## Behind the Herd with Totton Angus

## (Part 2)

## Season 1, Episode 56

[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 back to Cattle HQ, brought to you by South Dakota State University Extension. This is Madison Kovarna. This episode will be the second-half of the conversation with Charlie and Courtney from Totton Angus. I won’t keep you tied up too long in this intro, so let’s jump right back into the conversation. One other, while we’re talking about your selection, where you’re talking about how you select - going a little off script here, so I apologize, but you’re selecting for these moderate-framed cows, do you find that in the grand scheme of things that that works well for a variety of situations or is there - could it fit into anybody? We’re drifting to bigger and heavier cattle. Do you find that these moderate-framed girls still have a place to go or maybe even these moderate-framed bulls, is there a demand for them out there still?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, it’s interesting most people think while out west, they don’t put as much feed. That would be the obvious place for the more moderate-framed cattle. I grew up 120 miles southwest where our grass was a lot more - had a lot more protein in it and feed value than our bigger grass here east. So, what I’m getting at is that out west and almost supports a bigger cow better than east of here when your grass is half water, but people have plenty of feed so they make up for it. In my opinion, they work everywhere and a lot of people think, “Oh no, we got to have a big cow if we’re east here in the [[corner]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=CHQ-Ep-56.mp3&starttime=116&duration=20) country,” but…

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think that we always get stuck in the bigger, better, stronger, faster growing type genetics, but I think that sometimes that 1,200 lb moderate-framed cow that just knows how to do her job, and a lot of the times can fix a lot of problems that we may be running to with having - we’re staring down the barrel of a dry summer of the grass. We’re just not going to have a lot of it, and what cow is going to make the best of a limited inventory without us having to break the bank of feeding her to get the same end product of that calf. So, I think every size of cow has a place, and I think that a lot of the times the smaller gals tend to get the short end of the stick of no, they’re not going to raise the steer that can finish to 1,700, 1,800 lbs like we’re seeing now. I’ve heard of some finishing over a ton when they finally hit the rail. No, a 1,200 lb cow is not going to be able to do that, but she’s going to make you a pretty darn good 1,300, 1,400 lb fat steer that goes, or even in your case, a calf that comes back and comes back as grass-fed beef. They can do that fairly well. That’s all of my prepared questions, but I wanted to open things up to just other conversations that we maybe want to have today, at least, and just sit and chat about really whatever comes to mind.

**Charlie Totton:**

Okay. Well, when we’re talking about swath grazing, we move electric fence once a week, and what’s interesting about that is how much labor that saves, how much time. It doesn’t matter if you’re a big operation or if you got a full-time job in town. If you can go and put up a bunch of electric fence on Saturday and just open the gate or two during the week, a small operator can get - can still have his job in town and take a decent care of his cows. For a large operation, it takes way less people to feed a whole lot of cows. You don’t have to go out there once a week. A lot of times, we divide it up. We’ll have these two herds and we’ll move the fence on one day and a different day, and then we might feed them a couple of days towards the end, just so they don’t get so bored with the feed, but one person can take care of a lot of cows if you got your work divided up like that.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

We use electric fence, pretty near year-round, and very heavily in June and July with mob grazing, and then again in the winter like with the weaned calves, we started the electric fence out there around the first of November and we just finished that around the first of March, and that was with moving at about twice a week. With our mob grazing, people have always told us, “Well, that’s too much work. You’re just tied to the farm,” and whatever. With Dad and I, it takes 20 minutes a day to pull out a fence and we already have one put in, and then we pull one out and then put in tomorrow’s fence or the next day’s fence, and it is just quick and easy. You can do that before you go to work if you want to do it every day.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think with that, the time investment, you talk, yes, it might. Maybe even if you’re sitting and talking or morning coffee takes a little longer, you’re sitting in the - watching the cows or whatever. Even if it takes you an hour, how many of us can start the tractor, fill up the wagon, drive it to where it needs to go in an hour? I, maybe, I’m not the most time-sensitive person, maybe I’m a little tardy and how fast I get to things, but I don’t even know if you could get all that done and even a half hour to an hour.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Then there’s so much you can do a lot or a little. We could be moving the fence four times a day and get better utilization versus like in the summer, I should say. There’s a lot of research that says that we probably shouldn’t do a week at a time on this swath grazing. However, we see results good enough for us to continue. I mean, we’re talking, what was it, 165 cow days an acre?

**Charlie Totton:**

On the swath grazing cane.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Yes. So, then, leaving some armor for the soil. So, the economics come into it and your personal life comes into it and where you can fit it in, but ultimately, it’s been very beneficial here.

**Madison Kovarna:**

One of the things that you mentioned here too, and I should have brought it up earlier, but I hadn’t. So, you do swath grazing on this cane, but you also do mob grazing on the grass. So, walk us through your mob grazing mentality, how you set that up. You mentioned you maybe do it a little longer than the books say, but walk us through how that grazing plan came to fruition.

**Charlie Totton:**

So, we mob graze in June, July, and August, and we aim it for the heart of our growing season. We want the most cows on the fewest acres while the grass is growing, and that leaves us a lot of acres growing untouched for winter grazing, but so we concentrate our efforts during the heart of the growing season. Then we still have two herds of cow, but we used to have 40 head of cows in every pasture. When you group up all of your cows and you only have one water tank to go check when it’s 110 degrees, you only have one set of bulls to go see if they’re still in with your cows. Or it actually made a lot less work and you can go around one fence instead of have to have every fence ready the first of May when you want to turn out, and just by bunching your cows into one group saved a lot of Labor.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Yes, and if anybody wanted to ask us questions, it could be a very long conversation, but ultimately, there’s no one-size-fits-all prescription for mob grazing needs. On a dry year, they might get - we might have 200 cows getting 10 acres a day. Like last year, I think we averaged like four acres a day, and you just have to watch the land and the cattle and see how to manage it yourself, and then we’ve had a lot of experience, experimenting with different kinds of reels and wire and posts, and we’ve learned what our favorite is, but that might also not work the best for other people. It’s just very interesting, and then to see the benefit of resting ground. So, with the mob grazing, it allows us to rest parks or whole pastures for a year or more. When we say “rest,” we’re mostly talking about the growing season so that then we still have some clean acres with residual forage for the winter time.

**Charlie Totton:**

We’ve moved away from rest and now we start talking recovery, and recovery happens anytime there’s adequate moisture and adequate temperature for your pasture to grow. So, it’s the latest buzzword is talk recovery, not rest, but other things - say something. Let me think a second. [Laughter]

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

I’ve been getting interested in soil samples, so seeing exactly getting more data to support some of our wild ideas. What brought this up initially was looking into carbon contracts, and I mean, I’m all about getting some free money and to essentially not change what we’re already doing, but it’d be great if people were changing their practices to be more regenerative and carbon-friendly, but we’re very, very curious to see this spring some soil samples, and maybe the carbon we’re sequestering, and differences and different pastures with different management, and then even some fields with our swath grazing to see some of the nutrient benefits for the land.

**Charlie Totton:**

Now I remember what I was going to say a little bit ago. My name is on the Grass Science Coalition website as a mentor for cross-fence weaning and some different things. So, you can find me on the Grassland Coalition website if you do have questions.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think one of the common themes that has come up throughout this conversation is that realistically, this type of management and just you guys in general, it always takes a little bit of wanting to be a lifelong learner of constantly diving back into the why things work or how to get things to work better, which I think is something we can all take a little bit of token into our day-to-day life of - we don’t have to do the things that we did 50 years ago just because that’s what we did. Kind of incorporating these new management strategies, looking at things through a different lens, I think really goes a long way when we talk about longevity, even operation or just enjoying what you do, as I feel like sometimes, we get caught in the “Well, I just do it because I have to. Well, you should do it because you want to, and you like to” type of thing. So, I really liked that that’s come up inadvertently and both literally and figuratively through these. This conversation is that little piece as well, but you guys do a lot of stuff with the Grassland Coalition. Can you guys talk about the things that you do with them? I know you guys work with them on a Grazing School and several other things, but what brought that partnership to light or what are some things you work together with them on?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, with the Grazing School, they tried it on different places. They tried it on state land where there was no cattle. Anyway, one of the originals, Dave Steffen was one of the original people putting this Grazing School together. He told her, asked him, “You got to find a working ranch that’s doing something.” So, it was my mob grazing this - it’s why they picked us, and they picked us. We didn’t go find them, but anyway, so they make me tell my story every year, and it’s - I’m not that good at it.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

[Laughter] It’s always nice to be friends with the extension NRCS office and then these kind of opportunities come to us sometimes. Also, we’ve met so many people with the students and the staff coming here. It seems like every year we can learn something new and benefit from them being on our land. Then also, they put on so many trainings every year. This year, we’ve been a lot more interested in the controlled burns. Maybe we’ll be having a controlled burn pretty soon, but there’s just so many resources out there.

**Charlie Totton:**

People might not realize with this Grazing School, we’ve been taking 40 heads of cattle out there, pinning them up in little fence, and then the students got to go separate them.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Have a management plan and then measure how much they eat and…

**Charlie Totton:**

Anyway, that made us select for better disposition yet if you got 60 people walking through cattle in little electric fence pit. [Laughter]

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think that’s one of the cool things about the Grazing School is a lot of people think that it relates back just to land management, but you really learn a lot about cattle management through there. I took part in a Grazing School out on Wall and again, coming from Northwest Iowa where we have grass up to your waist by middle of July that’s been on it, to Wall, South Dakota, where we are in the short grass prairie, and it was little. I walked out there, and we did our first day and my job, I hit the ground, because I was like, “How are we going to graze this? How is this going to work?” and I think that going forward, there’s just an important thing to remember is that there’s things out there like that through different organizations that are literally there to help you learn. You talked about the prescribed burns and what? That’s the thing that it seems like it’s the gateway drug into a lot of different management things, kind of what got you into the prescribed burn? Is it to eradicate cedar trees for more grass for the cows, or is there something else that you’re looking for there?

**Charlie Totton:**

Mostly eradicate cedar trees and they’re just - we mechanically cut a bunch of these trees. For everyone, you cut down like 100 comes to their funeral, [Laughter] and we got [[Unintelligible]](https://recordings.civi.com/cgi-bin/player.php?file=CHQ-Ep-56%20(1).mp3&starttime=941&duration=20) it was just covered with like 3-foot tall cedar trees now, and if we don’t do something, we don’t have no grass left, bottom line.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Yes, I think that that’s the one thing that if you’ve never been to this, primarily in those parts of South Dakota, it’s spreading now of just how big of an impact the cedars are having on not only just range land in general, but for those who are trying to get range land to graze on, they take up a lot of room and they just end up coming up everywhere, so.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Mob grazing and fires have some similarities to me because with mob grazing, it looks like we’re not leaving a whole lot behind, but it forces the cattle to eat things that they wouldn’t seek out otherwise. Then, so you’re taking everything and with the Grazing School, you really see, you take an inventory of what plants are there before you let your cattle out, and then the next morning, you see what they ate, how much they ate. Then just knowing that, when we’ve managed the land or possibly have a fire and you see stuff come back that you’ve never seen before, and just knowing that the seeds were always there, it just needed the right environment to prosper is just very, very neat.

**Charlie Totton:**

Before we start mob grazing, we had no idea what cows ate. When you start moving the fence every day and that first time you go across that pasture, you find a hillside that has like a full acre of solid Poison Ivy, and you’re scared to get off the four-wheeler, but you do it anyways. You come back the next day and is grazed the hardest the cows really like Poison Ivy. Well, it got a poisonous name. Why would you even bother look it up in the - but the South Dakota book tells you it’s felt before it itches up. I looked it up after they ate it. I didn’t look it up before [Laughter] they ate it. I’m like, “They’re going to die.” [Laughter] “So, what am I going to do?” [Laughter] Anyway, we’ve changed this one hillside to it’s mostly big bluestem by mob grazing through there, but the Poison Ivy, I just said, “It’s not good for me, but don’t hurt the cows,” so I guess. We’ve seen a lot of things, and it took 10 years before seeing the switchgrass come back. I wanted to know where the seed come from because there just wasn’t any out there. After about 10 years, pretty quick all the way down the draw, there’s a little bit of switchgrass. Like I say, she said, “It looks grazed hard,” but when you’re out there in July, it’s already waste ties to the plant. It got to grow up once before it got to do its thing before you graze it off. It isn’t like season-long grazing. I tell people it’s like sitting in your car and you keep hitting the starter, but never let it run. You finally run your battery dead till it isn’t going – your car isn’t going to run. Well, when you graze off a plant every day and you’re not feeding the roots, and the roots are its battery and the leaves are the solar panels, you’re finally going to kill it just like your dead car.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think too, when we start to think about alternative grazing strategies, like the mob grazing, the swath grazing, it really forces the cattle to graze smarter and figure out how they’re going to go and get the nutrition that they need because it’s there. A lot of the times I compare them to toddlers, they’re going to walk out. They’re going to find the Snickers bar that’s out there and they’re just going to eat that all summer long.

**Charlie Totton:**

Sometimes the Snicker bar is a creeping Jenny plant. That’s I mean, in this pasture, the first thing they eat is creeping Jenny, that’ll be the only spot and it’s old gold background. It has plenty of creeping Jennies, but it will surprise you. Well, the cattle like and some of them weeds are their favorite.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

Then some would probably question if we’re herding like the calves gain for like weaning and I think the answer is no. Then even back to cross-fence weaning, people will say, “Oh, you’re going to lose weight grazing your calves and not feeding them hard,” and it’s actually the opposite. By not stressing them, we don’t lose weight, and we actually continue to gain when the stressed calves will lose weight and get sick and lose more weight. It’s just so interesting to see.

**Madison Kovarna:**

There’s a lot of animal behavior that goes into everything too. I mean, with grazing and picking different plants of, it’s funny to watch calves learn from mom the odd plants that we wouldn’t think of, because if there’s a cow that goes and picks the Thistle buds when they’re red and pink, her calf will go back and do the same thing, or calves that are just around her will do that same thing. think there’s a lot to be said of they’re pretty smart creatures if we let them. Mother Nature made them that way, so let them go out and do the work for us, but anything else?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, yes. I should have took you on one more tour this morning, but about the time we started cross-fence weaning was also about the time that the Grassland Coalition had low stress cattle handling, and so we kind of incorporated low stress cattle handling about the same time we started the cross-fence weaning. You can go to these schools or you can get videos online, and I’m convinced it’s 90% patience and about 10% understanding the cattle, but if you go to one of these schools, they’ll tell you where their eyes are set and where your eyes are set, and which way your pupils are on, and I think they’re just killing time to make you pay for the school, but you just really got to be patient when you’re working calves. It’s the slower you move, the better your day goes. Anyway, we remodeled the crawl again recently, and of course, it would pass Bud William because we got us a gate in there, but when we designed the crawl that two people can run cattle up to shoot without ever crawling out of the fence, but our bud box runs halfway up the alleyway so you can work cattle up the alleyway as you’re filming the shoot. Probably the other big improvement we’ve made was going to low stress cattle handling workshops and kind of got over the West River rope and choke method.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

We don’t have to invite all of our friends, so we have to have other parties to get together with the neighbors. [Laughter] We, majority of the time, plan stuff when my husband doesn’t have to work, and a lot of times it’s Dad, I, and my husband’s doing all of it.

**Charlie Totton:**

Like I say, when this - even our mob grazing that trains cattle to like you because you’re coming out there that you’re going to give them better grass. Well, we got a couple thousand acres roughly for everyday pasture, and me and Courtney have been rounding up by ourselves last couple of years. In the past, they’d have 10 cowboys out there and they’d still leave 10 cow when they got done, and we’ve figured it out. We just save some grass, and we just start opening the gates, and we just lead them out rather than chase some other.

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

It might take us a week, but it’s only like an hour a day for a week to make sure we got them all out. When you’re talking some, we cannot touch every acre of this 2,000 acres. It is rough. We stay on the path and we just hope we can holler and send a dog and get the cows to go, but it is very - the way that they learn and keep coming back to mob grazing, I don’t know how many times we have forgotten to turn on the fencer, and the cattle are like, “No, we have what we need here. We don’t need to test it.” [Laughter]

**Madison Kovarna:**

“They’ll be back tomorrow. They’ll give me some more for breakfast tomorrow.” [Laughter] I think a lot of people too just don’t give cattle enough credit. They can be pretty smart if we give them the tools to have a routine, know what this means. If they see you coming, either they’re moving to a new paddock or we’re moving them completely, and if they get that in their mind of when they see you that they get something in return, why would you run away? That’s like if one of you came to my office with a bag of M&M’S, like, “I’m not going to leave my chair if you walked in my door with those,” so that kind of thing too. I think it’s important to remember when it comes to animal handling is if we can give them a routine that they know what to expect, it makes it a lot easier for us. Like you mentioned, you don’t have to call half the county over to have a wild bus rodeo out in the pasture to get them all to come home for working. If that falls over weaning time, now you’ve got calves that come in riled up. The cows are mad and it’s just a whole other thing. It’s a trickle-down effect, big pieces come down. We’re nearing the end of our time, so I’m sure we’ve been in here for a while chatting. I will open it up for any closing comments before we sign off. Other than that, I think I learned a lot and had a really good conversation. Any closing comments for anyone?

**Charlie Totton:**

Well, I’m getting that age. I can tell long-winded stories if you need more time.

**Madison Kovarna:**

[Laughter] Anything, Courtney?

**Courtney Tyrrell:**

No. Thank you very much for coming, and we learned a lot from you, too. [Laughter] It’s always fun to visit with somebody else and thank you very much.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Yes, thanks for joining me on the podcast. It’s a lot to ask to sit down and take time out of your days to do this, and also take time out of your morning, let me tag around in the pickup with you and see some things. I appreciate that very much. I hope the listeners learned a variety of topics from you and how not everything needs to fit the perfect box that we see everywhere of everything goes together. I see Charlie waving his finger at me, so I better give him a few minutes. [Laughter]

**Charlie Totton:**

I got one more theory I’m going to lay on you. A lot of people talk about thinking outside the box. My theory is that a human being can only think outside the box for 15 minutes. If he thinks, say, longer than that, he builds a whole new box and jumps right in the middle of it. [Laughter] I try to stay on outside the box myself, [Laughter] but that’s my closing, words of wisdom from Charlie.

**Madison Kovarna:**

[Laughter] We should make that a tagline. I think we can make this a weekly segment, “Words of Wisdom with Charlie.” [Laughter]

**Charlie Totton:**

[Laughter] There we go.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Well, with that, this has been Cattle HQ, the headquarters for all things beef/cattle. You can find this on extension.sdstate.edu or on Spotify. Thanks for joining us, and until next time, stay curious and keep learning.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

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[Outro music]