

Friendship & Synergy

by Matt Hagny

'Better together' is the message from Phillip Nelson and Randall Kaufman, whose skills and machinery lines complement each other's farming operations near Windom, KS. Indeed, the daily operations seem so fluid and seamless that an outside observer might have trouble accurately guessing who owns what. As Randall explains it, "We're comfortable with everyone working on each other's equipment. We're goal-oriented."



The businesses are separate—Nelson's 2,200 acres are distinct from Kaufman's 750 acres, and all the equipment is owned by either one operation or the other. Inputs are carefully tracked and assigned to the proper crop owner. Yet that's the extent of the worry about the ledger balance—field operations aren't billed to each other, nor does anyone track their time in working on anyone else's machinery or crops. Phillip notes, "We don't spend a lot of time counting the nickels [between us]." Phillip's dad, Verlyn, comments, "If everyone's content, well . . . good enough." Randall adds, "The family friendships are valuable," and have spanned decades.

Phillip explains the synergy further: "We each make our own management decisions, but we bounce a lot of ideas off one another. We work well together, and are very

fortunate in that regard." He continues, "We've talked so many times about how lonely it would be doing a job by yourself." On which Randall reflects, "When you break down and you're by yourself, it's a downer." By pooling their labor, they're much more efficient and better able to cope with those issues.

A lot of the teamwork got started because Verlyn was best friends with Randall's older brother, and they did a lot of things together (Randall was just a kid at the time). Randall's older brother died young, but when Randall returned to the community in 1975 (after college, and work in Haiti and Mexico), he and Verlyn became close friends and did many things together, including their farming activities. Randall had an off-farm job during much of this time, and the late-'90s found him doing engineering work in Nebraska and subleasing his farmland to Phillip. They each bring different strengths to the table, with Randall's engineering and mechanical background, Phillip's logistical and managerial skills, and Verlyn's self-described (with a playful grin) "maturity and wisdom."

**On going 100% no-till:
"We wish we woulda done
it ten years earlier."**

No-Till, and New Vigor

Nelsons and Kaufman have a long history with no-till. Verlyn recalls no-tilling milo back into milo stubble in the early '70s with an IH runner planter—although the planting job wasn't pretty, Verlyn says the milo yielded alright. Randall also did some no-till milo for five consecutive years in the early '80s, initially with a Buffalo planter, and later an Allis-Chalmers planter. However, that field "had more intrusive weeds every year [under that monoculture]." Randall recollects, "Those were very good milo crops. And the soil in that field was by far the most mellow of any on the farm [due to 5 years of no-till]." Always one to push the limits, Randall later had the first cotton grown in McPherson County (at least since FSA record-keeping began, anyway).

Despite those early ventures, Kaufman & Nelsons didn't get all the pieces together for continuous no-till until



Photo by Matt Hagny.

Nelson's milo stalks, with the previous wheat stubble visible. A reasonable mulch, but Nelsons and Kaufman get concerned if residue gets sparse.