

CAB Honors the Elite

At its national conference in Scottsdale, Ariz., CAB honored cattlemen who excelled in producing for the brand.

Story by
CAB STAFF

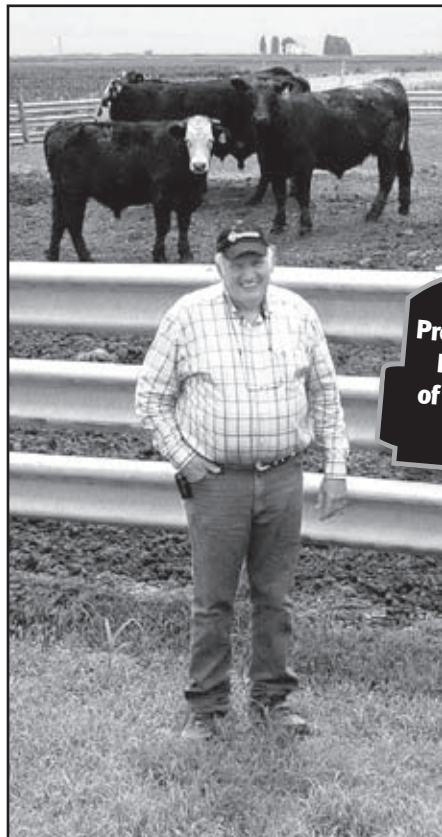
When the Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) started in 1982, it was like many other feedout programs of the day: It covered a local geography, and producers entered just a few head. The winner got a \$1,000 check and bragging rights.

But early on, supervising area Extension livestock specialist Darrell Busby and the directing board of cow-calf producers saw greater potential.

The focus became identifying factors that influence profitability. Recognizing a history of cooperation with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) through its licensed feedlots, the brand named TCSCF the 2009 Progressive Partner of the Year. Busby accepted the honor on behalf of Iowa State Extension and the 11 participating feedyards at the CAB annual conference in September.

Vaccination and weaning programs were among the first recommendations to surface.

"It was really eye-opening that healthy, faster-gaining cattle would grade,"



**Progressive
Partner
of the Year**

"All of the research work we have done has been retrospective. We try to do the best job we can with the cattle, and then we go back and ask ourselves why we see some differences," says Darrell Busby, who manages the data for TCSCF. Noting the typical \$221 spread in profit between the top and bottom thirds in each group, he adds, "We are trying to knock off that bottom end, whether it is genetics or management, and get rid of that spread."

Busby says. "We were excited when we sorted that out." Now, more than 40 individual data points are collected on each animal, allowing for several after-the-fact analyses.

"The thoroughness of the data adds much more potential for information than most futurities even begin to collect," says Larry Corah, CAB vice president for supply development. "TCSCF has provided some invaluable information for the industry."

TCSCF research pointed out that modified-live virus (MLV) vaccines are more effective than killed ones. The program advises preconditioning for at least 30 days, preferring 45 days before cattle enter its feedlots. History would also reveal higher percentage Angus genetics had a direct correlation with better quality grade and other profit advantages.

"Accessing this data answered a lot of questions for us," Corah says. "Twelve years ago, we didn't know how a lot of management factors impacted quality grade."

Starting with 105 head from 35 consignors, today there are 600 producers from 16 states and Canada sending cattle to the network of small Iowa feedyards. From a research standpoint, streamlined processes and procedures across all cooperating feedlots offer another bonus. One visiting consignor commented that TCSCF functions almost like one feedyard with a dozen locations.

"A side benefit is that these feedlots have helped each other get better, too," Busby says. "They are really good at sharing what they are doing."

The board wants to continue to grow, offering new reports and benchmarking.

"They know if you give people data they will produce more consistent cattle," Busby says.

Large Feedlot Partner of the Year

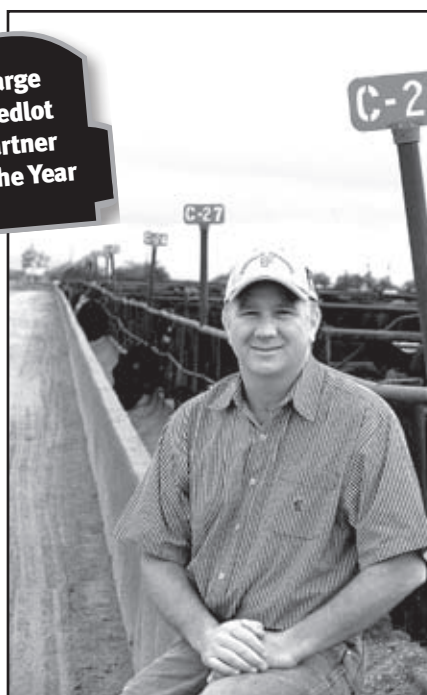
At Buffalo Feeders LLC, military precision brings in the feeding day, sure as reveille.

Trucks trundle out at 0600 hours, filled with ration that has been weighed and measured within a 1% accuracy margin. The *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand's 2009 Large Feedlot Partner of the Year, located near Buffalo, Okla., marches to meticulous order.

"It's got to have something to do with my army background. I like things to be just so," says manager Tom Fanning, who accepted the award at the brand's annual conference this September in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Contrary to common military thinking, however, the 40-member crew at Buffalo is focused on individuality. Animal induction procedures rely

**Large
Feedlot
Partner
of the Year**



"Each group of cattle is fed to its best end point," Tom Fanning explains. "I won't say perfect, but I will say best. We have to try to balance the economic side of the cost of feeding with the carcass quality and value side so we can return the most for each animal shipped."

heavily on technology and information from producers. There's an electronic identification (eID) tag reader on each scale and a scale under each chute to enter each animal into Buffalo's database. As often as possible, Fanning works with producers who retain ownership to track individual birth, weaning and yearling weights. The database links ranch tags to yard tags to help producers make herd decisions based on feeding and carcass results.

Cattle are frequently re-evaluated, re-sorted and grouped with others at the same target feed-intake levels. Intake goals are set for each pen based on a

mathematical equation. "When we're challenging those cattle to increase their intakes, we have to know where they're at according to their goal," Fanning says.

But crunching numbers in an equation is only part of the precision. Cattle are ultrasound scanned at re-implant to monitor progress, a kind of hard information that carries immediate orders. "We try to sort those cattle that day according to what the scan projection was," cattle manager Caleb Nelson says. Cattle expected to finish at the same quality level are grouped to optimize uniformity.

Fanning relies on his agricultural economics education to optimize value in the balance between producing and marketing quality cattle.

"It's about managing details, not only on your production, but on your marketing," he says. "That's risk management, where you're selling your cattle or what programs they're selling into." With a calculator seemingly never out of reach, Fanning constantly puts dollars and cents to his feeding practices.

"We want to manage those details every day — the small things, down to the individual animal, like animal health, feed delivery and just visiting with customers. If you manage the pennies, the dollars take care of themselves." That's not just a battle plan; it's a proven path to victory for Angus producers.

Small Feedlot Partner of the Year

A blank check and a promise were all Mason Fleenor had to send to Montana. In return, the Ida Grove, Iowa, manager and owner of GG Genetics got a load of the rancher's best calves, cementing a relationship that would endure for decades.

"That's just how honest he is," recalls the rancher.

**Small
Feedlot
Partner
of the Year**



Mason Fleenor refuses to raise or feed anything short of the best at GG Genetics, where he has combined a successful registered Angus bull business with a small feedyard.

Fleenor doesn't skate around the truth when it comes to the kind of cattle he likes to feed, either. "They're all pretty purely Angus. I won't buy anything else — I don't even want them. I guess I'm kind of prejudiced," he laughs.

Not just any black cattle will do for the CAB brand's 2009 Small Feedlot Partner of the Year, an award Mason and wife Diane accepted this September. "I think it has to be CAB or USDA Prime to have a good carcass. That's my opinion — that's what quality is."

Fleenor refuses to raise or feed anything short of the best at GG Genetics, where he has combined a successful registered Angus bull business with a small feedyard. He fills the 500-head yard with home-raised cattle and calves from bull customers.

The Fleenors started in the feeding business in the 1980s, and then delved into the bull business after realizing the potential impact they could make by integrating genetics. Last year, their 413 CAB-enrolled cattle averaged 81.1% Choice, 16.7% Prime and 74.6% CAB, including CAB Prime.

"One of the main reasons our cattle grade so good is that they're all out of our genetics," Fleenor says. "We don't buy commodity cattle. We want to know what we're getting when we buy cattle to feed." What they get is a return on the genetic package so painstakingly guided toward perfection. They've kept carcass data on every animal in the feedlot for more than a decade.

Although he owns full interest in all cattle fed, Fleenor still makes a point to share that information with the previous owners. Taking a further step, he tries to help ranchers make decisions in their cow herds that will complement the bulls he sells to produce the best calves.

Then it's up to Fleenor's feedlot management to bring home the real value. He uses minimal implants and feeds a high-energy, high-roughage ration. Close proximity to three ethanol plants allows the judicious use of distillers' grains as well.

"We don't push our cattle like a lot of the feedlots do," he explains. "If you start with the right genetics, you don't have to."

Quality Focus Award <15,000 head

In athletics, the real standouts compete against their own numbers, always trying to better their last performance. In a list of feeding greats, the people at Circle A Feeders, Huntsville, Mo., have certainly made a place for themselves — especially in CAB recordbooks.

From 2007 to 2008, during their inaugural year in the feeding business, Circle A posted an acceptance rate of 61.4% CAB and USDA Prime on 917 enrolled cattle, and vowed to better that with more experience.

That's a promise kept, and then some. During the current award year, June 2008 through May 2009, the feedyard increased to 78.6% CAB and Prime on 1,285 head enrolled. That blew by the

previous record they established by more than 17 percentage points, cementing a claim on the top annual acceptance rate across all awards and years.

These outstanding statistics earned the feedlot, an enterprise of

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**Quality
Focus
Award
<15,000 head**



Circle A's Mark Akin credits their increased success rate to tightening down on requirements for cattle entering the yard. Cattle must be age- and source-verified, 600 to 800 lb., less than 11 months old and 50% or more sired by Circle A bulls.

CAB Honors the Elite (from page 25)

the large-scale registered and commercial Circle A Ranch, repeat CAB honors. Mark Akin, general manager, accepted the 2009 Quality Focus Award for yards with capacity of 15,000 head or less.

Akin says Circle A staff honed their skill and requirements for cattle coming into the yard. They have “tightened down” on the qualifications, which include age and source verified (SAV), 600 to 800 pounds (lb.), less than 11 months old and — perhaps most importantly — 50% or more sired by Circle A bulls.

The customers must also wean the calves at least 45 days and give two rounds of vaccinations, but in return Circle A will buy full interest at a premium to the average market price.

“Genetics are part of it, but education and management are the other,” Akin says. Marketing manager Nick Hammett spends on-farm time with producers before their calves are accepted into the program.

“He is really our customer-service manager,” Akin says. “He walks through the cattle and talks with the owner to make sure it’s a good fit.”

Once calves are approved and purchased, Akin, feedlot manager Scott Crews and the rest of the team do everything in their power to keep the animals on the quality track. The 5,000-head yard is completely covered, with management set up to minimize stress from arrival through harvest.

The market has not rewarded



► “We get our premiums from the way our cattle feed,” says Chris Melson (left), manager and co-owner of Panhandle Feeders. “We’re marketing cattle while they are still going up on the efficiency curve.” Also pictured is assistant manager Steve True.

Choice-grading carcasses over Select as much as usual, but Akin says their sights remain high in anticipation of seasonal adjustments.

“It’s just like everything. With those seasons, there’ll be another with a wide Choice/Select spread, so you don’t make changes,” he says. “The feedyard is set up as the ‘top of the top’ in cattle feeding operations and those are the kind of cattle we’re going to recruit. We’re not going to change that.”

Quality Focus Award >15,000 head

If you can’t find the type of cattle you want to feed, create them, share the genetics and buy back the progeny to feed.

Monitor results and keep improving over time.

It’s all part of the plan at Panhandle Feeders, a 20,000-head CAB partner yard at Morrill, Neb. The CAB Quality Focus Award for feedlots larger than 15,000 head often features a CAB brand acceptance rate near 30% on perhaps 2,000 enrolled cattle sorted for a grid.

Panhandle enrolled nearly 20,000 head, June through May 2009, sold them on the live market and achieved 28.2% CAB and Prime. Most of them, 16,540 head, were eligible for the brand.

Winning the award was just an outward sign of an integrated performance program that hits the quality target.

“We’re not in this for recognition, but because we want the information,” Chris Melson, manager and co-owner, says. “We don’t try to guess which ones are good. We enroll every pen we can.”

Success is a team effort, from Larry Rice, who bought the yard in 1994, to Melson and assistant manager Steve True, cattle clerk Diane Ulrich and a crew of 20 others who share the vision. The program was built on experience. Rice has been a stocker operator and order buyer for 30 years, and Melson was a Cargill order buyer for 21 years, buying into Panhandle in 2003. They bought and sold thousands of cattle, tracking profit.

“Money in feeding still comes from a combination that has more to do with

performance than carcass,” Rice says. He used to feed more Continentals than Angus, because that was the only way to get performance.

Too many Angus cattle matured early and then marbled. So when Rice started Snake Creek Angus 10 years ago, “we started with Angus outliers that had the genetics to marble early in that growth curve.” After dispersal and rebirth as Flag Ranch, Rice maintains registered bull sales, rapid turnover in his commercial herd and a customer buy-back program that fed 10,000 calves last year.

Rice, Melson and a few others make up 90% of the customer base at Panhandle. Their common goals are profit and the flexibility to achieve it. “With the volatility and capacity issues in this industry, we want to market based on our opinions rather than commitment to the grid systems,” Melson says.

The focus on quality keeps the cash sale option available. “We get our premiums from the way our cattle feed,” he says. “We’re marketing cattle while they are still going up on the efficiency curve.” They hit the show list the day they plateau and therefore win in the yield-driven system. “Anything that is high- or low-CAB gets talked about,” Melson adds. “We want the ones that can do it all under constant pressure to perform.”

Seedstock Commitment to Excellence

The Bradley family has never been one to take the path of least resistance. That spirit was first illustrated when Minnie Lou (Ottinger) Bradley, family matriarch, headed to Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University) as the first female animal science student and member of the livestock judging team.



Mary Lou and James Henderson and Minnie Lou Bradley have a long history with CAB, first as American Angus Association members who ultimately own the brand and later through B3R Country Meats. In 2004, the plant was licensed as the first CAB Natural producer, to give consumers the highest-quality choice in that niche category.

Quality Focus Award >15,000 head

Seedstock Commitment to Excellence

Decades later, daughter Mary Lou left the Bradley 3 Ranch to pursue an accounting career — only to return with the determination it takes to forge a success in the meat business. The B3R Country Meats packing plant was built in nearby Childress, Texas, and Mary Lou was traveling across the country marketing “Beef like ranchers feed their families.”

That resolve to always produce what the customer wants, from the bull buyer to the consumer, was honored by CAB. Minnie Lou, along with Mary Lou and her husband James Henderson, accepted the 2009 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence award at the CAB annual conference.

The family has a long history with CAB, as American Angus Association members (Minnie Lou was Association president in 2005) and through their meat interests. In 2004, the B3R plant was licensed as the first CAB® Natural producer, giving consumers the highest-quality choice in that category.

Shortly after Minnie Lou and Bill Bradley were married they bought the operation's first 3,500 acres and managed yearlings on it. In 1958 they purchased their first registered Angus stock and began building up to the 12,500 acres and more than 400 cows that make up the herd today.

“We are trying to fit the cattle to the environment,” Mary Lou says.

Minnie Lou adds, “You don't have a customer if he's not going to make money off your product. So we strive to produce that kind of bull. Not only will he have some longevity to him, but after he gets that cow bred we want that cow to calve easily. Then we want him to just pop and start growing.

“Then, we want an end point out of the feedlot where he will marble and finish up,” she says.

They select for fertility by requiring the cows to rebreed in a 60-day window, using DNA as a tool that lets them use several sires per pasture.

“Anything that's open at preg-check we ship,” James says. “It seems everybody is so worried about quick turnover, but for a commercial guy, there's nothing that makes him more money than fertility and longevity.”

They lead Texas in the number of Pathfinder® cows (21) in the 2009 Association report, evidence of that commitment to the female side.

The family has a history of educating their customers.

“Because we had so many years in the meat business and we gave people a lot of information, then drug them through the cooler and made them look at their cattle, we have real sophisticated buyers,” Mary Lou says. “We turned that data into information.”

Knowing what the data tells them, the family will continue to keep all traits in balance while pleasing that ultimate customer.



National Junior Angus Association

Members of the National Junior Angus Association pay an annual fee of \$20, and junior privileges expire at age 21. Junior members have access to all services offered by the American Angus Association, and they receive two issues of the *Angus Journal* per year and the NJAA newsletter, *Directions*.

To apply for membership in the National Junior Angus Association, visit www.njaa.info and download a printable application, or call 816-383-5100 to request the application.