## The Journey to a More Drought Resilient Ranch: Dugan Bad Warrior

## Season 1, Episode 62

[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.

**Robin Salverson:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, brought to you by South Dakota State University Extension. I am Robin Salverson, Cow/Calf Field specialist living in Lemmon, South Dakota. I am joined by Madison Kovarna, SDSU Extension Beef Nutrition Field specialist. Madison is located in Watertown, and she’ll be my cohost for this episode. Our guest is Dugan Bad Warrior, Dugan Ranches, just north of Dupree, South Dakota. So, welcome to Cattle HQ, Dugan, and thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to join Madison and I today.

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes, no problem.

**Robin Salverson:**

So, just with our job, both Madison and I, we travel across the state and we see a lot of different countries from everywhere from Mitchell, Watertown over to Buffalo, and one of the consistent things that we’re seeing is really dry conditions. It doesn’t matter where you really are across the state. With you living in western South Dakota, you’ve obviously experienced a few or several years of drought conditions, and that’s why Madison and I have you on this episode is just to talk to you about how you manage through drought. So, with that being said, I just think it’s really important that the listeners of this podcast know how you actually manage your ranch past history to how you manage it today. So, could you just share some of that, how you used to manage it to where you are today and how you manage your ranch?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Sure. Up until 2016, I was pretty much a conventional rancher. I would run on big pastures for long periods of time, anywhere it’s up to 1,000 acres. I think my smallest pasture was 300 acres. So, I just go turn them out, go check on them every so often, and move them to the next pasture when the stock days that was calculated using the old conventional way of calculating stock days and move them to the next pasture for a month at a time. So, I thought that was the way. Everybody around me done it that way that thought that was the way to do it. Then I started going to get myself educated first to –I’m drawing a blank right now. They’re kind of the guru who started it. Anyway, I went to him and then I went to Ranching for Profit, and I found out there’re better ways to manage my ranch and manage my pastures, and then found my way to South Dakota Grassland Coalition, it’s a grazing school, and really started changing everything I thought I knew to a better way of managing my grass. Along the way, I’ve met a couple of great mentors, Pat Guptill and Bart Carmichael, who really helped me change my way of thinking, and also just always challenging me on new ways and other things, not only with grazing, but with the livestock and with nutrition, everything. So, just kind of a journey of to where I am now, to where I am in a better way of where I’m managing my grazing.

**Robin Salverson:**

So, do you think the way that you’ve changed have helped you be more resilient through these different types, through these years that we’re in drought?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes, because that’s one of my things that I learned along the way is to be drought-resilient and learning how to manage through that. So, I noticed it, especially, a couple years ago when we started this, I had a couple guys come to the ranch and wanted to come look at a couple of things, and they noticed how much forage I had and asking how I did it. I just explained my journey through just educating myself on better ways to graze than just to turn them out and hope for the best. So, it has, and one story I can tell is through my electric fence journey of getting these pastures built in the paddocks, I was having a lot of trouble. So, Pat and Bart both come out, and we were going and we found out what I was doing wrong or what I - we think the cattle were doing. Along the way, Bart asked me what was one of my journeys that I want, what was one of the things I wanted. I said, “Well, I want to really get my natives back and especially like big bluestem and his [it wasn’t] really poor pasture.” He said, “Like right there?” and we stopped and I was like, “Oh, my God.” So, I was - sometimes, I wanted what I wanted, but I wasn’t opening my eyes and that really said, I really got to pay a lot more attention because of what I was doing. Then after that, I was just going along and going through the pastures and doing everything. I’m like, “Wow. A lot of my things that I wanted to come back are starting to come back and a lot more resiliency.” A lot more filling in areas that were misused in the past, started to come back with a lot more natives. So, yes, it’s been a heck of a journey.

**Robin Salverson:**

So, what are some of those management things that you did to help? So, you talked about electric fence and things like that, and I’ve had the opportunity to come out to your ranch and see what you’re doing and, and in some of your places you can do more intensive type grazing where other areas you can’t because it’s just not possible. So, I know that takes more time to see impact when you do it that way. So, obviously, putting up electric fence and things like that. So, kind of share like throughout the year, how do you manage your grasses from the winter all the way through some of the summer, just in general?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Well, the biggest thing is going out and taking your inventory of what forage you have available. That was the biggest thing that I learned is, instead of going out and look, is going out and actually measuring, clipping, weighing your forage so you know actually what you have available so that you can calculate your moves. Once I learned how to do that and the importance of that, that really helped me in my electric fence journey because when I first started, when I got back from Ranching for Profit, they talked about cell grazing, and no mention of weighing and clipping, just cell grazing and more paddocks, the better. So, I started that journey and I did it kind of too literally. Of course, it’s easy when you’re teaching somebody, you do it in pretty much squares. So, I took that home and I went home and built a bunch of square paddocks and was having wrecks because I took everything too literal and not adapting to my terrain and understanding cattle enough, that you create a lot of areas where pinch points and the electric fence where cattle will congregate and push through. So, that’s one thing Pat and Bart have both really helped me through my journey is the evolution of creating paddocks and understanding electric fence and cattle with it.

**Robin Salverson:**

I think it’s interesting because you live in some big country. It’s pretty rough country. You live right by the Moreau River there, that creates a lot of rough terrain, and so a lot of people when they think about this type of grazing, it’s “I can’t do that because I live in this really rough terrain, this type of country that doesn’t allow,” but like you said, you’ve managed that and used some of that terrain to benefit you in regards to how you create these paddocks or these areas for your animals. So, I think that’s always a good take-home message because I hear that quite a bit. Madison, you probably do too, that “I can’t do that.”

**Madison Kovarna:**

Yes. I hear it more frequently than I think I don’t hear it, I suppose. I grew up in northwest Iowa, where our pastures are pretty scattered in between cropland. So they’re not as expansive and large as we can get the further we move West, but that shouldn’t be a hinderance either. You can do this type of management on really small pieces of land, just as easy, if not maybe a little bit easier. [Some of the guys] who are working with hundreds or thousands of acres too, but I have another question for you, Dugan, in regards to the herd itself, is have you made any changes to the herd itself in being more intentional with your range management, like has your cow size changed, any breeding season changes, or have you been able to keep the cows fairly similar through these last several years of being more intentional?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

No, my cow herd has changed several times from when I started out. If I know now what I knew then, I would never change my herd. I had the perfect - I think the perfect herd. I had a really good Angus herd, really moderate-sized animals. Then through my journey, you think you’re going to get to [chase] pounds, so then I started, with other influences of bulls and wanting to put more rapid growth on my calves, and when I was retaining heifers, their rapid growth continued into my cows. So, I started noticing my cows were getting a lot bigger, and then through this journey of - it’s not only of grazing, but I think it’s also animal husbandry and animal livestock handling, everything gets involved with once you start doing all this because you’re going to be around your cattle a lot more when you start manage grazing, and learning that I wanted a more efficient animal, a lot more efficient animal and a lot, so that it can help me and be more efficient with my grazing. So, yes, it has changed. Now I’m wanting a more moderate herd of, “Oh, I want an animal that’s roughly 1,200 pounds.” I’m still trying to get back down there, but understanding that there’re all kinds of aspects in this. The grazing, all these things, especially managing through droughts, I’ve changed my calving dates. I used to be a late March, early April calver, and then I had two disastrous calving seasons with blizzards that just, I mean, it crippled me pretty good. It still, to this day, it probably is still affecting me, but it hurt me really bad, and I changed my calving from then to right around May 10th, calving is where I want to start calving, but also through this process of Ranch for Profit, I also, I don’t put all my eggs in one basket. So, I got two to three different enterprises on my ranch at all times. So, like I am right now going through having short-term cows, and those are purchased cows. Those are older cows that just have very minimal life. I calve them out and then I cull everything. Well, the bad thing with that is you can always find late April, May calvers with that. So, I am buying where there’s - I try to get as late as I can, but I’m still buying April 1st calvers. So, I still have those, but it’s not my ideal. With my main herd, they are May 10th calvers.

**Robin Salverson:**

So, going back, you mentioned the word “with this managed grazing”. So has this managed grazing allowed you to stockpile forages so that way, you know how far out you can go with your herd? Do you have a nine months or a year worth of forage out in front of you, with your animals? Have you been able to accomplish that?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

What this has allowed me to do and what I wanted to do is become a year-round grazer. So, I am a year-round grazer with this and it’s allowed me to stockpile [before] winter. So, yes, it’s changed me, changed my grazing so much, and it changed my animals so much because I used to have to either sell, I used to be October sell, I sell my calves and then wean my replacements and bring them home, wean them, and feed them through the winter. Well now, I don’t. When I do sell my calves, now that I’m a late calver, I sell in January, and when I do wean my heifers, I put them back on mom until middle February, late February, to allow mom to teach that calf a little bit while she’s out grazing, and teach her calves a little bit how to graze through the winter. So, yes, it’s changed how I stockpile it, so that I have stuff in the wintertime to graze. This past year, I didn’t do winter grazing because I wanted to start, how do you say, rebuilding or start getting my soil health back on – I’m sorry. In winter, I bale graze this winter on about 300 acres that I wanted to start getting the soil health a lot better. So, that was a challenge. It’s the first time I ever bale graze. It was easy winter to do it, but so far, I’d like the results of that bale grazing. So that also allowed me to stockpile even more grass that I normally would have used through this winter.

**Robin Salverson:**

So, being able to intensively manage or like you said, manage your grazing, you’re able to be more drought-resilient, or maybe to make through a drought where, one drought you can get through, maybe even the second, if it’s a consecutive year of drought, and those are hard. When there’s two years in a row of drought, those are really, really hard, but with the way you’ve started to manage here in the past since 2016, you started this journey, correct?

Dugan Bad Warrior: Yes, 2016.

**Robin Salverson:**

You’ve been able to probably manage those knowing that, like you said, you have these other enterprises that you can get rid of, right?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes.

**Robin Salverson:**

If you need to. You can get rid of those cows that you bought in, and brought in, and are going to cull, but you can get rid of those quicker. Do you have an intentional drought management plan? Do you have something [Laughter] written out that helps guide you?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes, I do, and through the Ranching for Profit, a lot of the old, wiser, whole ranches that were in there, the [Brosius] out at Nebraska really helped me develop a drought plan and trigger dates to help me better utilize it. When I first developed it, I didn’t utilize it. I was like, “Okay. I got a drought plan,” but then, I’m still not the greatest, smartest person in the world. I tried to manage them and feed through the drought, and then I was like, “What the heck do I have this for if I’m not going to use it?” Two years ago - no, it was actually three years ago, I started really utilizing that. I started destocking and trying to manage through it. That’s been tough because trying to buy back in these high cattle prices when you destock. So destocking sometimes doesn’t mean selling too. It could mean just getting them off your ranch and going to somewhere else to feed, but I sold because I was trying to get my herd back to what I wanted. Now, I’m selling some of the undesirable, some of my calves that I didn’t want. Now, I’m trying to get back to my numbers, it’s a little challenging with the cattle prices the way they are.

**Madison Kovarna:**

That’s been a topic that we - you’re hearing it everywhere now is the fact of “Oh, why do I want to keep selling and cattle prices are so good. I should be growing the herd,” but I think it’s important that people remember the greater goal like you are. You are like, “Man, it’s hard to build back,” but you have a plan too. Whether it takes you five years to get there, or if it takes you six months, those type of things. I always advocate for drought plans if we can, because sometimes, I know Bart does it like this, and Dugan, you probably know this, but he does his A, B, and C herds. The Cs as soon as things go south, they’re gone. The Bs get a little bit more a free pass to hang around until things get really bad, but sometimes, even just grouping your cows and then that really allows the emotion to be taken out of the situation too because we all love every single cow in our herd, maybe except the ones that are a bit of drama queens and make life a little harder [Laughter] than it needs to be, but we appreciate every single one of them, so it’s hard to decide who stays and who goes, but putting it out in a business plan like that, those drought plans really can help make those decisions. Have you seen that, now that you’ve been following that drought plan a little bit more that it makes those decisions a little easier to make?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes. I wholeheartedly believe in the A, B, C, and sometimes D herds. I think I got A, B, C, D herd this year. So, yes, I do believe in that and it takes all the emotion out of it. So, like this year with the drought and in just some uncertainty of where the market is going to be this fall, I didn’t go wholeheartedly into the short-terms again. So, this year, I did bring in some custom grazing cows. I haven’t done that in a while, but knowing that the drought’s coming, that would be one herd. That’s my first herd that’s going to leave the place is the custom grazers, and I let the family know it’s in a contract, that if trigger dates aren’t met, there are certain expectations with that deduction of their herd first. As we go along, then once if I get rid of all of them, if it gets to be too bad, then the short-term cows are going to be next. That’s one reason I bought them is so they are liquidable and I can get rid of them. So, that’s one reason that I went that route. So I don’t got all my eggs in one basket and having to cut into a herd that I - people, you’re right, “I love my herd and don’t want to lose any of them.” Well, you should never fall in love with your animals. That’s one thing Ranching for Profit taught me is you should be profitable and that’s the first thing you should be looking for on your ranch.

**Robin Salverson:**

I think you’ve just stated it right there. It is a way of life, but you’ve truly made this more of a business versus just a way of life. It’s supposed to be profitable for you. I know you do. You look at your spreadsheets and you identify, and you try to take all the risk out as much as possible when you buy those short-term cows to hopefully make - well, you want to make a profit. They’re just not there to fill a space, right?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes.

**Robin Salverson:**

I think having that drought plan in place allows you to make those decisions to cull those cows because you can have all the cows in the world, but if you don’t have the grass and the soil to support them, it doesn’t matter.

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes.

**Robin Salverson:**

I said this before. I say that grazes come, I’m about eye candy and that’s the cows, right? I love [Laughter] my eyes gravitate to the cows right away. Going through a lot of the talks with you guys that really our eyes should be gravitating down and looking at the grass. Then right below the grass, obviously, is our soil, which is even more important. Like you said, with bale grazing, what you’re trying to accomplish with bale grazing, plus your more intentional management is to build that soil to help support those cows.

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes, and I agree. I love to look at animals too. Don’t get me wrong. I love a good cow and all this. I just was at Bart Carmichael’s on Sunday to go look at bulls and I was there for six hours because we looked through his whole cow herd, and we just sat out there and just looked. That’s all fun. It’s good. If you don’t have anything for them to eat and your soil is poor, you’re not going to have, be in a cow business very long.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Most recently, so I haven’t been with the extension too terribly long, but in the last several months, I suppose, I have gotten more into attending and doing more range management things because growing up, as a kid, I grew up on a farm and grew up grazing cows and all the things, but I was very much into the cow side of the equation. Now that I’ve started to learn my, a little bit of my range knowledge is improving. I wouldn’t say I’m a pro just yet or even mediocre maybe, at best is the way I should say it, [Laughter] but like going out into a pasture as well manage and being able to pick out all the different grass species and the different forms that are there of a healthy grassland is so cool to me now. I’m watching the cows utilize those different plants during different seasons of the year, and cattle are really smart with grazing and if we can give them the tools on a healthy grassland to do that, they pretty much will do the work for us. So I think it’s always cool to see how proper management in and/or out of drought too can really impact how those cows just perform through the year and start to work for us rather than the other way around.

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes. I always want to [grasp that] exchange and visiting with a totally different area climate rancher from Ohio, a producer, he called himself, but actually he called himself “grass farmer”, and he said, “I want to be the best grass farmer I can be.” So, I was like, “What do you mean?” So he said, “Well, I want to have the best grass, and how I harvest it is through the cows,” and that really stuck with me, and I agree with that. Now, 100% is I want to be the best grass farmer I can be, and how I harvest it is with the cow and the most efficient cow I can put on there. So, my whole paradigms have just changed through my journey and just sometimes, as of Sunday, visiting with Bart, every time I leave Bart’s place, I don’t think I listen to the radio because he’s got me thinking about things all the way home, and so, those are the good things now. Never stop learning is the biggest thing now, I think. I’m treating my ranch like a business. I always wanted to be a cowboy. That was my whole deal, this and that, but being broke and being a cowboy, that’s not very fun. So, I consider myself a businessman, and the challenges that go with that, and all the fun challenges that go with that.

**Robin Salverson:**

So, going back to the drought management plan, what are those trigger dates that you have? A lot of us tend to push the ball out, trying to just like, “Oh, it’s June and now it’s July,” and we’re like, “Oh, crap.” So, you said with your custom grazers, you have already spoken to them and said, “This is the deal.” So, what are you looking at in your place to help you start identifying when those animals may have to leave?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

The first one is in March. I think it’s March 19th. If I don’t have a certain percentage of moisture by then, then I notify the - whoever I’m taking the custom grazers that I’m taking in that we’re going to probably - you probably won’t be able to bring a 10% of them in. So, I reduce it by 10%. Then my next date is I think the April 19th or 20th. I think I give it 30 days. If I don’t have a certain percentage then, then we’re looking at maybe I think it’s a 25% reduction of what I was going to bring in. May is also another trigger. I think it’s May 20th. Then another one’s there, then I think it’s 50%. Then if it’s June, if I have another trigger date and they met, then they’re off the place within by July. Then I got to start looking at my herd and making decisions, and through there too. So, if I don’t have custom grazers, then I have also trigger dates from my herd too. That by these dates, I better start looking, what I might look at, I might start looking at where I can maybe pick up some grass to move my herd or sell. So, each one of these dates also have trigger dates for - if I was running 100% of my cows, which normally I am. This year, I took in custom grazers because of the uncertainties, and March and April both hit trigger dates, but I did not notify my grazers yet because the one reason I didn’t, they know about it and I told them, “We’re not going to do reduction,” as I left so much grass untouched last year with bale grazing, and how I managed last year, yet I need to come in and get some of these grass grazed. I also have on the north half of my pastures, I don’t have good water, so I’m going to use these custom grazers to run pipe, but letting them know of that, if May rolls around and the trigger date is hit, then we’re going to sit down, we’re going to discuss some stuff. I do need to get some grass, some pastures grazed this summer because I think I left almost 2,000 acres untouched last year. That I need to get some sort of impact put on them, and so, my drought plan is in full effect, but I’m tweaking it for this year.

**Robin Salverson:**

I don’t think that’s a bad thing because you have grass available and you’ve managed for that, and that’s good. That allows you to still have this cash flow, and so, it’s really a win-win in that, the way you’ve done that. I guess kind of back up to that, you are setting your trigger dates for July. You’re already starting like you said in March, you’re looking typically would be in March, and then April, and then May because by June 1st, "if we don’t have the moisture that we need, we really have a hard time throughout the month of July and August. We really, our production just - and so, I think just kicking the can down the road is not a helpful thing here, by any means when we look at trigger dates.

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes, and that’s the most important thing about the trigger dates. If you do do a drought plan, whoever, anybody, make them realistic and achievable, and something you’re actually going to do. Like I said, I didn’t use them for the first few years that I made my drought plan, and then we were in a three-long drought, I was like, “I got to do something. I got to do something.” It had showed on how resilient and how my pastures have rebounded with me doing that, that I have a lot more diversity than I’m seeing. Things that when I first took over, I didn’t see. I just see more native species just coming in, and just with understanding that you got to manage through all these difficulties, and having a drought plan is important. It’s very important.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think the important, I mean, Robin kind of touched on it and Dugan touched on its route is the fact that it’s a plan, but it’s not built in concrete and rebar that you can’t flex with. You have your trigger dates in place and you let them know, “Hey, this is where we’re at,” but you took in outside variables and outside things that have changed your response. So, it’s kind of neat for me to sit back and listen to you about, “Yes, I have this plan, but this is how it ebbs and flows with what I need it to be at that particular time,” which, I mean, I am a planner at heart, I always have been. If things don’t go my way through my plan, I sometimes get a little frustrated. I’m not going to lie. [Laughter] I need to work on that, but that’s the cool thing with these plans is we can make them as concrete as we want. If we could plan out everything that happens in life, I don’t think any of us would plan for a drought. [Laughter] I think all of us will plan for adequate moisture all the time and just let the grass grow and all of those things. So, it’s really cool to hear how you make that plan work for you and what you need it to be every single year.

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes, and I also do my grazing plan. I usually just want to have it finalized by the end of January, and for the last, now going on six years where I’ve had it, have I followed it every year? No. It has changed. Because when you’re going out measuring and your forage availability changes through the summer, I don’t think I’ve ever followed any of my plans, but that doesn’t mean they’re not important. It’s very important to have a grazing plan, but it becomes adaptive with your monitoring and knowing what you have available. So, everybody, like you said, all ranchers are optimistic and hopeful, but we’ve also got to be realist too, and things change throughout the year.

**Robin Salverson:**

Well, we have come up to the end of our episode for time, so Madison, do you have any last things you want to ask Dugan and pick his brain on?

**Madison Kovarna:**

If I wanted to ask all the questions I wanted to, I think we’d be here all day. [Laughter] I always think it’s so fun to sit and talk with producers that are out there doing the good things and making their rangelands healthier, so that our cows can be – as in nutrition, someone diehard [Laughter] cattle nutrition, all of the things, managing a rangeland really allows cattle to go out and do the behavior that we want them to do, and let them go select their diet better than I could ever dream of making. If I can make a diet as good as they can graze, I would be making a lot more money, [Laughter] to be honest. So, that’s really cool, and I think our listeners should really take what Dugan is saying at heart, and if they get a chance to access the resources that he mentioned, because they’re all just wells of knowledge that do nothing but really good and make you sit back and ruminate on what you’re doing at home.

**Robin Salverson:**

Absolutely. There are a lot of great resources out of there, and I know, Dugan, you are a true teacher at heart too. I know that you will talk to anybody if they have questions, right?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Yes. So, I found out is, I don’t want people to make the mistakes that I did. If I can help somebody not make the mistakes that I learned through this process, but that’s one way you learn is, do mistakes, but try to minimize people’s wanting not to do this because it’s very important to start managing how you graze.

**Robin Salverson:**

Absolutely. It’s the foundation. It’s the foundation of everything. We have our foundation herds. People that have their, but really, the foundation is our grassland and our soil health, so. Well, thank you, Dugan, so much. Do you have any last comments you want to make before we wrap up?

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

No. I just thank you for asking me to be part of this, and hopefully if somebody can learn something from this, and if they ever want to reach out to me, hopefully, they can get a hold of Robin or Madison, and you guys can get them in touch with me.

**Robin Salverson:**

We can do that for you, absolutely.

**Dugan Bad Warrior:**

Sure.

**Robin Salverson:**

Before we end this episode of Cattle HQ, I just want to share with our listeners that SDSU Extension does have Cattle HQ Live webinars that are held on a monthly basis. To learn more about these live webinars, feel free to visit www.extension.sdstate.edu. Once again, this has been Cattle HQ brought to you by SDSU Extension Headquarters for all things beef/cattle. Visit extension.sdstate.edu for the latest beef information. Until our next episode, you are not fully dressed until you’re wearing a smile.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

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[Outro music]