



Your Link to

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Before quality was cool

It's nearly impossible to go to restaurants or grocery stores today and not see a reference to some brand of beef. Even fast-food chains have found a way to tap into the trend, following a trail blazed by the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. However, it takes a special breed to walk the walk and talk the talk when it comes to quality.

The troubles faced by early CAB backers call to mind the 1980s country song, "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool."

Putting peanuts in a Coke® was more common than collecting carcass data on cattle in those days. But Angus producers quietly built the American Angus Association's database to allow accurate selection for quality. They took a lot of kidding at first, but they didn't let the static deter them.

The early years saw hard work, rejection and finally progress as CAB created the groundswell of a new trend in beef production. It was built on a

foundation of producers who believed in raising quality Angus cattle that would meet the test and give consumers a consistently great eating experience.

Success brought imitators, but the CAB brand is the proven benchmark for

CAB's quality focus helps it remain a branded beef icon.

quality among 32 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-certified brands with Angus in their names today. It is the only brand owned and monitored by the Association.

The eight carcass specifications developed in 1978 still have the same effect on black cattle. Cattle with less Angus influence are less likely to make the cut. With just one out of five or six Angus-influence cattle meeting CAB carcass requirements, the only sure way to have success is to go with carcass-proven Angus progeny.

Despite the incentives to use selective breeding, specifications for the brand have never required a certain percentage of Angus in a calf's pedigree. The U.S. cattle herd is primarily

crossbred, and CAB was built on the proven fact that Angus-sired calves from those cows do a great job of hitting the brand's target.

At face value, the CAB mission is to increase demand for registered Angus cattle. But, in light of the demanding quality specifications, the brand has a more positive effect on the value of those Angus cattle with above average carcass genetics. The idea was to create a value-based market for the cattle that bring consumers a quality eating experience.

Consumer-driven

The brand has always stood for dependable, consistent quality. Even before consumer panel tests proved that lower-quality-grade beef faced rejection 25% of the time, those who built the CAB brand knew that was no way to build the Angus name.

The CAB focus on quality is a full-circle approach from producer to consumer. In 2003 consumers could enjoy CAB product at more than 4,500 retailers and 5,000 restaurants. This translates to more than 2 million cattle that must meet CAB standards to satisfy demand.

Opening up more chances for potential demand, CAB works diligently to give consumers a variety of value-added products, ranging from CAB brand snack items to microwavable meals.

With similar appeal to the consumer, in 2001 the brand began marketing CAB Prime product, first to elite restaurants, but now even to retail stores. Continuing to move ahead, this year the brand introduced quality-focused, natural beef production with the implementation of the CAB Natural program.

All of these opportunities for marketing mean one thing for producers aiming for a CAB market target: higher profits. However, commercial and seedstock Angus producers have discovered even more benefits along the way.

The connections among more than 30 CAB-licensed packers, 80 CAB-licensed feedlots and their customers make for a highway of carcass data. This network-driven flow of information has led to some unique growth for the Angus breed.

Carcass data show commercial producers how their herds are performing on the rail and allows for culling and genetic improvement based on real values, not simply visual traits. Producers now realize that carcass numbers are reliable, and that means good news for beef consumers.

Demand for proven, carcass-trait Angus bulls has grown significantly during the last 10 years, and in 2003 nine of the top 10 Angus bulls in terms of progeny registrations had positive

expected progeny differences (EPDs) for marbling. Consumers want quality, and producers know that the quickest way to get there is through registered Angus cattle.

Today the reward for carcass performance is weighing in on feedlot performance to the tune of an average \$30- to \$50-per-head premium on CAB-qualifying cattle. In rare cases, the premium has been \$100 per head. That's music to the ears for those who knew all along CAB was cool and at the top of the charts in beef quality.

There is still confusion, however, because the CAB program is hard to describe in a few words. And consumers don't understand that purebred Angus cattle are not typically produced for the feedlot.

The USDA has never required a certain percentage of breed genetics as part of any Angus beef program, but the Association knew producers could only reach a quality-focused requirement by using carcass-proven Angus bulls. Better-tasting beef is simply more likely to come from certain higher-percentage Angus cattle.

Consumers must wade through dozens of beef brands trying to be what CAB is. Recent history has shown the quality beef movement isn't a fad, but even as other brands look elsewhere, CAB will stick to quality.

What does it take to be cool? Anyone can wear a hat, buckle and boots and say they are "country," but it takes more than designer clothes to run the ranch. Cool, like quality, is beyond skin deep.



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