

3-9-06 9SHORT.DOC

Two days before the bulls went out with the cows, number 529, a son of Iconoclast number 1058 and Open Range 2016, cleared the fence to the bull pasture to land on our new neighbor. The last time the 09 Divide knew such rapid action, the United States Air Force in 1944 linked a fire watcher's tower on the county road via short wave radio to the air base in Angelo in equal flurry.

Instead of days passing hunting for the bull in the brush, the neighbors trailed him in hours using radar or satellite. Every 15 minutes reports came in over the wire: "Don't worry, Mr. Noelke, we will have your bull back before dark."

One call echoed with cows bawling in the background — lots of cows bawling in a pen, perhaps his whole herd. Each call transmitted an urgency. "Determined" is a better way to describe the tone. No, no, "high-pitched panic" is the right phrase to describe the emotion.

For the last five breeding season, neighbors have been very cooperative about returning my fence-breaking, watergap-crawling, high-jumping oxen. The bull pasture is enforced by an electric wire. A solar charged 12-volt battery keeps the wire hot. Three top barbs on a 47-inch

high net fence present a steep hurdle for the dumpy, pot-bellied bulls' profiles.

Puzzled how the bulls kept escaping, I studied an old cattle breeder's manual of my stepfather's explaining breed characteristics. Only clue was a footnote saying, "Angus cattle bred to high tail heads, pinched nostrils or pigeon toes show marked resistance to prod poles or hot-shots."

Last time I was around electrically stimulated cow works, Uncle Goat Whiskers kept his subjects three corral boards in the air at all times with EverReady batteries. Whiskers thought he'd save time and shrink by hitting an old sister with a shot of juice in the wrong place at the wrong time. By age 60, he held the world's title of having turned more cattle back going the right way than any cowman alive. But seems like his bulls ran over more fences than they ever jumped.

Next morning, the neighbor ended the bull hunt to report my bull had gone back home under a watergap. Sure was possible. Iconoclast cattle tend to have nervous reactions to noise. The wife roaring around on a four-wheeler helping search exceeded the loudest motor noise bull 529 had heard in his whole life, unless the old feed wagon backfiring counts for "motor noise."

One of my helpers blamed the excitement on the previous owner of the ranch, the one who grew so sensitive to joining an unplanned crossbreeding program the year we used 12 cold-blooded bulls to breed out heifers.

My plan was to rotate six "corrientes" every 30 days, thus allowing six bulls to rest, and ship all the calves at 300 pounds. His plan was to straight breed his Brangus cows to registered bulls, top his heifer calves, and sell the steers for a premium at 600 pounds.

My first mistake was resting the bulls 30 days, allowing extra impetus to jump and break fences. Second mistake was thinking four miles distance, two cross-fences and one outside fence made enough barrier to keep six bulls away from a herd of Brangus cows. And the worst mistake was assuming the neighbor's sense of humor stood unwavering in times of theatrical crisis and the mongrelizing of his cow herd.

Before recalling how fond he was of those old black humpy cows, I suggested we build a conveyor system to shoot those bulls from his headquarters over into my pasture. The heads and tail ends of the bulls came to perfect points to be relayed down a belt line.

Caught on, though, when he replied, "Shoot is an appropriate word, friend Noelke. We are shooting pretty

high cards with six of your 'damn' bulls running on me, breeding that many cows every hour, plus threatening to cripple a bull costing more than all six of those misfits added together."

Stalling for words, I remember saying, "Always heard good fences make good neighbors. Must have started before this became a cow-calf country. Don't you reckon?"

He sputtered one more obscenity. Then he slammed down the phone so loud it made my mastoid bone tremble.

I struck a herder at the hardware store last week. I was feeling mighty ashamed of my bulls being a disgrace on the 09 Divide. Before I opened my mouth, he said, "Monte, I am not going to give up ranching unless you do."

Stricken, I thought, "I am just like my bulls - a bad influence - a ruination of man - a blasphemy on bloodlines." Gave him a strong handshake and stalked out the door without pausing for a visit.