feeding silage and hay mix to the pairs before weaning, about two weeks, every other day just to get the calves used to feed, and then moved them home, got them used to the pasture for a day, weaned them, and then they got put with the other weaned calves who showed them where the bunks and the water were, and the cows were on the other side of the fence for a couple days and it just has really worked smoothly.

**Charlie Totton:**

So, basically, we across-the-fence weaned them on prepared forage rather than on native grass, but we got them used to the prepared forage before we weaned them.

**Madison Kovarna:**

One of the things that’s kind of been a recurring topic at least in this is that a lot of changes come to an operation out of a need. So, you see something and a change happens, or something happens and you realize, “Well, this isn’t necessarily going to work for me any longer,” and you’ve taken that with stride over the last years of keeping the cow herd moving forward in a positive light and changing to whatever life throws our way, rolling with the punches, but what are some things for other producers to think about when it comes to implementing any sort of alternative management strategies or anything that kind of comes to mind of questions you wish you would’ve asked sooner or questions that you asked yourself when you guys were thinking about these things?

**Charlie Totton:**

So, like we got our calves – even after we weaned them, we don’t ever lock them up in small lots anymore. We move feed bunks around on half the field where we cut silage. We got portable steel bunks. We move them once a week so the manure never builds up. Between the across-the-fence weaning and moving our feed bunks and just having a clean spot, and then moving the electric fence, they got a clean spot to lay down on the windrows after they get done eating, we give up treating them with cocci Crumbles and Aureomycin sometime in the last 10 years. We used to have a lot of problems with coccidiosis, but just by changing our management, we got away from spending about $1,500.00 a year on just medication, and we still have less sick calves than we did when we weaned them in the cradle and didn’t do the swath grazing with them.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Anything to add, Courtney, about thoughts that maybe you’ve had around the dinner table that we’re sitting at right now of things that maybe you’ve seen coming in that maybe that you’ve contributed and added into the business?

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Well, some of this stuff, when my husband and I moved back here in 2019, some of the changes necessary were simply due to growing the herd to a larger herd, but being married to somebody who’s also from a farm and ranch background, it gives a lot of perspective because I have perspective of how his family ranch has operated, and then through helping neighbors and stuff, you see how they do things and you can take a little bit from everything. One thing that I would never want to do again is calving a lot. We also calve on pasture and that has been extremely beneficial. Just a few years ago, somebody was telling me about dipping navels in iodine and I asked them why. [Laughter] They were blown away that we calve out this many head and I didn’t know why, but we’ve never had to because we don’t have problems with calving on pasture. It’s just interesting to keep learning and see what else is out there.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I was going to say, today I’ve learned a lot about different management. I mean I’m from northwest Iowa. We’ve got corn, soybeans, pasture sprinkled in between on the land you can’t farm, so it’s a whole different lifestyle and a whole different management style even though realistically in the grand scheme of things, that’s not that far away. Getting out and seeing what other people are doing really helps you learn a lot. One of the things when we were out that I thought was super interesting that you guys have done is actually chop down some of these cedar trees that you’ve had growing in fences, under power lines, everywhere that they’re not supposed to be and offering them up to the cows to kind of scratch on and do what they need to do. What brought that up? Was it just kind of drag them in there and they so happened to itch on it? Or what was going on there?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, we kind of knew from when we moved them that they like to rub on cedar trees anyways. If they hadn’t been around them, they were attracted to them, so we knew they liked to rub on them and then we were hoping to get more of like – repel lice. In theory, back, the old-timers built cedar chests out of cedar because it kept moths out of their clothes, so we were hoping to get a little repellent from bugs. We can’t really make that claim, they still have lice, but…

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Sure saves on fences and everything else that they want to scratch on. If they are itchy or bored, then they have something to scratch on, and we have an abundance of cedar trees in the Rough River Hills, so cutting them down, dragging them home is a 10-minute project.

**Charlie Totton:**

These trees, they were in the road ditch, they were in the fences. They all need to be cut down anyways, so why not put them to some use?

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Then once they all got the good rubbing out of them, then we drag them to a draw where we’re fighting erosion and help the draw stop eroding with that in there.

**Charlie Totton:**

Everything is a learning process. First time we tried that, we built a dam and then it just washed down the creek. When you put them in a stop to keep it from eroding, you want to build a filter. You just want to slow the water down, spread it out. We had to throw a few rocks on top of the trees to get them to stay where we wanted, but we got old foundations and enough rocks around here, so we’re kind of getting – we had to cut the trees anyways, so we’re getting good out of them for saving our fences and now saving erosion. So, we’re getting three uses out of the trees.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I was going to say, if anything, it’s a good use for a cedar tree that no one wantsanyway, so at least give the three some sort of purpose rather than sprouting up everywhere where they’re not supposed to be. It was cool to see when we were finishing coming back, to see the cows actually all over congregated around these trees, actively scratching or just using them as kind of a common area or spot to rest and say hi to their friends and do all of that. It was cool to see something as simple as cutting down one of these trees that really doesn’t have a purpose otherwise and giving it some sort of purpose for the cows to use and, like you mentioned, saving some inputs in terms of not having to fix stretched out barbed wire, broken posts that they scratch on too hard, or anything like that. One other thing that I wanted to brush on too was the fact that you guys raise some grassfed beef and that seems to be kind of a fad going around. Everybody wants grassfed beef and it seems like everybody is raising it, but we had some for lunch and I can attest that it was really good. So, that’s a positive and a pat on the back to you guys, but how does that fit into your operation? Where does that come from? Is it a separate enterprise? Is it something else that comes from the herd? Or where does that fit in?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, it started out as a hobby, just a little niche, but being in the seedstock business, we needed to know if our cow could be grassfed, if we had the right type of cow, if it’s easy enough fleshing. So, it started out just as an experiment, just to prove it could be done, and then we got to eating it and liking it. We can get marble just as good as any cornfed steak, and a lot of people I think have had bad experiences with some poor grassfed meat, but they haven’t eaten ours.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

It just kind of fits into our operation, the way we do it, because after we check our replacement heifers, we just keep some back and then butcher them the next summer when the grass is at its peak. So, they’re at their fattest on the nicest grass and they’re about 28 months old, and then we do sell to family and friends, but we don’t ask for much of a premium. I don’t think it’ll ever be a separate enterprise, but I guess never say never.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Kind of something to put some meat in the freezer that you kind of know everything that went into it, and there’s just something about eating your home-raised beef. My dad just started doing it several years ago. We had never done it before and there’s just something about being able to go in the freezer and know where that animal came from and all the steps that went into it. I’m sure it benefits you guys knowing the bulls that you’re selling, they come from genetics that are capable of doing that as well, but other than that, with the grassfed beef, has there been maybe a learning curve into that of – you mentioned that you just pull the replacement heifers out that don’t make the cut or aren’t bred or anything like that, but are there any other learning curves that you found with raising grassfed beef even if it was just for your family and friends and yourselves?

**Charlie Totton:**

But even in the beginning, you questioned whether a critter 28 months old was fit to eat. When everybody else was butchering 14-month-old stuff, you kind of wonder and it was a nice surprise. You start off trying to be cheap and you use a [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=1684&duration=20) that lost a calf and they’re a little tough. It was a learning curve. When we take these [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=PC-00002-CattleHQ-Ep55.mp3&starttime=1691&duration=20) open heifers, but we breed like 200 heifers every year so there’s plenty of opens, and we still slacked off the deepest body, easiest flesh in heifers that we know has the best chance of marbling and doing well on our grass.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Hello to our listeners. This is Madison Kovarna chiming back in. The conversation so far with the Totton Angus crew of Charlie and Courtney is one I encourage you all to ruminate on. In our next episode, we will continue the conversation with Charlie and Courtney as we dive further into their operation, so stay tuned, but with that, this has been Cattle HQ, headquarters for all things beef/cattle. Please visit extension.sdstate.edu for the latest beef information. Until next time, we’re hoofing it out of here, but we’ll be back before the cows come home.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

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[Outro music]