

A 'W' in the Game



Wehrmann Angus wins 2010 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by **Laura Nelson**

It takes a certain finesse to win in a game of inches.

It's finesse that creates the combination of precise measurement, calculated skill and natural instinct. It's finesse that differentiates the majors from the amateurs, elation from disappointment, a legacy from a career. And when the game's called and the lines between competitors are drawn, it's finesse that allows both to gracefully re-evaluate and to focus on the next series.

But it's the numbers in neon lights that differentiate winners from losers.

Richard McClung knows that. The New Market, Va., cattleman has been honing his craft nearly all his life. The past 35 years have been spent as manager of Wehrmann Angus, where he's been shifting cattle genetics subtly — an inch gained here, another earned there. The craft is a means to an end, and in the end it is those numbers that matter.

"You could jump up on a stump and holler that you've got a good one all day," McClung says. "And Nick

would say, 'Prove it.' You had better be able to substantiate it. Of course, I felt that same way."

There wasn't much in the way of business philosophy that McClung and the late Nick Wehrmann didn't agree on. They teamed up in 1975, set to develop a herd of cattle that excelled in traits of economic importance. In the year after Wehrmann's death, the registered Angus ranch of his namesake

holds to that fundamental with McClung still calling the plays.

Brothers Nick Jr. and Robert Wehrmann plan to accept the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand's Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award on behalf of the ranch this month, an honor that recognizes the years of dedication.

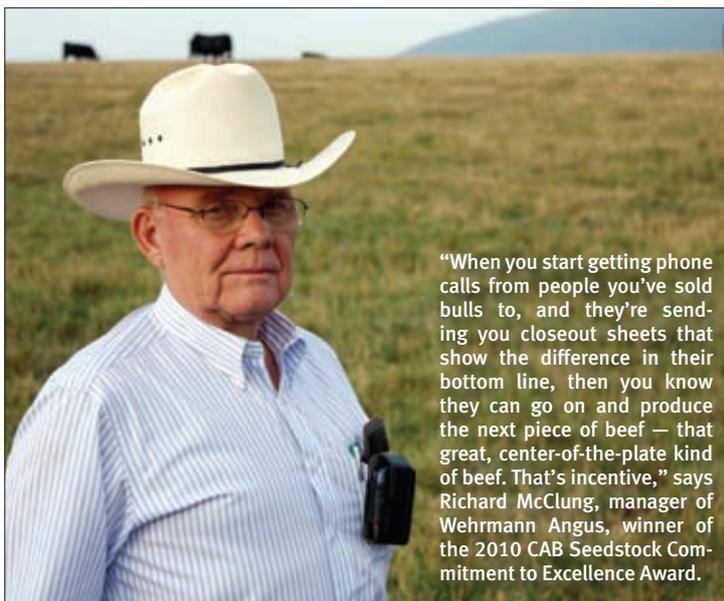
Wehrmann Sr. was educated as an engineer and made his way in the textile business before focusing on cattle.

McClung was born a cattleman, educated in animal sciences and bought his first set of calves two months after his college graduation. They started in Cairo, Ga., in the mid-1970s and started building the herd, progressing inch by inch.

"The only person I ever knew that might be more competitive and aggressive than Nick Wehrmann might be me," McClung says, a smile breaking through the game face no batter could read.

"You know, I played baseball in my younger days," he confides. "I went to college on a baseball scholarship. I was

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"When you start getting phone calls from people you've sold bulls to, and they're sending you closeout sheets that show the difference in their bottom line, then you know they can go on and produce the next piece of beef — that great, center-of-the-plate kind of beef. That's incentive," says Richard McClung, manager of Wehrmann Angus, winner of the 2010 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.



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pretty proud of the fact that I was known to be pretty darn good. It's the same thing here. We're proud of the cattle that wear that Wehrmann brand. They can do some things well. We've put some good into the cattle that wear that brand."

Thinking back to Georgia, McClung says, "The cattle got better every year, and we got a lot of opportunities as we were building this place. We found that if there's something you can do, you don't want to not do it. You want to take advantage of it, so we just kept expanding."

They found they could build good-doing cattle, despite being stifled by deep southern heat and industry trends that wanted bigger cattle than their moderate-framed ideal. The herd was based on South Dakota's Jorgensen Land & Cattle genetics, selling the thick northern cattle through southern bull markets for a decade. They moved the franchise to its current Virginia home in 1986, maintaining southern ties but gaining a broader reach.

Now, the outfit sells cattle around the horn — the March bull sale at the Virginia ranch, two sales a year with Texas partner Tommy Donnell, additional by private treaty, then back to the ranch for the annual female sale in October.

Focus on fundamentals

Wehrmann Angus was founded in a time of 8- to 10-frame cattle trends. It didn't suit McClung then, nor has any other fad since.

"Cattle need to be complete," he says,

tapping a decisive finger for emphasis. The American Angus Association's recent establishment of \$Value indexing simplified the multitrait selection McClung has focused on since opening day. The numbers tell the strategy that goes into Wehrmann genetics.

"You can use a bull with 160 pounds (lb.) of yearling EPD (expected progeny difference) and create a high beef value (\$B) in an instant, but that's just as bad in my opinion as using one with 30 lb. of yearling EPD. That's just no good," he maintains. "It has to be accomplished with balance. To come up with a \$B that's worth something, you have to have an animal that excels in every trait."

For Wehrmann cattle numbers to close in on a perfect batting average, they must have the proper composition. It's the combination of calving ease that turns to quick growth and pounds of solid ribeye and abundant marbling that hits his mark.

"Cattle that can do these things, and do them well, are what those commercial breeders are going to have in order to survive." But again, that craft has a larger purpose. "We are going to have to do these things in order to meet the demands of the consumers," he says.

Chad Mathias ranches just down the road from the Wehrmann place, with 250 head in line with McClung's aces. He feeds about 150 calves locally and utilizes grid marketing to catch the carcass premiums on the \$B he finds in the sale book.

"That's where my paycheck comes from, whether I'm selling right off the cow or retaining ownership in the feedlot," Mathias says. "That's what pays the bills. Even though we are selling by the pound, we're still getting paid back for the good carcass quality."

The cash lining in his pocket is just the silver lining of a solid cow herd.

"Obviously, the cows have to work first. We're not sacrificing cow quality to go after carcass. If you didn't have a cow that would perform, all the carcass in the world wouldn't matter to a commercial guy like me," he says.

That's the basis of McClung's game plan.

"A cow's got to be a good commercial cow before she's fit to wear a set of registration papers," he says. With rapid-growing calves in mind, calving ease is his No. 1 priority. Efficiency is essential if they are going to survive and perform on a fescue field.

"Fescue is the best culling device we have," McClung explains. "Cattle that can do well on our fescue can go anywhere and perform. If they can raise a calf on it and then rebreed on time, they can excel in any environment."

There's a science behind that strategy. In the heat of spring, the grass produces an endophyte fungus. Cows that can't digest it well won't shed off excess winter hair, slightly raising internal body temperature. Just a degree-and-a-half increase cuts conception rates by almost 50% and reduces milking ability, McClung explains. That minute temperature difference is enough to inch a cow right off the Wehrmann ranch.

"The thicker, meatier cattle are the ones that shed early and are slick as moles. Those are the cattle we started with from Jorgensen's decades ago, and those are the kind we keep around here today," he says.

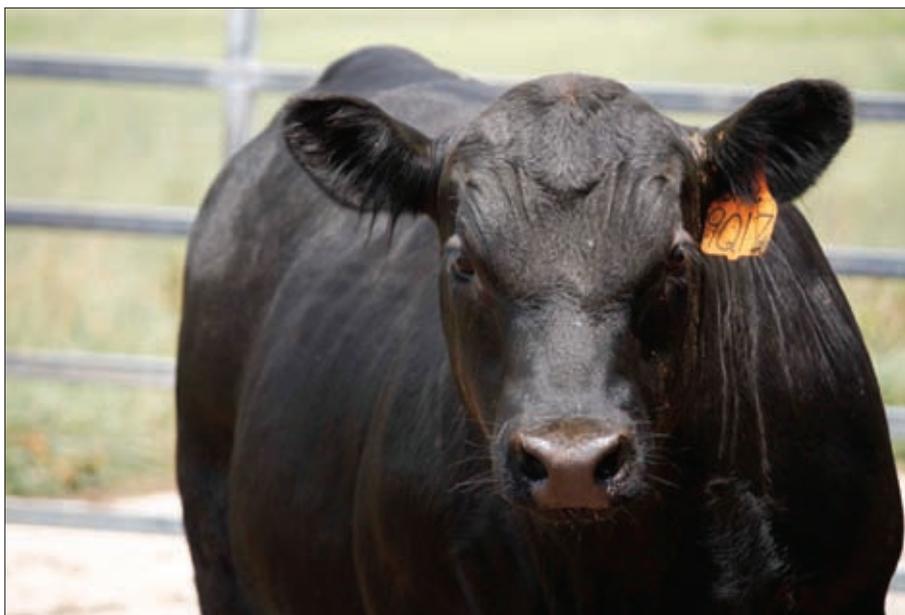
Backing up the basics

In those early days, McClung and Wehrmann were selecting cattle based on the fundamentals. "From Day 1, I have believed in making mating and culling decisions based on weights and visual appraisal. You don't ever neglect that. There are traits of economic importance you can see, too," McClung insists.

That builds a franchise, but complacency inches it away from progress. Instead, McClung keeps a scout's eye on evolving technology to help them stay on top.

"They are always on the cutting edge, taking all the information available and using it," Mathias says. "There is so much data out there, and it all reinforces what the paper and the numbers say. The numbers don't lie, so there's never a surprise with these cattle."

They added ultrasound technology to the



► "You put these cattle on the rail, and it is just unreal what they can do," says Edinburg, Va., feeder Randy Kibler of the cattle produced by Wehrmann genetics. "I usually have to pull a Wehrmann calf a little before he looks ready, because now I know what's going on under the hide that I can't see."



► Wehrmann Angus' team consisting of (from left) Richard McClung, Nick Wehrmann Jr. and Jason Arehart put one in the win column, earning the 2010 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

lineup in 1989, six years before ultrasound-based ribeye and backfat merit numbers were included in the Association database. As soon as ultrasound for intramuscular fat (IMF) was available, they started building their numerical repute with that data, too.

"Every tool, every technology there is, we want to use it. If we want cattle that can grow fast, finish early, cut and grade with enough pounds to pay the commercial breeder, we have to know exactly what we have under the hide," he says.

Randy Kibler knows firsthand what comes under a hide with the freeze-branded W. He started feeding bulls for McClung seven years ago. The ones that don't make the sale still score big with feedlot and carcass performance numbers. That experience was enough to pull the feeder into the cow-calf business, eager to raise the kind of cattle that were making him money in the yard.

"I call them my FMC cattle — fleshing, milking, carcass — they do it all," he says. That's a triple play that satisfies a cattleman in every aspect of the production line. "These are the cows that will be the foundation of my herd and create the bottom line of my feedyard. They make me feel like I've got the best commercial herd in the country.

"I had never gotten too excited about the genetics, the EPDs, the numbers. I've always felt pretty good about eyeballing cattle and picking the good ones the traditional way," Kibler recalls. "But since I've been working with Wehrmann cattle, I'm pretty excited about knowing how they'll perform before they even show up at my place, based on those numbers."

The Edinburg, Va., feeder scouts out local

Wehrmann-influenced cattle to "stack" his yard. He estimates that nearly all of the cattle he feeds of the Wehrmann influence hit the quality specifications for the CAB brand. Every once in a while, there's one that really hits it out of the ballpark.

"You put these cattle on the rail, and it is just unreal what they can do. I usually have to pull a Wehrmann calf a little before he looks ready, because now I know what's going on under the hide that I can't see," he says. "We've had a couple kill Yield Grade (YG) 1 Prime. That's the real deal. Those are the cattle that pay the bills."

The home run

McClung is already looking for technologies that will keep the lights on for years to come, starting with a personnel lineup that thinks in equally progressive terms.



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Assistant ranch manager Jason Arehart, on deck for seven years, grew up dissecting information from Wehrmann Angus bull sale books, putting together charts that helped prioritize selection and generally thinking about the game ahead.

Now a new player has arrived, like ultrasound technology 20 years ago. McClung and Arehart are already in line to put DNA profile data to bat.

"As more of that data is compiled, we'll start learning more about highly heritable traits that are hard to measure right now," Arehart says. "To be able to confirm things like feed efficiency and tenderness with DNA numbers is pretty exciting."

It'll be just another skill that adds substance to the Wehrmann style of inching closer to perfection and profit for their customers. It's all part of the finesse it takes to illuminate a "W" in neon lights.

"When you start getting phone calls from people you've sold bulls to," McClung relates, "and they're sending you closeout sheets that show the difference in their bottom line, then you know they can go on and produce the next piece of beef — that great, center-of-the-plate kind of beef. That's incentive."

That's a home run, and the fans love it. The Wehrmann team reciprocates.

"You know I love selling good females," McClung says. "But an ego trip for me is to sell a bunch of good bulls to good cowboys — people who use them and know how to use them. Cowboys who can get the good out of them and know what they have, and then get a bunch of good closeout sheets. That's pretty gratifying."



Editor's note: *Laura Nelson is an industry information specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*