



From Jiu Jitsu Fighter *to* Rancher

First generation cattleman making a name for himself.

By Kaitlyn Alanis

Unlike many agriculturists, Mitchell Coats started his cattle operation in Boise, Idaho, without the guidance of a predecessor. There was no farmer or rancher helping him in his journey from Jiu Jitsu fighting to Wagyu wrangling.

“I didn’t inherit anything,” he said.

“I’m a first-generation guy. I didn’t inherit any land, any fencing, any feed tubs, water troughs — nothing.”

As a first-generation rancher, Coats had no obligation to take over any cattle, continue any family traditions, or sustain a ranching legacy.

Rather, the national award-winning Jiu Jitsu fighter of more than 14 years found himself leaving the business world and creating his own path into

the cattle industry, simply because he wanted the lifestyle that agriculturists lead.

Coats noticed the same values he established during his championship fighting career were also present in the agricultural industry - hard work, integrity, responsibility and no days off.

A LIFE, NOT A JOB

“I told my wife — we didn’t have children at the time — that I was looking for an investment, but I also want a lifestyle,” he said. “We were talking about having kids, and I wanted to raise them around those principles — the things that come from being around livestock.”

Within a three-year span, Coats, the founder and co-owner of Prime 37 Beef, has built his operation from a small cow-calf herd on one acre of land, to a 30 plus cow-calf operation now housed on 1,600 acres thanks to a partnership with Stock Rock Ranch. Alongside his friend and business partner David Gee, who is also a first-generation rancher, Coats drew upon values like hard work and responsibility to grow Prime 37.

“It was just kind of like, ‘Oh, you want to try ag? Well just go ahead and put some cattle in my [Gee’s] backyard,’” Coats said. “But of course, I don’t do anything small, and he doesn’t do anything small, and we’re just really scaling up, but it all started in a backyard.”

When Coats, now 36, started his ranch with just two head of cattle in a backyard in 2014, he had nearly no experience or education in agriculture.

Taking a non-traditional route,

Coats started his small cow-calf operation about six months before he began a degree in agriculture science at the University of Idaho, which he is pursuing now. Coats expects to graduate in the spring of 2018.

“College was a total want, and not a need, because I had already proven myself successful as an entrepreneur,” he said. “Because it was a want, I said if I’m going to sit my butt in class and invest myself, I want to do something I’m passionate about. I was looking for an investment, a passion and a degree at the same time.”

And that is exactly what agriculture has been able to provide him and his family.

“I think a lot of kids grow up in a sterile environment,” he said. “They don’t get dirty, literally or figuratively. But figuratively, they are in boxes all day, from house to car to school. Being able to be out where there’s no boundaries or borders is something I wouldn’t be able to do without cattle.”

“Buying a cabin or a boat would do that, but it wouldn’t pay for itself,” he continued. “Cattle, if you do it right, does both. Cattle subsidizes the lifestyle for my family.”

However, the task of creating not just a business, but a lifestyle, has come with its own set of challenges.

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FIRST GENERATION CHALLENGES

Leading a grass-fed beef business in the flint hills of Idaho has been anything but easy.

“As a first-generation rancher, there are more drawbacks to benefits,” Coats said.

The challenges started with securing land and continuing his daily routine of studying for school, growing a business and raising a family.

“We struggled to find somewhere suitable to meet our cattle’s current needs and a place that would allow us to grow and expand,” Coats said.

Prime 37 has high expectations to reach and exceed standards, so room for growth was of utmost importance to Coats and Gee.

To do so, though, they recognized



financial restraints.

“Cattle ranching is a very cash-intensive business, especially in the beginning,” Coats said. “We have tried to procure some of the best genetics that our region has to offer, which is costly. Investing in the genetics is our number one priority, but we also had to purchase many of the items that people would have inherited from one generation to the next — things like squeeze chutes, scales, trailers and feed bunks.”

But of course, as a man experienced with business management, Coats knew that starting a cattle ranching business from the ground up would consist of a lot more challenges than just purchasing land and cattle.

“There is a natural learning curve in every business,” he said. “There are things that you just don’t know when you first set out. Things like learning flood irrigation, animal husbandry,

where to butcher and ruminant nutrition are some examples of things we had to learn along the way.”

While learning the best nutrition techniques for his Wagyu cattle may be new, implementing basic business techniques is not.

“We continue to find the answers to our problems by assessing our strengths and weaknesses,” Coats said.

By not mirroring other operations that have been in the business for generations, Coats said they have created their own path.

PERKS OF A FIRST-GENERATION RANCHER

Despite the challenges, life as a



Coats accepts an award during the University of Idaho College of Agriculture and Life Sciences banquet. Pictured with Coats is his wife, Stephanie Coats.

first-generation rancher has provided Coats with opportunities that would be uncommon to one who has been on a ranch built generations ago.

“Our primary advantage is I can look at market trends and I don’t have to ask anyone’s permission,” Coats said. “I don’t have to ask my father or grandfather permission, or wait until I



inherit the operation.”

“There’s more disadvantages, but that’s my primary advantage — I steer the ship,” he continued. “It’s like a cruise ship, somebody turns it, and a mile later the ship will turn. I have much tighter of a turn.”

The opportunity to steer the ship as he and his partner chooses has allowed Coats to develop Prime 37 into a business that not only produces local, grass-fed beef, but a ranch that believes in transparency and bridging the gap between farm and fork.

They have been able to do so through easy integration of new technologies and production methods, including genetic testing, new cattle-handling techniques and new data-collecting software.

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Coats’ sons Ryder pictured with Prime 37 business partner, David Gee.

LIFE AS A BUSINESS

From turning cattle into a business, a career into a lifestyle and his passion into a niche, Coats said he has seen nothing but growth during his first three and a half years as a local cattle rancher.

“We are committed to it,” Coats said. “We have our savings in it, but the business is already in the black as of last year, so it’s not too bad if you’re business minded. But you have to be willing to be out there at all hours. You have to be all in.”

“My life is my business and my business is my life,” he continued. “There is no off time.”

GROWTH AND HIBERNATION

Coats has watched Prime 37 continue to evolve. Not only does the operation sell beef, but they’ve

also begun to sell seedstock. Producing marketable cattle has allowed Coats to better utilize his understanding of math and science.

“We are hibernating the production side of things and really focusing on building the genetic foundation of our herd,” he said.

Coats said Ranch House Designs has been a vital part of Prime 37’s growth.

“Ranch House has helped us tremendously,” he said. “Specifically, we wanted a logo that would be timeless and reflected our region. We were blown away with the final version. They took what we had in our minds and translated it to something tangible.”

Their logo recently won the 2017 national championship logo design award from the Livestock Publication Council.

“We turned to

RHD because of their professionalism, integrity, designer-customer interface, and speedy turnaround,” Coats said. “Ranch House is a one-stop-shop to create a brand presence worthy of our efforts and passion for our new venture.”

Coats is now hopeful to evolve from an undergraduate ranching student to a ranching agricultural law student in the near future.

“I want to advocate and lobby for the ag industry here in Idaho,” he said. “There’s some underrepresentation, and it’s important to have more people that are advocates for agriculture to be present. I have a logical business mind, I understand the city type and I have experiences on the ranch. It marries very well.”

To learn more about Prime 37, visit www.prime37beef.com.