

Setting the Bar



Certified Angus Beef LLC announces annual award winners honored at its national conference in Sun River, Ore., for excelling in their respective areas of production.

Story by
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At its annual conference in Sunriver, Ore., Sept. 20-22, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) honored cattlemen from the ranch and the feedyard for excelling at hitting the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand target. We feature the Commercial Commitment to Excellence winner as our cover story this month. Other winners are featured here.

Seedstock Commitment to Excellence: Rancho Casino and Dal Porto Livestock

David Medeiros and David Dal Porto — “the Davids” — have more than a few similarities. The native Californians share cattle philosophies and even a bull sale venue. Most recently, they shared the CAB 2011 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

They each grew up showing cattle in the northern San Joaquin valley, maintaining small cow herds. Those were put on hold when Medeiros headed to Cal Poly and Dal Porto to Chico State, where their paths continued to cross in livestock judging.

“They were real rebels ... er, rivals back then,” Dal Porto’s wife, Jeanene, teases.

After college, their black herds seemed a bit rebellious. Rancho Casino and Dal Porto Livestock were among the few locals that focused on Angus. But they stuck with it, building those show herds up with functional, seedstock genetics.

“They both had a great customer base, but both realized at about the same

time that they needed to do business differently,” Medeiros’ wife, Carol, says.

In the late 1970s, the men saw an opportunity that led to eventual collaboration: Commercial cattlemen were looking to Angus for balance and calving ease in replacement heifers.

“We wanted to offer a large number of bulls that had low birth-weight EPDs [expected progeny differences], and several generations of it,” Dal Porto says.

Nearly year-round forage availability means California cattlemen expect unassisted performance in the pasture, and that includes calving season.

“We believe you should never have to pull a calf,” Medeiros says. Stacked generations and strict culling deliver on that.

“We have a short breeding season, so if they don’t breed we cull them,” Dal Porto says. “There are no second chances.”

Cows from their bulls also have to calve unassisted and excel in udder quality, mothering ability and disposition.

End-product performance is a factor, too. “There are enough cattle out there that we can identify and stack generations that have the lower birth weight, wean a good-sized calf, and add some carcass to go along with it,” Medeiros says.

Their common maternal base established, the partners turn to serving diverse customers who need individual attention.

“We want to work with our customers, not just to make sure they get the right bull, but after that, too,” Dal Porto says.

Age and source verification (ASV), AngusSource® enrollment and compliance with non-hormone treated cattle (NHTC)



David Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlots, CAB’s Progressive Partner of the Year, uses a hypothetical scenario to educate feedyard visitors on how everything from genetics and ranch care to implants and markets can affect beef quality later on.

PHOTO BY MIRANDA REIMANN

protocol — those acronyms denote extra dollars for their customers.

Some, like John Ginocchio of Walnut Creek, Calif., have taken the plunge into finishing cattle. Medeiros and Dal Porto often play the catalyst in developing relationships between feeder and customer, or even go in on partial ownership of calves at Beller Feedlot, Lindsay, Neb., which nominated them for the CAB award.

Ginocchio uses data from Beller and CAB to improve his herd. He began building his reputation by noting his bull source 10 years ago.

“People know these aren’t just black cattle, and they aren’t just great Angus cattle,” he says.

Other Dal Porto Livestock and Rancho Casino customers have been “name branding” their calves at auction as well, often paired with another value-adding brand.

“There’s a reason people put ‘CAB-candidates’ next to our cattle,” Medeiros says. Dal Porto chimes in, “Everyone knows what that stands for, and people pay more for those.”

Progressive Partner Award: Gregory Feedlot

In the feedyard, some calves make money and others lose money. The kicker is, it’s not always just about luck.

David Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlots at Tabor, Iowa, uses a hypothetical scenario to educate feedyard visitors on how everything from genetics and ranch care to implants and markets can impact beef quality later on.

Everyone gets a workbook and a virtual calf when they begin, and the story is revealed as they make stops at the processing barn, the feedmill and the pens.

“Cattle producers care about what they’re doing; they care for the animals humanely and they provide nutrition and great health care,” Trowbridge says. “If we can convince the whole world that that’s what we’re doing, we’ll sell a lot more beef.”

This philosophy, along with a commitment to driving interaction at every point in the production chain, earned Gregory Feedlots the CAB Progressive Partner of the Year Award.

Trowbridge and feedyard owner Jim Gregory “understand the importance of educating end users on their segment of the beef industry,” says Nikkie Allen, corporate meeting planner for CAB.

“They take time and put thought into what things they want attendees to walk away with when they leave their property.”

Of course, tours or not, cattle must be looked after and Trowbridge gives a lot of credit to his small crew.

“All I do is talk on the phone and get customers here,” he says with a quick smile. “They do the work.”

The hint of truth is probably rooted in the sheer amount of effort it takes to build and maintain relationships.

Trowbridge estimates 85% of the cattle in the 7,000-head feedyard are retained ownership.

Everything they learn about cattle coming in — from recent history, like vaccines and implants, to cow herd history — helps them do their jobs better, he says.



PHOTO BY LAURA NELSON

From the beginning, David Medeiros (left) and David Dal Porto (right) knew their customers needed bulls that worked in their environment, so they collaborated to market Angus bulls providing balance and calving ease. Proving carcass can be part of that balance, the pair shared in receiving the 2011 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

“Working with the producers we do, we are able to save money, time and stress on the cattle by customizing what’s done,” Trowbridge says. “Those calves should never have had a bad day. When you wean them, you want them gaining just as good as they do in the feedlot.”

They aggressively sort because most of the cattle are grid-marketed even when the Choice-Select spread is low.

“I’ve been able to show customers that even if we get \$1 over the base meat price, and if your cattle will grade 85% Choice or better and yield decent, we can beat that price,” he says. “Even if we’re looking at a \$2 Choice-Select spread, we’re still selling a majority of our cattle on a grid, and making money doing it.”

But the ultimate payout is seeing repeat customers make progress.

“It makes you feel good when they come back and the cattle are better than they were,” Trowbridge says.

Large Feedlot Partner of the Year: Keeling Cattle Feeders

Hereford, Texas, is known as the “Beef Capital of the World.” It is also home to Keeling Cattle Feeders, CAB 2011 Feedlot Partner of the Year for all yards with more than 15,000-head capacity.

In 2007, only about one-quarter of the feedlot’s 17,000 head were Angus type, and of those, just 9.6% reached CAB brand acceptance. Becoming a CAB partner that year added an Angus focus to the Keelings’ overall commitment to quality. Last year, the yard enrolled 6,200 head that made 21% CAB — well above the Texas average.

“We changed our whole business over the last few years,” says Scott Keeling, who owns the yard with wife Karen.

As the feedlot moved up from 25% to 50% cattle ownership and worked toward upgrading animal type, risk management became increasingly important.

Grading effects, weather and variable lot sizes are a few of the challenges the feedlot faces. “Sometimes it’s like trying to nail Jell-O® to the wall,” Keeling says. “But that’s part of what I like about our business.”

He also likes the results, as real opportunities get nailed down, herds improve and everybody from rancher to consumer wins.

“There’s a circle of friends that comes with being a CAB partner,” says Keeling, who was honored in 2008 as CAB Progressive Partner of the Year.

One of those friends is state and nationally prominent Angus producer Steve Olson, who started feeding with Keeling when it became a CAB-licensed yard.

“The feedlot is the right size to give personal attention,” Olson says. “He’s involved himself in the marketing and feeding. He knows what’s going on in his yard and that is a plus to me.”

Olson was looking for a feeder who could provide carcass data on the calves he was raising.

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PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

Named CAB’s Feedlot Partner of the Year for yards with greater than 15,000 head capacity, Scott and Karen Keeling went in with a partner to buy the yard in 1985, purchasing full ownership in 1994.

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Keeling Cattle Feeders has served as a tour stop for chefs from big cities and other beef specialists who want to learn more about the products they sell, prepare and serve.

"We do a lot of things like that; we're really transparent with what we do, and I love to show it to people," Keeling says. "They ask good questions and appreciate what you're doing."

The feedlot is a model with its beef-industry advocacy and a commitment to quality; much of its business revolves around building bridges.

"Those relationships have only gotten stronger with our CAB affiliation," Keeling says.

Small Feedlot Partner of the Year: Will Feed Inc.

Anne Burkholder knew she'd never be a traditional feedyard manager.

The Dartmouth psychology graduate hailed from urban Florida roots when she married into a Nebraska agriculture family. But when she and her husband, Matt, moved back, her father-in-law put her right to work at the 3,000-head Will Feed Inc.

"It took a tremendous leap of faith to give a job to a 22-year-old woman who had no background in agriculture," she reflects. "But he didn't give me the manager job right from the start. I went to work for \$6.85 an hour, running the feed truck, scooping bunks and processing cattle."

As manager today, she still does most of those tasks.

Burkholder has made many changes at the feedyard, including signing on as a CAB-licensed feedlot in 2008. The overriding quality focus, data-gathering and details management took hold long before, but those became increasingly apparent.

They helped earn recognition as the 2011 CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year for operations with up to 15,000-head capacity.

"The niche we've really tried to get into is tracing calves from ranch to rail," Burkholder says.

Instead of paying freight, eight or nine years ago Burkholder started working the connections she'd made from involvement on Nebraska Cattlemen committees to recruit local customers. Today there are times when the yard is 100% full of Nebraska-born, age- and source-verified calves.

Many of them are Angus and sold on the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid.

They wean quite a few calves, too.

"Through a real focus on the minute details, we've come up with a plan that really works," Burkholder says. "If somebody doesn't get to the bunk that day, we make sure we get them looked at. We exercise and acclimate our calves when they come in."

Exercise goes on for five to seven days. During that time they're being fed mostly prairie hay with "just a touch" of wet distillers' on top, and that gradually gives way to a calf ration before they work their way through the normal feedlot formulations.

Nothing gets an implant until it's been there for 30 days.

"When you implant an animal and they're under stress, your implant isn't as effective and it can impede the animal's ability to marble," Burkholder says.

Health programs are all coordinated, and everybody knows her end goal.

"I want to produce something that tastes good and something that's tender," she says. "Beef is not inexpensive, so it's something that a lot of people have to sacrifice to put on the dinner table."

So there's the greater good, plus a monetary benefit.

"Even when the Choice-Select spread isn't very big, if you can get your animals to go CAB, that's a really nice kicker," she says.

Quality Focus Award <15,000 head: Osborn Farms

Osborn Farms, Savannah, Mo., repeated its 2010 achievement with even better numbers as the CAB 2011 Quality Focus Award winner for partner yards with less than 15,000-head capacity.



When it comes to performance and cattle, John Osborn (right), shown with his son Joel, and Pete Mitts (left) are all business. They know their pool of 1,200 related cows.

PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

This is just a 600-head yard that enrolled 535 head with CAB last year, but the point is 90% of those were accepted for the CAB brand, including 28% CAB Prime.

Owner-manager John Osborn and his longtime consultant and cattle partner Pete Mitts work together to hit the target.

If you followed the AngusSource Carcass Challenge (ASCC) last year, you might recall their champion pen of 42 heifers went 100% CAB with 55% Prime. The September 2010 harvest date fit the contest year for this June-through-May annual CAB award, too.

Still, the award wasn't automatic or easy. This is the fourth consecutive year that a Missourian won the category, and the top three contenders nationwide were in Missouri this time, as well.

The other two were Circle A Feedlot, Huntsville, Mo., and Performance Blenders, Jackson, Mo., and depending on the week, each of them spent time in the top spot. The contest was not decided until the last few weeks of May.

All three feature cattle of known genetics.

Osborn and Mitts have proven that their already excellent cattle will keep getting better. They all trace back to bulls from Green Garden Angus, Lorraine, Kan., genetics stacked in cow families backed by Mitts' no-nonsense records and the duo's program of low-stress management.

That's low stress on the cattle, they would point out. Stress for the cattlemen is sometimes unavoidable in these days of volatile markets.

When it comes to performance and cattle, these guys are all business. They know their pool of 1,200 related cows. They either own or used to own most of them, and all current owners are friends, neighbors and associates. They know the market is crazy, but they also know carcass data feedback still runs the engine of herd improvement and keeps it on track.

As long as Osborn Farms can feed these predictable cattle, no current quality records will be safe. Fair warning.

Quality Focus Award >15,000 head: Pratt Feeders

A 38,000-head feedlot near Pratt, Kan., shows what can be done with a systematic approach to higher-quality beef.

Pratt Feeders committed to quality in 2003 by licensing with CAB, and won a national CAB award the next year because of manager Jerry Bohn's plans.

The feedyard gathered data as never before, sharing it with CAB and customers to upgrade cattle and profitability.

Back then, its 11% CAB brand acceptance rate on 17,000 cattle was a benchmark to leave in the dust. In the same June-May period ending this spring, a similar number of enrolled and harvested cattle made nearly 32% CAB and Prime.

It's why, at the CAB annual conference, assistant manager Dave Latta accepted the 2011 Quality Focus Award



As manager of Will Feed Inc., CAB's Feedlot Partner of the Year for lots with fewer than 15,000 head, Anne Burkholder is shooting for a niche where calves are traceable from ranch to rail.

PHOTO BY MIRANDA REIMANN



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER



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Manager Jerry Bohn committed Pratt Feeders to quality in 2003, becoming a licensed feedlot. The yard has since moved from an 11% CAB acceptance rate to 32%, earning it the 2011 Quality Focus Award for feedlot partners with capacities of more than 15,000 head.

for partners with more than 15,000-head capacity.

“We made a conscious effort to procure more of the right kind of cattle,” he says. “But our retained ownership customers have made great progress, as well.”

Latta heads up both areas of procurement.

“Our cattle from Florida and Louisiana customers fit in with those from Kansas, Oklahoma, Kentucky and South Dakota, pretty much all Angus,” he says. Per-head premiums earned in June ranged from the mid-\$40s to twice that above the cash market.

A key to earning premiums is learning how to feed high-quality cattle as a category, and specific to repeat customers.

Bohn set the course for success years ago with a strategy to learn as much as possible about the cattle he feeds while inviting higher-quality placements. The feedyard has enrolled more than 150,000 cattle in the CAB database since licensing. It opened doors to Angus producers for networking and a series of options to return data, even when the feedlot buys up to full interest.

Below: “We made a conscious effort to procure more of the right kind of cattle,” says Dave Latta, assistant manager of the yard. “But our retained-ownership customers have made great progress, as well.”



“Angus customers have made a pretty intensive selection for quality as we learned a bit more on how to feed them and returned the data,” Bohn says. In 2003, he knew something about the genetic potential in 15% of the cattle fed. Today that stands at 35% to 40%.

Over the last couple of years, Pratt Feeders has been increasingly involved

with CAB in training foodservice and beef sales teams.

“Our industry has to become a little more transparent,” Bohn says. “The beef consumer is quite removed from the rural roots of years ago. We have to become advocates for our industry.”

From rancher to feeder, packer to purveyor and consumer, “everybody in the

system is more willing to share information than they used to be,” he says. “That’s more important now than ever. All the volatility and higher prices in the system put more pressure on the need to share if we are all going to move ahead.”

