

DEMAND DRIVER

Tom Jones and his Hy-Plains team keep feeding, learning and showing the way to better.

Story & photos by Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC

If they set the bar there today, by tomorrow, they'll raise it higher. That's the kind of feedyard Tom Jones manages. It's the kind of person Jones is.

In 1999, he and investors bought a 28,000-head yard near Montezuma, Kan., and immediately began doing business as Hy-Plains Feedyard LLC. Two decades later he still makes his living on the business, but that looks different today than it did then. It may look different next year, or even next month.

"We have cattle grading 100% Choice, and now we are working on the Prime. So what is the next demand driver going to be?" Jones asks. "We have to look to our new customers, and they are looking for transparent, wholesome food. They are looking for traceability, so those are some of the things I'm looking for in the future."

That attitude, and the actions behind it, earned Hy-Plains Feedyard the 2019 Certified

Angus Beef® (CAB®) Progressive Partner Award.

Good of the industry

Coming off a good year in 2014, the business was in a strong financial position. Having expanded twice before — first to 35,000, then to the current 50,000 head — Jones wasn't interested in building more pens or buying new feed trucks. Instead of traditional capital outlays, he decided to make a long-term, far-reaching investment.

It took some time to get it just right, but in 2017 the company opened its Hy-Plains Education and Research Center.

"We felt it was time. The industry has changed over the last seven years; the genetics have changed. Our ability to study

cattle, collect data and see how that affects performance has changed," Jones says.

The center is part research, part demonstration facility, part communal office space, but all grounded in sharing knowledge and growing more of it.

"If we can study our lessons, we can make a huge difference," he says. Jones enjoys feeding cattle for commercial and registered Angus customers because they're the ones who "influence change in the industry."

On any given day, staff from ABS might use one office, while next door, veterinary professionals analyze data they're gathering at the yard. Those would be staff from the Hays, Kan.-based Veterinary Research and Consulting Services (VRCS).

"The facility, with the managers and Tom's visionary thinking and ability to think outside the box, it allows us the avenue to try different things,

Left: Tom Jones says, "You have to own something in your life. It doesn't matter if you own the job where you are working or you buy land or own your business. Own what you do."

different products and different management strategies to give us valid results that will help us make improvements all along the production chain," says Miles Theurer, research director for VRCS and Hy-Plains Feedyard.

Cattle feeder turned tour guide

They're able to find new answers, while externally sharing answers the industry already knows.

"We do have a great story to tell, it's just hard to find the time to do it," Jones says.

So they make time.

"My biggest desire was to be able to bring in a busload of fourth graders and have them watch us process cattle," he says.

Jones hosts the leadership from McDonald's and Carl's Jr. in the same place where 120 elementary students from neighboring schools come out for a field day. One day he's tackling global environmental challenges as a member of the U.S. Roundtable on Sustainable Beef, and the next he's training college-age interns.

They all get the same version of Jones — someone who is focused, competitive and serious about providing the best care he can for the cattle in his yard.

A push to get better

Don't ask how many cattle they can work in an hour.

"Processing cattle is not a timed event," Jones says definitively. "When we spend time teaching stockmanship skills to our employees, the cattle are not stressed. They are more comfortable so they perform better. We work as quietly as possible."

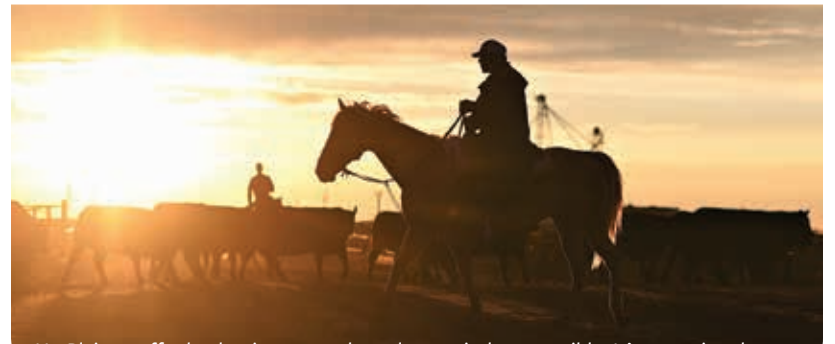
It takes extra work and hours to collect data and to do it right.

"These people we have on staff are very interested in making a difference," Jones says.

His push to get better and desire to win are as much a

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Continued on page 81



Hy-Plains staff take the time to work cattle as quietly as possible. It's not a timed event.

part of how he was raised — and the people who mentored him along the way — as they are a personal philosophy.

From his own dad, the farm boy learned hard work and getting by with less. As a cattle buyer for IBP (now Tyson) and then Hy-Plains Dressed Beef, Jones learned about business. Working for feeding pioneer Earl Brookover, first as a pen rider when he was young and later managing Brookover Ranch Feedyard, Jones saw the importance of setting an example worth following.

“You have to own something in your life. It doesn’t matter if you own the job where you are working or you buy land or own your business. Own what you do,” he says.

When cattle leave Hy-Plains Feedyard, Tom Jones knows his name is on every single one. It weighs on him to reach a little higher each day. **|**

Editor’s note: Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.