

# Joining the Ranks: *Industry newcomers work out at Cattlemen's Boot Camp and Angus Skills Lab*

Story & photos by  
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Academic and industry professionals put new recruits to the cattle industry

through their paces at the first Cattlemen's Boot Camp at Colorado State University (CSU) Oct. 20-21, 2005. Sponsored by the Angus Foundation, this interactive educational program attracted commercial

producers, seedstock breeders and cattle enthusiasts from 14 states.

Hands-on activities offered participants a chance to learn new skills and sharpen existing ones related to genetic selection,

health and nutrition, and general cattle management. Speakers focused on creating and communicating value through marketing programs and improved management techniques. The program, a partnership between the American Angus Association and CSU, took place at the CSU Agricultural Research, Development and Education Center (ARDEC).



## **Skill-building at Angus Skills Lab**

An Angus Skills Lab Thursday morning allowed new Angus members to roll up their sleeves, put on rubber gloves and get down to work. Attendees watched demonstrations, then applied their new knowledge in a variety of skill areas. They practiced applying tattoos and freeze brands, using ultrasound and artificial insemination (AI) equipment, processing and weighing, body condition scoring, and using performance data.

CSU staff and student employees focused on safety and technique when leading the workshops.

"The biggest mistake I see cattlemen of all experience levels make is that they try to process cattle too fast. Newcomers seem to think they need to do things fast, but they'll really be much more accurate and efficient if they just slow down," Casey Thompson, an ARDEC employee, said.

Workshop leaders also stressed the value of measurements and documentation.

"You can't just guess — especially when it comes to weights. You'd be surprised how much even an experienced cattleman can be off when trying to estimate cattle weight and age," Tom Field, CSU animal science professor, said.

"Written records are essential," Field continued. "They must be accurate."

## **Reinvest in the industry**

For the first time in nearly a decade, cattle producers are reinvesting in the industry, said Dave Weaber, director of market analysis at Swift & Co., in kicking off the Cattlemen's Boot Camp program Thursday afternoon.

"Three-quarters of U.S. herds are trying to expand right now," Weaber



Qualified cattle with AngusSource<sup>SM</sup> tags give buyers confidence that the animal has valuable genetics and has been source- and group age-verified, explains Ty Groshans.

said. “Slaughtered heifers have decreased 4%. ... With current prices, producers can retain more females and still have enough cash flow from selling calves.”

U.S. cattle inventory charts show a steady decrease from 1996 to 2003, but an upward trend started in 2004. Weaber predicts cattle inventories will continue to increase during the next few years. When producers rebuild their herds, the number of harvested cattle usually decreases. “We don’t have enough feeder cattle right now,” he said.

Consumers are also feeling pinched. As their purse strings continue to tighten, Weaber predicts restaurant sales will decrease and retail sales will increase because more consumers will eat at home. Weaber believes the demand index shows that consumers are willing to pay for beef.

He says the industry is “chasing Choice” and looking for more red meat yield to please consumers. There are premiums to be earned on Yield Grade (YG) 1s and 2s, he said. Weaber strongly recommended cattlemen get back data on their cattle from packers.

“Carcass data is always worthwhile. Sometimes it’s hard to look at the numbers, but it makes you better,” he said.

### **The value chain**

“Structured changes are transforming the industry from commodity-oriented to consumer-driven production systems,” Daryl Tatum, CSU animal science professor, told Boot Camp attendees. “Don’t think of the market as a supply chain anymore — think of it as a value chain.”

In 2003, the U.S.’s global beef market share was 18%. By 2004, that number dropped to 3%. Domestically, beef market share has decreased, while chicken’s share has doubled. Tatum reported that the beef demand index has increased and said the cattle industry must continue to add value to their products.

“Vertically aligned chains emerge because they are responsive to consumer needs, involve coordination of management practices that add value [and] create efficiency, and they allow quality and safety to be monitored and maintained,” Tatum explained.

He said the cattle industry must create products that have greater value — whether it is real or perceived value — because they will bring higher prices.

Tatum gave producers these tips on creating and capturing value:

- Consider retained ownership. Identify genotypes that perform in all segments of the chain, and own them further into the chain to capture the value you’ve created.
- Use management practices that create value. Look at labels in the retail case, and consider their branded value such as source- and age-verified, or hormone and antibiotic free. Be sure your management practices are monitored and verifiable.

- Capitalize on the value and power of information. Create and maintain auditable information traits to differentiate and authenticate your product. Use data to guide your decisions.
- Network with others in the industry.

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Skills Lab attendees are familiarized with the female reproductive system and AI equipment before pulling on the AI gloves and trying it themselves.

**Boot Camp** *(from page 107)***Industry education**

Thursday afternoon brought more interactive stations. YGs, quality grades (QGs) and dollar value indexes (\$Values) were explained. Then attendees analyzed four carcasses to see how those numbers translated into saleable product. Attendees were walked through a number of forms

and reports, including kill sheets and feedlot closeouts. Program representatives explained Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines, AngusSource<sup>SM</sup> and the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand and encouraged attendees to take advantage of the value that comes from participating in these programs.

Patty Alexander, a Longmont, Colo., cow-calf producer, said the CAB program

influenced her employer's decision to start raising Angus. After the conference she said, "The AngusSource program adds value" and that she "definitely want(s) to be a part of it."

**Customer focus**

Then came time for a little self-reflection. Attendees ranked traits of importance relative to the profitability of

their herd, then ranked the traits they perceived were most important to their immediate customers.

Field separated results by enterprise type, then compared them to see how each segment matched up. The similarity of the results was both surprising and encouraging. Commercial cow-calf producers ranked calving ease, weaning weight and milk production as the top three most important traits to their profitability. By comparison, seedstock breeders perceived that weaning weight, calving ease and birth weight were the top three most important traits to their cow-calf customers.

Field said this showed "there is more sharing of information in the supply chain than ever before in history." But, he continued, "We're still behind. Communication must continue."

**Sale time**

Thursday evening, Boot Camp attendees put into practice what they'd learned throughout the day. After another crash course in expected progeny differences (EPDs) and more detail on \$Values, cattlemen formed small groups to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a hypothetical herd. Armed with a new appreciation for performance numbers, they scrutinized a sale book looking for sires to complement their herds. The groups then competed against each other in a mock auction.

But, of course, there was a catch. Before bidding, each group — a diverse mix of cow-calf producers, seedstock breeders, feeders and packers — had to agree on their top three sire picks and settle on the maximum price they'd pay for each. The group that bought their top-choice bull for the lowest price won.

"This really forced us to talk to each other about our needs, and I can see how doing this (talking with other links in the supply chain) could be really helpful. It was a lot easier to make decisions with the data and with group input," said Toni MacDonald, a cow-calf producer from Lucerne Valley, Calif.

A marketing panel concluded the Boot Camp on Friday.



Travis Hoffman, CSU BQA coordinator, explains yield and quality grade components of one of four carcasses that were harvested during the Boot Camp.