

Beef's MVP

Story & photos by
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Ask any cattle producers in or around Saluda, S.C., and they'll tell you Phil Perry gets their vote as the beef industry's most valuable player (MVP).

"Absolutely," Angus breeder William Rushton says. "He is the driving force in our cattlemen's association. We have over 400 members. He gets speakers nobody else could. They come from North Carolina State, the University of Georgia, Auburn. He is so well-known people come to him. It is amazing what he can do."

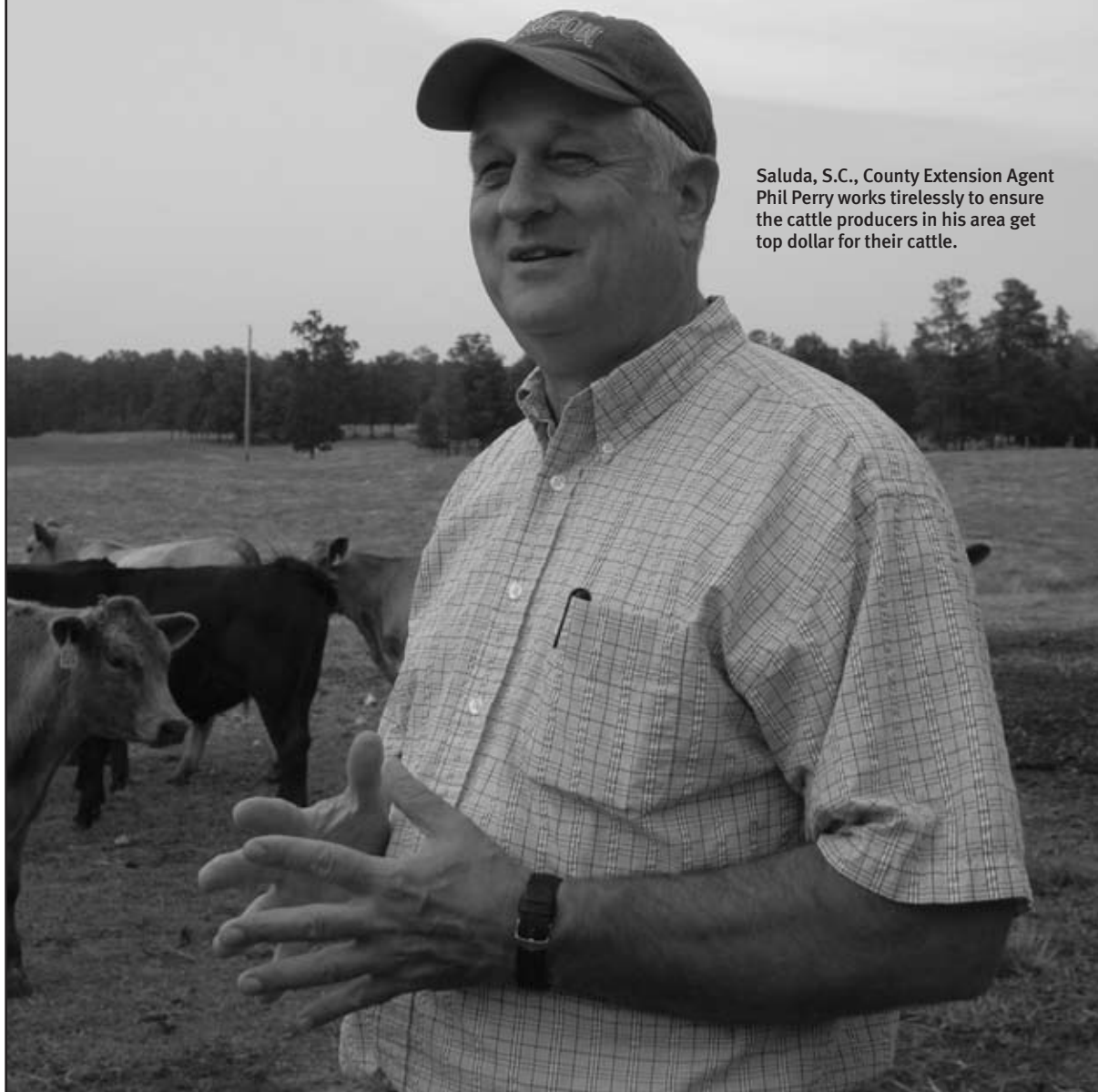
"He bends over backwards for cattlemen," says commercial producer Clinty Clark. "He'll tell you what's right about weeds, marketing; he's onto it. If you'll listen to him, you'll get ahead."

Clark should know. He was the county and state Commercial Cattleman of the Year in 2004.

Collecting speakers and dispensing advice are by no means Perry's only contributions to the local beef industry. With his behind-the-scenes help, the Saluda Cattlemen's Association will host its 18th replacement heifer sale next February.

"He goes to the farm and helps the producers weigh their calves, advises them on their vaccination and deworming programs, and screens them," Rushton says.

South Carolina County Extension Agent Phil Perry acts as quarterback, coach and cheerleader to score big for the cattle industry.



Saluda, S.C., County Extension Agent Phil Perry works tirelessly to ensure the cattle producers in his area get top dollar for their cattle.



Phil Perry, Saluda, S.C., is a hands-on county agent.

"He'll do anything he can to help producers get better prices for their cattle," says Grace Satcher, Ridge Spring commercial producer. She and her husband, Ed, are longtime consignors in the replacement heifer sale.

"He goes beyond his call to help," Ed Satcher agrees.

But all Perry can talk about is the team effort.

"This replacement heifer sale is so good," Perry says. "We have real people working together to advance their genetics. We are so far ahead of where we were 17 years ago."

Ditto for the association's

preconditioned steer sale, hosted every August. With Perry's guidance and encouragement, the producers have been pooling their calves and selling truckload lots since 1994.

"Our association owns two Powder River squeeze chutes, panels and scales. We've made progress in herd health," says the enthusiastic county agent.

He also acts as public relations agent and recruiting officer for Saluda County. "He's not the only reason we moved to Saluda County, but he is a big reason," Angus breeder Kevin Yon says.

"He was so excited he rode in the

tractor-trailer with our cows when we moved to Ridge Spring," says Lydia, Kevin's wife and partner.

But to hear Perry tell it, he is the fortunate one. "I walked into our county agent's office in Saluda when I was a little boy and told Mr. Bill Craven I was going to be a county agent. I even wrote a paper in elementary school and said I wanted to be a county agent. I made it. It will be 34 years in October."

Distinguished service

Beef cattle producers are not the only beneficiaries of Perry's time and passion. His first love was the dairy

business, and his Clemson undergraduate degree was in dairy science. It is a handy skill to have in the heavy dairy county.

There are also his 4-Hers. In 2006, the livestock judging team went to the national contest. In 2007, both the livestock and dairy judging teams went to their national contests. In 2008 and 2009, both groups finished second in the state.

“We show seven different critters: beef, dairy, swine, goats, chickens, horses and dogs. The local farmers and agribusinesses raise money for premiums, and we bring in good judges. We have clinics. The young people are our future.”

Then, of course, there is Saluda’s well-known peach industry, row crops, vegetables, forages, timber and wildlife.

“We are the third-leading ag county in South Carolina,” he says.

The non-stop county agent still managed to find time to marry in 1980. “I met Kaye when she was showing a Charolais heifer at the state fair,” Perry recalls. “I said that little girl has spunk.”

The couple had two 4-Hers of their own. Sam, their son, works for AgSouth Farm Credit, while daughter Sarah is a senior at Clemson.

There is also his involvement in Saluda Baptist Church, his pointers and quail hunting.

But there is no such thing as watching the clock to get to his interests. “The only reason he owns a watch is so he can get to the next producer’s on time,” Lydia Yon says.

His efforts have been noticed by those outside Saluda County. In 1996, the South Carolina Cattlemen’s Association named him Educator of the Year. And in 2001, the National Association of County Agricultural Agents presented him with their Distinguished Service Award. Most gratifying to Perry, though, was that his local producers paid his way, and Kaye’s, to Albuquerque, N.M., to accept it.

But to find out about those awards, and the scores of others, one has to ask.

“He is one of the most unselfish public servants I’ve ever met,” Kevin Yon notes. “He never does anything for personal recognition. He gets a great deal of satisfaction when his producers do well, when they sell a calf crop for a good price.”

Lydia adds, “That goes for somebody selling three truckloads of cattle to the littlest 4-Her showing a pullet. He is a cheerleader. He builds people up.”

Perry just sees it as part of his job. “I’m supposed to be an encourager,” he says. “I’ve got to be up-tempo. My producers have struggles and challenges.”

Getting better

Speaking of struggles and challenges, there is that one little minor thing, a glitch as Perry refers to it. In December of 1999, he was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

“I am fantastically blessed. I get tired, but I can still go. Right now I’m at the stage where I haven’t had to take chemo,

but I will. It messes with your immune system.” Obviously not enough to send Saluda’s beef MVP to the sidelines.

“I love what I do,” Perry says. “I look forward to it every day. I know everybody on a first-name basis. I know their children and their dogs. I don’t feel like I’m ever going to work. And we’re going to keep getting better and better.”



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