

Economics drive the Schleich farm

By HOLLY SPANGLER

KENT Schleich has always figured there's more than one way to grow a farm.

Sure, he can add acres, as he's done throughout his 32-year farming career, culminating in his current 1,880-acre land base. And he can add cows, as he's done to build a 200-head purebred Angus herd. But he also learned a long time ago that consistent, persistent attention to production details would grow the business beyond simply adding volume.

That emphasis on real production improvements, combined with his lead-



Sunnyhill sale is an annual event

JUST days after Kent Schleich receives his Master Farmer award, he'll welcome 100-plus people to his Sunnyhill Angus Farm for their 19th annual production sale, traditionally held the second Saturday in March.

It is no small feat preparing 80 head of cattle for sale, and Kent and his wife, Wendy, will have worked for months to pull it off. And that's not to mention the artificial insemination and embryo transplant program they've used to build performance and carcass traits of their herd over the years.

Kent began by selecting animals, mostly bulls and cow-calf pairs, from their purebred Angus herd. They weighed and tested the animals and submitted the info to the American Angus Association to generate expected progeny differences. Then Wendy began work on the sale catalog.

They tailor their sale offerings to the commercial producer, but Sunnyhill genetics are used by both purebred and commercial breeders throughout the Midwest, the majority within 100 miles of the Schleich farm.

Key Points

- Kent Schleich farms 1,800 acres in Fulton County, raising corn, soybeans and cattle.
- An annual production sale offers genetics from their Sunnyhill Angus Farm.
- Kent serves as a director on the Illinois Farm Bureau board.

ership record, makes Fairview farmer Kent Schleich a 2009 Master Farmer.

Alongside his father, Junior, Kent began building an Angus cattle herd through 4-H and FFA. He added cows while attending Western Illinois University, then rented a farm while teaching agriculture. From there, he transitioned to part-time work at the Farmers Home Administration and started farming full-time in 1979.

Kent pinpoints much of his farming achievements to two early efforts. First, he applied agricultural economics and farm management skills that he learned in college.

"Whether to buy land, how much debt to take on — those decisions were dictated by what I learned in ag economics and real estate appraisal classes," he explains.

Second, he bought land instead of renting, creating stability in his operation over time.

"I bought what nobody else wanted, and then I improved it, taking out trees, putting in dry dams, terraces, waterways," Kent describes. "I like to tell people I farm some of the best ground and some of the worst ground in Fulton County," he jokes.

Among that worst ground is reclaimed strip mine acreage and timber ground, with some farms at 30% non-tillable. That's where the cattle come in.

Cattle drive

Kent's Sunnyhill Angus Farm has been a major part of the farming enterprise since 1940 and today is considered one of the best performance herds in Illinois.

Kent and his wife, Wendy, have studied genetics and visited herds all over the country — often planning vacations around such visits — in order to improve their knowledge base.

Back home, they keep careful production records to make breeding decisions and select replacement females. Kent was one of the first in Illinois to use Beef Performance Testing, and then transitioned to Angus Herd Improvement Records. He was also an early adopter of rotational grazing, and has hosted several tours and field days.

Kent employs no-till and minimum-till practices to control erosion. He no-tills soybeans and does a combination



FAMILY TIME: Kent and Wendy Schleich are raising 12-year-old Emily on their Fairview farm, which was founded in the 1870s by Kent's great-grandfather.

of conventional, strip till and no-till corn. A longtime user of grid-sample soil testing, Kent puts livestock manure to work as a big part of his fertility program and has begun strip-till banding some of the fertilizer.

With 200 cows to feed, Kent relies on a ration mix of hay, distillers grains and corn silage.

Putting up silage is a big part of his early harvest efforts, which is exactly where he found himself nearly three years ago right before being airlifted to a local hospital. Kent was standing in the silo chute, nearly 30 feet off the ground, with his feet on a panel step. The panel gave way into the silo, allowing his lower body to enter the silo, flipping him upside down. He fell head

first onto a conveyor on the ground.

Doctors were amazed that he didn't break his neck and, in fact, he had little more than a cracked lower vertebra. Wendy believes that by landing on the H-shaped conveyor, Kent was spared from serious head and neck injuries.

Today, he shakes his head and chuckles, recalling how many times he'd told his wife that it just wasn't possible to fall in the silo. "I bet I told her that 20 times," he says. But it was also a watershed moment for him personally.

"It made me realize there are other things in life besides farming," he reflects. "Before, when I'd think about coaching my daughter's ball team, I'd worry about the time commitment. Now I just do those things."

Farm Bureau leader

Today, coaching is one of Kent's great loves, along with watching local sports in general. He's quick to spend any down time with Wendy and their daughter, Emily, 12. He's even taken a part-time position at the local school, coaching junior high girls basketball.

Kent's leadership, however, extends far beyond the local community. He has a distinguished history with the Fulton County Farm Bureau and currently serves as an Illinois Farm Bureau district director. He's an officer in the Illinois Coalition for Animal Agriculture, a member of the Illinois Livestock Development Group and chairman of the Illinois Farm Bureau Farm Profitability Advisory Team. Back home, he has served Extension, 4-H and the local elevator board.

And the secret to his success? Kent is thoughtful for just a moment.

"Probably Wendy," he answers, a notion to which his wife gently scoffs with embarrassment. "She's been real supportive. I don't have any brothers and Dad's been retired for a while, so I can bounce ideas off of her. And that's really helpful to our operation."



BABY BOVINE: Calving starts in January at Sunnyhill, beginning with bred heifers.