



# Quality Over Quantity at David Ranch



Results speak volumes for CAB award winner.

Story & photos by **Lindsay Domer**

John David is not big on words, just results. Those can speak volumes. That low-key, high-achievement approach resulted in the David Ranch feedlot winning a national honor from Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB).

The Lenora, Kan., operation was recognized at the CAB Annual Conference in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, Sept. 15, with a 2008 Quality Focus Award for feedlots with less than 15,000-head capacity.

What the David family may lack in quantity, at 3,000-head capacity, they make up in quality. The feedlot enrolled 1,349 head with CAB from June 2007 through May of this year with 82% grading USDA Choice or better. Incredibly, 50.4% of those made the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand or Prime, mostly CAB Prime. No other feedyard enrolled a higher percentage of fed cattle with higher quality.

David Ranch began in 1953 and opened

the feedlot 35 years later. Owned and managed by John David with the help of sons Troy and Mike, the feedlot became CAB-licensed in 2002. The Davids finish their own Angus calves as well as customer cattle.

Many factors and goals come into play when raising and finishing high-quality cattle, but David Ranch narrows it down to a simple mission: using Angus genetics to maintain a self-sustaining operation.

There are no employees outside of the family. They haven't even bought an outside cow in 18 years.

The Davids produce most of their own feedstuffs and raise their own "cow" horses, too. The three of them work together to check pens, unload trucks, harvest crops and rotate pastures.

"Being family owned and operated just simplifies things," John says. "Everyone knows what they have to do and it gets done."

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## The feedlot

Started along the North Fork of the Solomon River, the feedlot was rebuilt on higher ground in 1999 with room for a few more cattle. "We had built up our customer base through small-town word of mouth," John says. "The first cattle in the lot were all from local people, and the cattle we feed today are still primarily local."

Another row of pens were added in this decade to reach current size, which is big enough, he says. "We enjoy the feedlot because we know our customers so well, especially those who have been here since the start."

"Yeah," Mike adds, "we pretty much see the same people and same cattle every year. That makes for a consistent base of cattle, and it also helps that they are Angus, of course."

Growth implants are held to low-dose products to ensure success in grid marketing through U.S. Premium Beef (USPB), John says. If there's a key to hitting the grid target, it's just "avoiding the use of aggressive implants and finishing Angus cattle with good genetics," he says.

The wet distillers' grain now used in

# Quality Focus Award <15,000 Capacity

the ration is “more cost-effective than the molasses-fat mix” it replaced, and it helps support the moderate gains achieved. “We try and have a balancing act with gain and grade,” John says.

He credits longtime customer and consulting nutritionist Russ Smith for helping the family find that balance. Smith represented the Davids at the CAB award recognition.

Although they may not talk a lot about results, David customers know the family leads by example, having always used feedlot and carcass data to improve their cow herd.

## The ranch

Part of the feedlot’s success lies in the David Ranch Angus cow herd. Oldest son Troy manages the 450-cow herd that has been their basis of genetics and knowledge in finishing cattle.

“Genetics are so important in our cow herd,” Troy says. “We want high-marbling, balanced bulls on cows with excellent mothering abilities. We got there with bulls from Rishel Angus [of North Platte, Neb.]”

After a long expansion phase, it is time to start leveling off, he says. But the promising new crop of heifers brings up a problem:



►Part of the feedlot’s success lies in the David Ranch Angus cow herd. “We want high-marbling, balanced bulls on cows with excellent mothering abilities,” oldest son Troy says.



►David Ranch feedlot owned and managed by (from left) Troy, John and Mike David, became CAB-licensed in 2002.

“We have a hard time finding a cow to cull anymore.”

Troy says they moved calving later, to May and June, to help cut feed costs and labor that is needed in the feedlot. Excluding some pastures from the summer rotation allows cows to winter graze for ease of care and nutrition to match their gestation phase.

The Davids still work their cattle the old-fashioned way — from horseback. Troy has several Quarter Horse broodmares he uses to raise horses for work at the feedlot and on the ranch.

## Farm and future

In line with the other self-sustaining goals, David Ranch produces almost all of its feedstuffs. Youngest son Mike manages the corn, alfalfa and wheat fields.

Shortly after the millennium turned, John and Troy realized they were getting too many cattle to handle the farmland as well. “We were at the point where we were going to have to hire outside help, but we decided to ask Mike to come back first,” John says.

It seemed like a long shot. Mike had recently acquired a master’s degree from Fort Hays State University in sports medicine, and was a licensed trainer in Missouri.

“We were surprised when he came back, but really happy,” John adds.

Mike cultivates all of the alfalfa and wheat that the ranch needs and produces most of the corn. At critical times, he also helps with the feedlot and cattle.

Counting all owned and leased land, the David Ranch now encompasses 10,000 acres. And that’s a final stopping point.

“We can’t get any bigger or we will have to start hiring help,” Mike says. “And, we like doing everything ourselves.”

The family agrees they will “never say never” on changes at their ranch — with one exception. “Angus cattle will always be here,” John says. Troy and Mike nod.

“My family has made their living off Angus cattle,” John says. “It’s something we’ve been doing for years and years and will keep doing for years to come.”

