

Nebraska, Missouri Partners

Big or small, feedlot honorees carry a quality mind-set.

by

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Angus cattle just keep getting better, especially when managed with a long-term focus.

Ten years ago, the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand set up the Quality Focus Awards (QFA) for large- and small-scale feeding partners enrolling cattle with the highest CAB acceptance.

The National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) had just begun in response to the popular goal of 30% CAB. The top 800 cattle in that 2004 contest barely exceeded 25% CAB. Records show the breed and its producers have come a long way leading up to this final year for the QFA.

Best among the bigs

Among the large yards (>15,000 head), Darnall Feedlot, Harrisburg, Neb., won

for the fourth time and the third year in a row with 42.5% of eligible cattle making CAB or Prime.

Always near the top in this category, Darnall enrolled 12,487 eligible cattle in the past five years, with more than 46% achieving CAB or Prime.

Gary and his son Lane Darnall operate a commercial-Angus ranch, as well. Lane and his wife, Robin, accepted the award at CAB's annual conference Sept. 19 in Marco Island, Fla.

The QFA rules were set up to require a significant number of enrolled cattle per year — at least 1,000 head for large and 500 head for smaller yards. With fewer cattle enrolled, smaller yards in Missouri began to dominate the category and have held sway since 2008.

On a smaller scale

Among those smaller-volume partners, none has matched Performance Blenders, Jackson, Mo., with three straight years winning the QFA, and finishing with their highest number ever at 84.8% CAB and Prime in the 485 eligible of 522 cattle enrolled in the June-through-May contest period.



Gerry and son Geoff Shinn, along with associate Roger Eakins, work with a unique network of more than 100 small producers in southeast Missouri, monitoring progress on many farms and regularly shipping multi-owner loads to National

Beef in southwest Kansas. Gerry and his wife Jane accepted the award at CAB's annual conference.

During the past four years, Performance Blenders has enrolled 1,938 eligible cattle that made 83.7% CAB or Prime, and about one-quarter of them graded Prime. Adding past enrolled cattle from the other two-time QFA winners Osborn Farms, Savannah, Mo., and Circle A Feedlot, Huntsville, Mo., brings up a seven-year run of approximately 8,000 cattle that exceeded 80% CAB brand acceptance.

When this 10-year run started, it was hard to find 800 cattle making better than 25% CAB, so genetics and management have responded well to market forces.

Each year is different, but the drought impact was less of a factor this year, partners say. The high price of feeder cattle stood out as a potential barrier.



Darnall Feedlot is the 2014 recipient of the Quality Focus Award for yards with more than 15,000-head capacity. Always near the top in this category, Gary Darnall (left) enrolled 12,487 eligible cattle in the past five years, with more than 46% achieving CAB or Prime. Gary and son Lane Darnall (right) operate a commercial-Angus ranch, as well.

Still Top CAB%



"It was a challenge to keep smaller producers focused on feeding their value-added calf crop" with calf prices so strong, says Geoff Shinn. "It was also tough to bring on new producers with unknown or less-predictable genetics and still maintain our high quality standards."

Still, these folks are old hands at feeding for the best possible outcome and among the highest quality grades in the business.

"We don't look at it as a challenge," Gary Darnall says. "Sometimes there are concerns in the market, but it isn't difficult when we have access to these good cattle to feed. We enjoy being able to produce the kind of beef consumers want."

Geoff Shinn says some customers converted marginal land to corn when those prices were high, exiting the cattle business. Others found the recent higher price of weaned calves and feeder cattle irresistible and did not feed this year.

"They perceive it as high risk," he explains. "Even though they have invested 15 months of time, money and energy to get the cow bred and raise the calf to weaning, they don't have confidence that the next six months of the finishing phase can be financially rewarding, too."

That's partly because the cost is up front on the calf, already incurred and more than covered by an auction bid. Yet, producers who decided to upgrade

genetics a few years ago left money on the table this year by not feeding, Shinn says.

"Knowing the genetic base of your cow herd and using high-accuracy-EPD

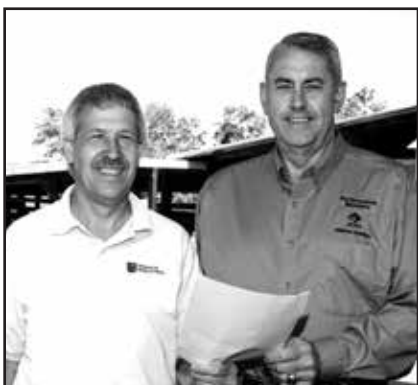
(expected progeny difference) bulls lessens the unknown quality variance," he says. "But that's a plan that must be put in place years before any actual carcass data can confirm those decisions."

There have been a few standout herds for many years, with hundreds of cattle

known to achieve better than 80% CAB in the 1990s. That moved up to many thousands of such cattle today, and seems on track to encompass hundreds of thousands of cattle in the decade ahead.



Editor's Note: Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



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