

FARMERS FOR THE FUTURE

# Self-reliance keys success





## Responsibility at an early age set the stage for this stocker cattle and winter wheat farm

By Gil Gullickson, Crops Technology Editor

**M**ore than 1,000 miles, major mountain ranges, and several rivers separated Ryan and Hope Pjesky as youngsters.

Their differences, though, are merely geographic. Their upbringings – rooted in self-reliance – mirrored each other.

When Ryan was just a toddler on his family's Goltry, Oklahoma, farm, a neighbor gave him a Holstein steer calf with an injured leg. Ryan fed the steer until he sold it at 1,000 pounds. Ryan used this money to buy two more calves to feed and sell, after which he repeated the cycle many times. At age 12, Ryan rented his first land to grow winter wheat.

"Instead of our dad just having us work for him, he gave my brother and me responsibility at an early age," says Ryan. "We had a checkbook and paid fertilizer and vet supply bills. It taught us the importance of self-reliance, of being responsible."

Hope worked with the sheep flock on her parent's farm near Monterey, Virginia. She also showed horses on a local show circuit. When she wanted to start showing at breed shows, she started working summers for a horse trainer in another part of Virginia.

"My parents didn't know I had ▶▶

Ryan Pjesky prefers steers over heifers in the stocker cattle operation he and his wife, Hope, have with his dad, Roger.

"You can buy heifers cheaper, but you always have to worry about them getting pregnant. And they don't gain as well, either," he says.

Photographs: Mark Kempf

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## THIS SERIES

**Farmers for the Future** is one in a series of stories about farm families who are transitioning management to a new generation. For additional resources for young and beginning farmers, visit [www.agriculture.com/future](http://www.agriculture.com/future). This partner project of *Successful Farming* magazine and Agriculture Online® is brought to you by Roundup Ready 2 Yield™ Soybeans.



**left:** Hope and Ryan Pjesky say one of the best investments they've made is a semi truck. They save money by hauling their own cattle and wheat.



**right:** An enclosed cattle chute enables the Pjeskys to work cattle in all kinds of weather.

▶▶applied until after I got the job,” says Hope. “I did it on my own.”

The couple met at an American Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers Discussion Meet. They married in 1994 and settled on the Pjesky farm. Ryan’s father, Roger, still farms, while his mother, Rita, is a bank vice president. His brother Rex, works off the farm as a professor at West Texas A&M University.

### STOCKER CATTLE ON WINTER WHEAT

Remember the book *The Grapes of Wrath*? It chronicled Depression-era Okies who left Oklahoma.

Well, the Pjeskys mimic the Okies

who stayed in an equally riveting book, *The Worst Hard Time*. They’ve used similar pluck by annually running about 1,000 stocker cattle in an area of scant rainfall and hard-scrabble soils.

“The way we make wheat work is to run stocker cattle on it in the wintertime and use pounds of beef that the cattle gain as a second crop,” says Ryan.

The Pjeskys grow hard red winter wheat for grain on their better cropland and just graze cattle on wheat grown on their roughest cropland. They graze stocker cattle on all wheat fields from late fall until winter wheat reaches the hollow stem growth stage in spring. If they move cattle prior to that stage, winter wheat grain yields do not decrease.

Cattle moved from winter wheat in spring go to grass pastures. Each year, the Pjeskys continue grazing cattle on one-third of their acres instead of harvesting the wheat for grain. Thus, each wheat acre is grazed every third year.

“When we graze off, we can double the normal stocking rate and cattle can gain up to 3 pounds a day on ▶▶

## PASSIONATE FOR AGRICULTURE

Ryan and Hope Pjesky’s passion for agriculture extends off their farm, too.

As a 2008 Eisenhower Fellow, Hope traveled to Japan, Thailand, and Malaysia to learn about differences in agricultural trade policies and food safety, defense, and traceability practices. Both served on the agricultural advisory committee of Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) during his campaign. They have also been involved in developing policy adopted by Farm Bureau on state and national levels.

“We’ve talked about things at the kitchen table that have made it to the county, state, and national levels of Farm Bureau and are now being lobbied for to become law,” says Ryan.

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► wheat,” says Hope. “Grazing off is also a natural way to control weeds like cheatgrass and rye.”

Except for busy fall wheat planting and summer harvesttime, the Pjeskys buy steers year-round weighing between 350 and 500 pounds. They approximately double weights before selling steers to feedlots for finishing.

A good frame on which they can pack on pounds is a prerequisite for the steers the Pjeskys buy. After that, though, they aim to buy less expensive ones that need more initial care.

“You take a risk when you buy these types of cattle in that you have more death loss and lower gains while you’re building them up,” says Ryan. However, the risk is often worthwhile, as they glean more profit at sale time due to the time-tested adage of buy low, sell high.

Their graze-off option also enables

them to sell cattle into late spring, when fewer cattle are marketed and buyers are willing to pay more. “Normally, everyone sells around March 15, but we can keep cattle and sell them into May,” says Ryan.

## NO SILVER SPOON HERE

Although separate, the Pjeskys and Ryan’s father run their operations in parallel. They equally split stocker cattle, farm expenses, and equipment. They own and rent land together, but also own and rent land separately.

“In our family, land isn’t given,” says Ryan. “We buy it from the previous generation.”

The cattle and wheat combo has placed the Pjeskys on a solid future foundation. That’s key in a stressful climate like theirs, where a drought can set back a farm for years.

“We’re probably better equipped to handle a loss than we’ve ever been,” says Ryan. ■



## learn more

To learn more about the Pjeskys, including Hope’s travels as an Eisenhower Fellow, go to [www.agriculture.com/Pjesky](http://www.agriculture.com/Pjesky).



Although their flock is now down to 20 ewes, sheep have long been a part of Hope and Ryan Pjesky’s lives. Both had sheep flocks while growing up on their parents’ farms.