

BUILDING A BRAND

Written by Mona Howe

BUILDING A BREED

When the three partners set out on their mission to develop SpecklePark Reserve, their vision was much broader than creating just another branded beef program. That vision encompassed building up the entire Speckle Park breed. In fact, the project was born with the goal of securing, not only the future of Speckle Park cattle in the industry but also greater marketing opportunities for those who raise them.

The idea for the program grew out of intense conversation between Vince Stevenson of Ker-Kain Farms, Rob and Janice Harasymchuk of INC Cattle Company and Ken Friesen of KFC Farms on how to level the playing field for this great breed they are all so passionate about. After much discussion they determined the process would be to acquire and feed the cattle, collect the carcass data and market the product in a way that each segment of the supply chain would recognize the superior attributes and characteristic of

the Speckle Park breed. A proving ground, if you will, to show the world what these three Speckle Park breeders already knew was so special about this breed including above average marbling, less days needed on feed and desirable muscle sizes attractive to the food service sector.

Vince Stevenson, who owns and operates Ker-Kain Farms along with his wife Jillian and son Kain, has been a key driver in developing the SpecklePark Reserve program. His experience owning and operating Ranchhouse Meats, a butcher shop and meat counter, gave him a unique frame of reference when embarking on this project. His firsthand exposure to Speckle Park carcasses at the shop, along with more than 35 years of experience raising cattle of his own are just a couple things that led him to get involved with the breed initially.



Speckle Park Reserve Founding Members Janice Harasymbuk, Ken Friesen and Vince Stevenson

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“A friend of mine told me about Speckle Park winning the carcass competition at the Calgary Stampede. After hearing about this, I found six head of Speckle Park online, bought those feeder cattle and fed them out. The carcasses were excellent, well marbled and consistent,” Stevenson recalls. “I had been using some other breeds that I grew up with, and they were inconsistent at best. Anyways, I tried these and really liked them,” he continued.

From there he went and bought a group of Speckle Park bred heifers in hopes of maintaining a consistent supply of these cattle for the butcher shop. When those six heifers all calved in a spring storm, brought in 6 live calves, bred back right away to calve the next spring and stayed in top condition throughout the winter months, he was hooked on using this new breed in a big way.

“I was raised, first and foremost, to be a cow/calf producer but then I got into the butcher shop business, so I had to look at the cattle a little bit differently. From there, I just knew, for all facets of the business; the cow/calf side, the finishing side and the meat side, Speckle Park was the way I wanted to go,” he explained, “They were the best all round breed that I’d ever had anything to do with.”

Fast forward 10 years from those initial experiences Stevenson had with Speckle Parks, to the present. “I’d been watching Speckle Park calves sell in the

auction marts and they were selling at a big-time discount,” he noted. It was at that point he knew somehow, something needed to change. After sharing his concerns with some other Speckle Park breeders, Stevenson found that he wasn’t the only one looking for ways to address the challenges the breed was facing. Purebred Speckle Park breeders Rob and Janice Harasymbuk and Ken Friesen were also convinced that the breed’s potential was being overlooked throughout the supply chain and commercial cattlemen using Speckle Park genetics were leaving too many dollars on the table.

“It was obvious we weren’t getting our fair market share because of the cattle’s coloring. We saw the need to do something to promote the breed and product through some means that proved what the Speckle Park carcass had to offer the industry,” expressed Rob. This sparked a great deal of conversation between the three parties on what was the best path forward. The idea for SpecklePark Reserve, as Janice says, “really developed from a series of discussions between the three of us,” referencing INC, KFC and Ker-Kain Farms. A year and half later, their plans were set in motion.

With the idea of a branded beef program as the vehicle, the trio set about developing the framework for how it would accomplish the necessary objectives of highlighting what the breed had to offer. The nuts and bolts, if you will. The initial step was to source the feeder cattle, both steers and heifers, and get them into a feedlot. When buying cattle, their aim was to source animals with at least 50% Speckle Park genetics. Bull customers of



SpecklePark Reserve Cattle in Feedlot

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INC Cattle Company and KFC Farms were a natural fit.

Rob and Janice Harasymchuk of INC Cattle Company added four Speckle Park heifers to their long-time herd about 10 years ago. They fast tracked their program using AI and embryo transfer as well as through purchasing top Speckle Park genetics from other herds. Today, INC is one of the top breeders in the country, if not the world, running over 300 head of Speckle Park cows. That, of course, has led them to build an extensive client base of bull customers. This customer base, they felt, was the perfect jumping off point for sourcing feeder cattle for the SpecklePark Reserve program

Ken Freisen, having been in the cattle business for over 20 years and purebred Speckle Park breed for the last 15, also had a thriving client list to source feeder calves from. As Janice, who was President of the Canadian Speckle Park Association at the time, tells us, “We knew we had to help our breeders and their bull buyers get a fair shake, and getting their calves into this program would allow us to start doing that.”

Boyd Stuart, long-time marketing rep with Northern Livestock Sales out of Prince Alberta, Saskatchewan, admits that the patterned cattle often get docked at the market, even though the quality is there, and agrees that

this program will help spread the right message. Last fall the group purchased anywhere from 6 to 200 head at a time from 15 different producers across Canada in order to reach their total of nearly 1,000 head of feeder cattle to kick off the program.

The feedlot situation was critical as the cattle would be finished without added hormones that are normally used on over 90 percent of cattle in custom feedlots. Not only that, but the numbers were also relatively small compared to what most lots were accustomed to dealing with. In addition, the lots had to be willing to deal with a variety of classes of cattle

being fed as a group, as Vince mentioned, “We wanted to buy a little of everything; the good, the bad and even some of the ugly cattle of the breed.” The group felt that these steps were necessary to accurately represent what the breed is currently offering the market and to be able to do the necessary comparisons. All parties agreed that both Red Coat Cattle Feeders near Hazenmore, Saskatchewan and Highway 21 Feeders near Acme, Alberta were the perfect fit for the project. “We never anticipated that we would be finishing cattle in a feedlot but here we are today,” noted Rob.

“I’m not a feedlot guy and had a lot of questions that needed answering,” Vince stated. “We can’t thank these feedlot managers enough for finding space for the cattle and guiding us along in this process as we’ve figured out what to do and what we could do better moving forward,” he went on to add. Being able to put their trust in the feedlots gave each of the stakeholders added peace of mind when it came to having the cattle fed and finished properly. Kevin Ainsworth, manager at Red Coat Cattle Feeders, shared his perspective, noting that the Speckle Park cattle have a great deal of potential given their ability to consistently grade well and finish with fewer days on feed, along with initial numbers pointing towards better than average feed conversion rates. Scott Brady of Highway 21 Feeders reiterated that these cattle were topping both gain and grade, two things that typically don’t go together.

While the group was confident in the carcass quality, they have been pleasantly surprised by the data that has come back from Cargill thus far; over 95 percent grading AAA or prime with yields of 60 plus percent.

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Other positive attributes aside, the Speckle Park carcass is one area the breed appears to really stand out. While the group was confident in the carcass quality, they have been pleasantly surprised by the data that has come back from Cargill thus far; over 95 percent grading AAA or prime with yields of 60 plus percent. With more than 700 head of cattle on feed having been processed to date, these numbers are very encouraging.

“We believed the numbers would be up there well above the industry average, but now we actually have the data to say, okay, it’s everything we’ve always believed,” agreed Rob and Janice. This high quality and accurate data from a federally graded facility is the proof the group felt was required to share with other Speckle Park breeders and to help reach the level of credibility the breed deserves within the industry. As purebred breeders Ken, Rob and Janice know genetics play a significant roll in meat quality, that’s something the data is proving and something they are excited to share with other Speckle Park breeders and the cattle industry at large.

Gaining the approval of the retail meat and food service sectors was another key aspect of the SpecklePark Reserve venture. One thing that Ken Freisen of KFC farms noted about the more moderate carcass size characteristic of the breed, was muscle sizing more desirable to the food service sector. This was confirmed by Trent Enns, owner of Smoke Haus Meats of Martensville Saskatchewan and former meat inspector for Alberta Agriculture, who said “These Speckle Park carcasses consistently have a very desirable balance of even muscle sizes, especially the loin eye size of the ribeye and striploin.” He went on to say that, in his ample experience working with Speckle Park carcasses, he has found the meat to typically be very well marbled, providing the consumer with a tender, juicy eating experience that keeps them coming back. “If people eat it, they will like it and keep coming back for more,” reiterated Enns who first encountered the breed back in the late 90’s during his time as a meat inspector.

Building trust within the industry and getting their information into the right hands was another detail that could not be overlooked. An innovative 5-star event, dubbed “Taste to Believe” by current CSPA Vice President and Chairperson of the CSPA Commercial

Committee, Craig Brown, was established to help convey their message. The idea behind this event was to, not only share their important data with industry partners such as cattle feeders, order buyers butcher shops and food service providers, but for these people to taste the Speckle Park difference for themselves. They wanted to let the superior eating experience of the beef speak for itself. Read more on the Taste to Believe dinner in the sidebar following this article.

The initial load of steers that was purchased and unloaded at INC Cattle Company



When embarking on this venture the trio knew it wouldn't be an easy task to get this project rolling but were confident that, with the right mix of like-minded individuals, they could most certainly make it happen. The three parties agreed that the success the brand has had to this point can be attributed to a couple of key factors. First and foremost, it has been their willingness to take some big risks, contributing massive amounts of time and effort, that has brought SpecklePark Reserve to where it is today.



"We're all very hands on. There's cow shit on our boots and dirt under our fingernails," illustrates Rob. The prior business background each of the team members possess has, no doubt, been a critical component as well. "All of us owned different businesses outside of the cattle world, too. I don't want to say we are experts, but we had lots of knowledge and different experience in different areas to pull from," shares Janice. Last but by no means least, Vince credits bringing the right people on board to help them

with things like feeding, marketing and media as having a significant impact and knows it will continue to be pivotal in moving forward. "One of the smartest things we did was get smart people to help us," affirmed Rob.

Looking forward, the SpecklePark Reserve group sees immense opportunity for growth. When asked about their vision for the future of the program, Janice said, "In the next five to ten years, we'd like to see it grow by 500%. And that's realistic. So right now, if we have a thousand animals on feed, we're looking at feeding around 5,000 head annually." With the amount of interest they have had from producers, sourcing those number won't be a problem. Growth like this doesn't come without challenges. One hurdle the group continues to face is continuing to make people aware of the breed and all the good it has to offer. However, with increased volumes on the horizon and the collection of more valuable data, the future of the brand and most importantly, the future of the breed, certainly looks strong.

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