

Native Son



PHOTO BY ERIC GRANT, API CREATIVE MEDIA

Schumann named CEO of America's largest beef breed organization.

Story by
ERIC GRANT

Every morning, Bryce Schumann traces the footsteps of his childhood across the rolling hills of eastern Kansas. He rides along the same old roads that once took him from his family's farm near Powhattan, Kan., to the livestock markets of Saint Joseph, Mo.

As he crosses over the Missouri River, swollen this summer with muddy water, the Black Snake Hills rise in the distance. Invariably, his thoughts return to his father, Larry, who brought him this way countless times in the cab of a two-ton truck, trundling across the prairie and burgeoning with cattle and hogs bound for the auction barn.

"It was always a treat to go to Saint Joe," Schumann reflects. "There was always something different to see, always something new to learn."

At the time, Saint Joseph's terminal market was one of the largest in the country. It bustled with the energy of rural America. Its vast network of pens and alleys, which spread like a chessboard across the bottomland near the river, was filled with cattle and hogs. It contained the highest hopes of farmers and ranchers who traveled the long miles from their homes to reach the market in time for the bidding to begin.

Looking back, those were formative days for Schumann. He learned from his father and mother, Annette, the value of honest dealings and the power of a person's word. He came to appreciate the vastness of American agriculture, understand the interconnectedness of farmers, ranchers, feeders, markets and packers, and grasp the complexities of producing beef from so many people with so many varied interests from so many far-flung places.

He also learned the brittle nature of life.

When his father died suddenly in a car crash, Schumann, who was 13 at the time, was thrust from childhood into unknown territory. His father, who was a tall, strong man, had anchored his life on the farm. The pastures and cropland — once sources of comfort and familiarity — became vessels of uncertainty. His future in farming and ranching fell into doubt, and the trips he enjoyed so much to Saint Joe — along with the livestock market that once dominated the region — suddenly

became vestiges of the past, echoes of a time gone by.

"Bryce became who he is today because we lost our father at such a young age," says sister Lori Thomas of Baker City, Ore. "It forced him into a role of guiding and protecting our family. It forced him to become a leader. It shaped him into what he is today."

Even now, the key to understanding Schumann can still

be found in the rolling hills of eastern Kansas. His wife, Gina, and their children — sons Wyatt, Dylan and Jessye, and daughter Cassidy — continue to raise cattle near the same pastures of his childhood home. His mother and stepdad, Stan Larson, remain actively involved in the cattle business.

In the evenings, the family often saddles up horses and rides through their cows. In his children, he sees continuation, the presence of his parents. In the sea of green grass that surrounds them, he sees the best of what his life once was. In the gathering rainstorms, there is hope for a better future.

"One hundred years from now, people may read my name in a book," Schumann reflects, "but it's my family that will be my living legacy. That's the true measure of success — if you've raised a family that's

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— Bryce Schumann

(Continued on page 6)

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Above: The Schumann family has called eastern Kansas home "from the beginning," Bryce Schumann says. He grew up on a diversified farming and feeding operation, with cattle, crops and hogs.

“There are a lot of things my father taught me,” Schumann says. “Never quit until the job is done. Do the job right the first time. Don’t cut corners. Your word is your bond.”

[PHOTO BY CRYSTAL YOUNG, API CREATIVE MEDIA]



Native Son *(from page 2)*

able to move on and achieve after you’re gone.”

Heading the Angus family

No doubt Schumann will need the support of his family as he becomes the chief executive officer (CEO) for the American Angus Association, which

celebrates its 125th anniversary this summer.

The position, he says, presented him the opportunity to apply the values he’d learned from his father and to be a catalyst of change for rural America by helping cattle producers across the country become more competitive and consumer-oriented.

“I wanted the opportunity to lead,” he says. “I wanted the opportunity to serve our members. And, I wanted to help move this organization forward.”

For many in the cattle business, Schumann’s sudden rise to the top spot in the cattle business is something of a surprise. He possesses an unassuming nature. He doesn’t seek the spotlight. But those who know him best say beneath the quiet veneer there is strength, tenacity and a deeply held commitment to rural America.

“Bryce has always been super-conscientious and super-focused,” Thomas says. “When he does something, he does it right. He looks at the big picture from every angle. He likes to take input from everyone before he makes a decision. He likes to see all angles and hear all opinions. But when he makes decisions, he’s the kind of person that not only moves forward with conviction, he also brings people together.”

Schumann’s eldest son, Wyatt, puts it this way: “He’s always showed us how to do things the right way. He always says, ‘Take the time to do things right. Don’t take short cuts.’ He’s always been very thorough, and he’s always been there when any of us have needed help.”

Schumann joined the Association staff in 2000 as director of activities and moved quickly up the ladder (see cover story).

“During the last eight years, Bryce has had the opportunity to learn just about all aspects of the Association’s business,” Gina says. “His vast knowledge of cattle — from production to pedigrees to EPDs (expected progeny differences) — combined with his knowledge of business management give him a foundation that really is unique.”

The crossroads

In 2008, the Association finds itself at a crossroads. U.S. cattle producers, who have enjoyed cheap prices for fuel, feed, fertilizer and land for decades, have watched prices for these things skyrocket during the last 18 months.

The U.S. packing and feeding sectors continue to consolidate, bringing about greater economies of scale and worldwide reach for U.S. products, but raising doubts about the future role of family farms and ranches.

Consumer concerns regarding humane animal-handling practices came to a flashpoint last winter in California, calling into question the stewardship of all cattle producers.

Schumann believes there is room for optimism, however. The Angus

(Continued on page 8)

Native Son *(from page 6)*

breed now enjoys a 60% market share in the commercial cattle industry. Surveys conducted by livestock publications continue to show widespread market demand for Angus genetics among U.S. bull buyers at a time when demand for other breeds is declining.

Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) — the world's largest branded beef program — continues to occupy a dominant position in the branded beef business; its biggest challenge is not ensuring demand from consumers, which grows stronger every year, but securing enough cattle to meet the growth of the company.

In fact, CAB projects it will break all-time production records during 2008 with more than 600-plus million pounds of beef sold through the program. By 2020, CAB hopes to crack the 1-billion-pound ceiling.

"To make sure that happens, we're going to have to become even more aggressive than we've been in the past," Schumann says. "We're going to have to look for ways to find new opportunities. We're going to need to look for ways to develop new markets, create new enthusiasm and get the people excited about the Angus business."

Initial objectives

Schumann says he will focus on three primary objectives during the initial stages of his leadership.

First, at its meetings in June, the Association's Board of Directors ratified a new management structure proposed by Schumann for the Association and its entities. The restructuring, which puts in place an executive management team consisting of the presidents of each of the Association's entities — CAB, Angus Productions Inc. (API), Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), and the Angus Foundation along with a chief operating officer (COO) for the American Angus Association and departmental vice presidents — will provide for greater coordination of activities, improved membership service and enhanced communication between the various entities.

Second, Schumann believes information and technology, the key to the success of the Angus breed over the years, will play an even more critical role in the coming years as the industry becomes more consolidated and the economics of raising cattle become more challenging.

"Our success in the past has been built on our ability to make hard decisions at critical times," Schumann says. "We've been open to trying new technologies when others were reluctant to do so. We've looked at new ideas when others didn't see them. And, that's been the spirit of the Angus business, and that's paid us incredible dividends over time."

"The greatest thing about our membership is its ability to adopt new technology," he says. "New technology will be our greatest challenge and our greatest salvation. With the high cost of feed, identifying those genetics that are most efficient will become our highest priority."

The lessons of the past — and the blueprint for our future — are really pretty simple: If we produce a superior product, we'll have loyal customers.

—Bryce Schumann

"The way we identify those highly efficient [individuals] is to continue to have groundbreaking information that is publicly available to all cattle producers, whether they are small, medium or large," Schumann continues. "The public sire summary and genetic evaluation programs that we have offered our members and the commercial industry have really set us apart from the pork and poultry businesses. Those industries didn't have open sire summaries, and now those industries have consolidated into the hands of very few companies."

"But when you have greater information on a public basis," he continues, "that gives individual people in this business greater opportunity because they can make their own decisions. Through our genetic evaluation efforts, we have to be inventive and think outside traditional parameters. Our first obligation is providing our members — and their customers — with the tools they need to remain economically viable."

Third, Schumann believes the Association's ultimate objective will be continuing to ensure the products Angus producers bring to market meet consumer needs.

"The reason the Angus breed has been successful is because during our toughest times, we were able to make difficult decisions," he says. "With the establishment of CAB, we reached out to the consumer rather than pulling back. We moved forward rather than retreating. We created an opportunity that no one knew was there, and that opportunity has become one of the greatest success stories in America. Ask any person on the street what the



[PHOTO BY CRYSTAL YOUNG, API CREATIVE MEDIA]

Bryce and Gina Schumann married 17 years ago. Like Bryce, Gina is a native Kansan whose family raises cattle on the eastern edge of the Flint Hills.

definition of quality beef is, and almost all of them will tell you 'Angus.'

"As Angus producers, we need to continue to reach farther," he says. "We have to be innovative in the ways we communicate with consumers. We have to find new ways of delivering products to the marketplace. We have to be sensitive to what's taking place with consumers across the country, and we have to be positioned to create new opportunities."

The lessons of the past — and the blueprint for our future — are really pretty simple: If we produce a superior product, we'll have loyal customers. Our livelihood, more than ever before, depends on it."

Into the future

Standing in a pasture and looking to the north, Bryce and Gina hear the bawling of cattle as their four kids trail them across a wide pasture. The hoots and hollers of their children's voices carry on the breeze.

It's strange, Schumann says, that in just a few years their children will be grown up and moving on into their own lives, in their own way and on their own terms. The cyclical nature of raising cattle and families continues; the loop will close once again.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of farming and ranching is that the true value of raising Angus is not what the markets will bear on any given day; rather, the breed has come to represent an opportunity for many to continue, a way to see the next generation trace the footsteps of their fathers and mothers, to watch them take that first, critical step down their own trail to the future.



[PHOTO BY CRYSTAL YOUNG, API CREATIVE MEDIA]