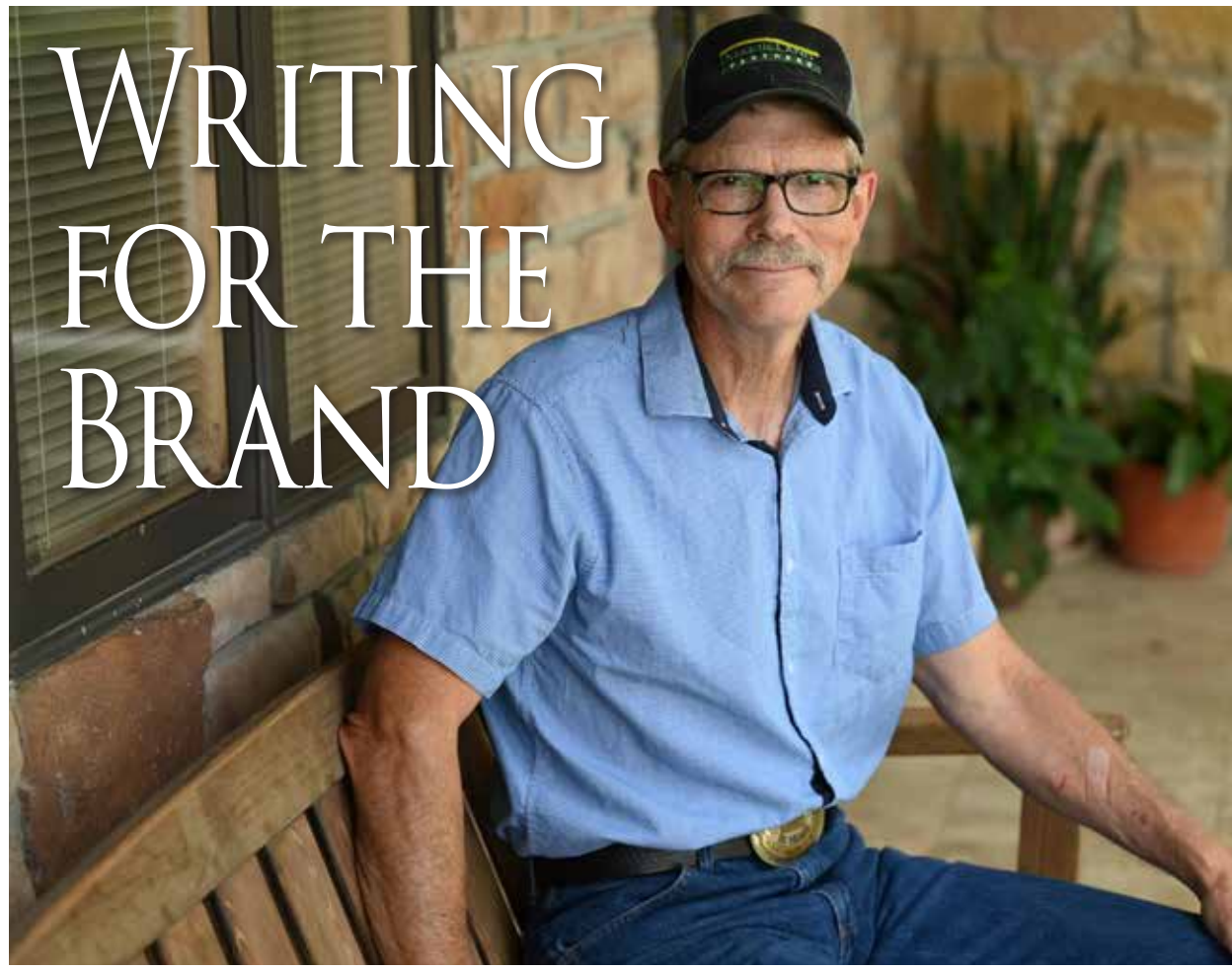


WRITING FOR THE BRAND



Suther inspires cattlemen to ‘Aim High.’

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

Taking the complex and making it applicable. Listening, not just hearing. Asking really good questions. These are the traits that make a good communicator, and they’re hallmarks of Steve Suther’s career.

He seemed to know what a cattleman was thinking and questioning — probably because he was a cattleman himself — and readers gravitated toward what he shared.

The former director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef took full-time retirement last year, after two decades of shaping the high-quality beef movement with his pen.

Making a difference

Neal Haverkamp was one of those Angus breeders who followed Suther’s byline. The cattleman kept up on industry news, reading ag papers to stay informed of trends and markets.

He started to implement some of the ideas Suther explored.

Then one day Suther asked Haverkamp if he could stop at his Bern, Kan., farm with an intern.

“I always read his articles, and when he called to do an article on us, that was huge motivation for me, that we might be doing something right and then to keep working at it,” Haverkamp says.

It was like hosting a celebrity influencer before influencers were a thing.

It’s hard to say exactly when an idea hits, or what helps it build along the way, but for hundreds or thousands of cattlemen like

Haverkamp — those who have added carcass quality as a production goal — it’s likely Suther had something to do with their motivation.

As the voice of CAB’s outreach to producers, Suther primarily made use of the written word, even as the effort branched out to the internet, radio, video and social media. He mentored young employees and more than 45 interns, and he played an active role



in helping guide the brand’s supply development team.

“I just wanted to have conversations,” Suther says, recalling some of his longest-running efforts.

Those included a monthly “Black Ink®” column for ag newspapers, along with regular features in the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, the American Angus Association’s publications directed to seedstock and commercial audiences, respectively.

For the first 10 years, there was no real proof that the quality movement was taking hold. He’d receive mail from disgruntled producers asking why they weren’t getting paid more, or disregarding his messages as rhetoric.

“You just take it on faith that you’re making a difference. You have really no idea whether this is going to be effective or not,” Suther says.

Watching the national acceptance rate stagnate at a longtime 17% average before falling to an all-time low of 14% in 2006 certainly didn’t give much reassurance. Still, he found reasons to hope based on genetic trends and increasing grid premiums for quality.

“I never lost heart, even though we weren’t seeing any obvious signs we were making a difference,” he says.

Haverkamp says in the late

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1990s and early 2000s, there was still a lot of confusion about CAB and how it worked.

“We’d use his article as a reference that you’re going to get feeders who are going to pay more for those calves that are going to earn a premium,” he says. “You’re certainly not going to get the whole premium, but they’ll be willing to give you part of it [if you] will produce the kind of calves that will earn a premium.”

In time, nationwide carcass quality responded to market signals, and CAB brand acceptance began setting records year after year. Today, nearly 37% of all Angus-influenced carcasses hit the CAB target, though you’ll never hear Suther take any credit.

“I would be hard-pressed to find anything I can say for sure that I did to establish proof that I earned my keep,” he says, “but somehow it all worked out good.”

Teamwork

Suther joined CAB as a seasoned ag journalist with experience from regional to national ag publications, such as *Farm Journal* and *Beef Today*. Industry information as a division (now known as producer communications) was created when he started with CAB in 1998.

When then-CAB Vice President Larry Corah took Suther to lunch to discuss the opportunity, he casually asked about goals.

“I said I wanted to work to make a positive difference in the beef industry, shining a light on ideas that would help cattlemen do a better job, profitably,” Suther recalls.

Perhaps that was just the right answer, or perhaps Corah already saw synergy in their ideas. He was hired within weeks.

“My vision was a stereopticon with Corah’s, as we agreed it had

everything to do with money and increasing profit potential for the commercial cow-calf business,” Suther says.

With his animal science background, Corah often brought new research findings and technical details of how to improve quality to Suther’s never-ending quest to show the economics that answered the “why.”

There were research white papers and “think tanks” that gathered some of the brightest minds in the industry, along with surveys and the popular “Here’s the Premium” auction barn study. An “Aim High” series of articles featured producers who reached 30% or higher CAB acceptance and helped others see the possibility in themselves, Suther says.

One of those producers was Arizona rancher Chuck Backus.

“I was trying to raise better calves in harsh country,” he notes.

Early discussions on a quality-focused Black Ink list-serv planted a seed. Suther moderated that list for more than 10 years, as a

more technical precursor to today’s social media discussions. Backus read Suther’s articles and formed a friendship via email.

Both Suther and Paul Dykstra, longtime production specialist for the brand, helped connect Backus with a feeding partner in the Southern Plains and navigate the world of retained ownership. It was the first report card the desert rancher ever got on his genetic decisions, which bucked the regional trend for breed makeup as he added more and more Angus influence.



Steve Suther married Anne in 1978, and the couple built their life in the same county where they grew up. His career and personal life intertwined to center around farm, family and faith.

“I learned a lot from all these interactions and tried to implement it the best I could,” Backus says.

If he’d never met Suther?

“I would be a typical Arizona rancher, with a lot of Brahman cows and a variety.”

In 2013 Suther made a visit to Arizona to learn more about him and those atypical herd goals.

“I hadn’t accomplished a whole lot by then, but I was on my way,” Backus says. “He observed more than I thought he had, and he got my admiration right away.”

Suther made a return trip when Backus was named the 2016 CAB Progressive Partner for thinking and acting outside the box.

Learn by doing

Suther’s own commercial cows became a chance to try out new things learned on story trips. It was a way to put his suggestions into action and see if the research he reported worked in real life.

The first-ever baseline showed Suther’s home-raised cattle were only 10% CAB and 10% Standard, the rest split between Choice and Select.

“Selling those on a grid paid much less than the previous year’s unweaned market-toppers,” Suther

says. “I would spend the rest of my professional career sharing the experience of others who moved up from that level to 50%, 70%, even 90% CAB and Prime as my own herd approached those levels.”

He was a careful student of all things genetics and management, and matched artificial insemination (AI) sires to produce uniformity with his bull battery.

In time, Suther bought bulls from Haverkamp. That was

like the ultimate compliment for someone who already knew his high standards from afar.

“He wants quality in the end, but he always wants balance,” Haverkamp says. “Docility has been important to him, very functional maternal genetics. He’s just someone who uses the EPDs (expected progeny differences) as the tool they were intended to be.” Whether it’s precise word choice or breeding goals, Suther says, he enjoys the challenge of getting it just right.

“Not everyone matches what their talent is with what they’re meant to do in their life,” Backus says. “He’s one of the lucky ones.”

That life’s meaning also includes Suther’s wife, Anne, a longtime science teacher and coach, with their three children and families. Four grandchildren spread from Kansas City to Killarney, Ireland, keep Suther busy and mostly looking forward, but when he takes a glance back, it’s always with a heart for his readers.

“I hope they are making more money and feeling more secure about their business model now,” he says. “I hope they aim for high quality because they know it’s essential to the market on which they rely.” ■

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— Chuck Backus