



# The Right Choice

Longtime manager helps Kansas feeder earn CAB honors.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**T**y Rumford runs the feeding company like it was his own. He's been doing that for the business south of Scott City, Kan., since 1994, with the title of operations manager since 2000. That was six years before the ownership and name change, but Rumford provides continuity.

For an unflinching focus on producing what consumers want over the years by working with the people who produce the cattle, High Choice Feeders (HCF) was selected to receive the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand's 2017 Feedyard Commitment to Excellence Award.

Today's owners bought the 38,000-head, two-yard facility in 2006 from the Crist

family, who started feeding on their farm in the 1950s. HCF President Brad Scott, with his father Jim Scott and partner John Hintzsche, go back to a century of cattle feeding near Chicago, Ill. Pandorf Land & Cattle, Callaway, Neb., raises a lot of corn on that land, with cows in the Sandhills and feeders in grow yards.

Scott handles much of the risk management, but he leaves day-to-day operations in Rumford's capable hands (see "Farm boy roots"). That's why many customers identify their relationship as "feeding with Ty," rather than the company name. Rumford would be the first to say it's a team effort, and that he'd be lost without veteran business manager Dorinda Jurgens.

When cattle folks talk about "High Choice," they could mean the top one-third

of a USDA quality grade or "Ty's feedyard," which specializes in helping them hit premium beef targets.

Rumford has many other dimensions, of course, from his wife, Julie, and daughter, Claire, a high school freshman this fall, to their son, Chase, who often helps out at the yard but began work on his animal science degree at Kansas State University this fall.

Family comes first, but customers say his accessibility and focus make them feel a kinship.

"He treats our cattle like they're his," says Magdalena, N.M., rancher Todd Saulsberry, whose family grazes 600 commercial Angus cows on more than 60,000 acres in the state's western highlands.

"We tried feeding there 15 years ago, but our cattle were barely 60% Choice and hardly any premiums," Saulsberry says. "So, we backed away and started buying better Angus



► **Above:** Operations Manager Ty Rumford runs High Choice Feeders of Scott City, Kan., like it was his own. He's been doing that for the business since 1994. High Choice Feeders (HCF) was selected to receive the CAB brand's 2017 Feedyard Commitment to Excellence Award.

bulls, just well-rounded at first, but in the last 10 years we made sure to include carcass traits like higher marbling.”

### Mutual high target

That’s a common theme among the 150 or more HCF customers in 30 states, Rumford says. From the brittle, high deserts to lush Appalachian pastures, ranch customers aim high.

“This started 20 or 25 years ago, when grid sales first let people see what kind of cattle they had,” he says, noting the feedyard was a charter member of U.S. Premium Beef (USPB). “Once the cow-calf guys saw, they kept measuring and using the tools of genetic selection to improve.”

Just after HCF came to be, widespread drought coincided with global recession, and many ranchers had to cull older cows to keep the younger core and hope for better days.

“The price of beef went up, but quality was going up, too, and we kept moving it,” Rumford says. “A lot of people thought beef would fall on its face, but we learned consumers want quality. Our feeding customers improved genetics, and we improved feeding, too, because the consumer is our ultimate customer.”

Bryan Sims, Palestine, W.Va., spent 10 years trying to find the right feedyard after joining USPB in 2000 and investing in premium Angus bulls. He sent calves to a half-dozen yards in that time, never finding a match until happening upon High Choice.

“At first, we just sent a load or two, but now it’s two loads of our calf-feds and three or four from guys I know are buying good bulls, and one who buys his replacements from me,” says the cattleman, who relays data to those sources.

His steers head west weighing 700 pounds (lb.) and finish “right up against 1,400,” with a 3.8-lb. daily gain. The yearlings exceed 4-lb. gains. Sims says his last calves made 97% Choice or better with 40% CAB.

As performance and grade rise, what stands out in the feeding experience is “integrity,” Sims says.

“We don’t have to guess about anything,” he says. “He tells me when they’re done, but calls me about anything else that may come up. He’s all ‘right there.’ With Ty, I have the confidence to just let him decide practically everything.”

Ryan Georg, LaCrosse, Kan., starts up to 1,000 eastern calves per year in pens and pastures across hundreds of miles before they move on to finish at HCF. His experience with Rumford goes back to 2004. Steady improvements in performance and grade

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### Farm boy roots

It was 1994 when Ty Rumford first went to work for those who own the feedyard he reports to each day, although ownership changed a decade ago. His own retrospective begins on an Ottawa, Kan., farm 40 or 50 years ago.

“When I was young, my dad was a farmer and had some cows,” Rumford says. “Every Saturday morning, we’d grind feed through an old hammer mill. He’d put in so many scoops of corn and meal along with a mineral package. It was a very simple system, but he counted the scoops in, so he knew what he was doing. I thought that was pretty neat.”

Through high school and later, on breaks from his Kansas State University studies in feed science, Rumford worked for a local dairy, milking and feeding.

“I saw how critical the feed and nutrition was to the animals’ response and performance,” he recalls. “It’s the same with beef cattle, but you don’t see the impact as quickly.”

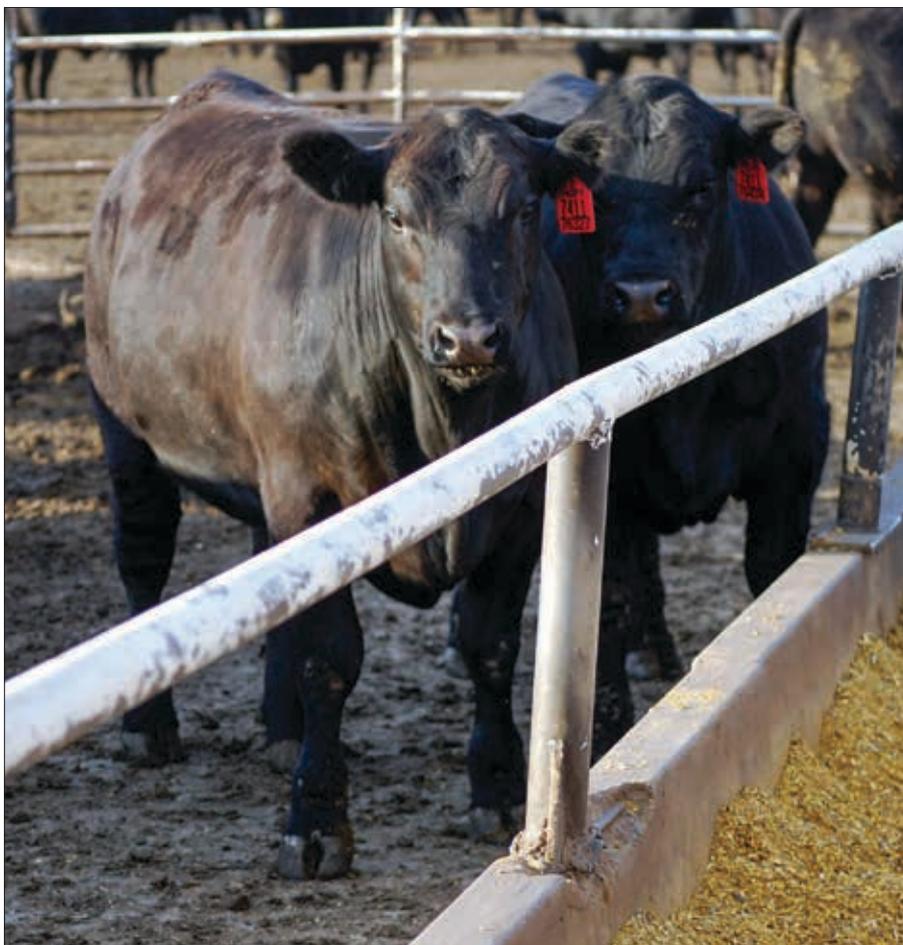
The farm boy planned a career in livestock feed manufacturing, so it was natural to interview when Cargill came to campus. Nutrena Feeds was a solid brand within the company.

Interviewers liked Rumford, but they had other plans. College students with practical experience linking feed and cattle were rare, and Cargill needed mill operators in its High Plains feedyards.

In the summer of 1984, he started work at a huge feedyard near Leoti, Kan., just west of Scott City.

“It was supposed to be a one-year training program,” Rumford says, “but after three months, Cargill needed me to run the mill at a Texas yard, so I went down there for five years. Then I came back to Leoti and worked up to assistant manager.”

He went for a change of pace when the Crists needed a manager for the 15,000-head yard they had recently purchased west of Scott City, running that for three years, then all 38,000 head in both yards for another three before hiring an assistant for that west yard and taking on the mantle of operations manager. Rumford kept up business as usual through the December 2006 change in ownership.



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on commodity yearlings led him to start an Angus cow herd in 2010.

He uses the best Angus sires by artificial insemination (AI) on all of the 120 cows before turning in clean-up bulls, and credits that with adding nearly \$40 per head in premiums.

“Feeding cattle isn’t always a net positive,” Georg says, “but we always have a great experience with Ty. We never have to wonder about anything and sleep easy knowing he’s feeding them. Would we change anything? We let Ty worry about that while we keep starting these calves.”

Rather than worry, Rumford stays ahead with a proactive style that assesses opportunities and potential challenges.

His first year at the main yard in 1997, he salvaged an iconic-looking “globe” tank from a nearby oil refinery, sandblasted and epoxy-coated it to keep a full-day’s water supply in reserve for 23,000 cattle.

The ownership team relies on Rumford to run with opportunities in the premium niche market with natural, non-hormone-treated cattle (NHTC), and Global Animal Partnership (GAP) programs. All focus as much on high-quality Angus as their own protocols, he says.

“CAB has done a good job,” Rumford says with a smile. Niches capture the imagination of young people on both the consumer and producer side, and he’s caught on to the rhythm.

“It’s a whole other dimension of quality that lets the Angus genetics shine,” he says. “We have to fit cattle from two calving seasons into these 52-week supply programs,

sometimes pulling them forward or holding them back. It takes superior genetics to do that and deliver the level of Primes we can get — 30% or 35% even.”

By comparison, the CAB brand sits atop a mainstream market, but that also requires alternating the push and pull over time.

“It’s amazing how short you can feed some of these cattle and still get Choice and CAB, or stretch them out a little when we need to on this feast-or-famine cattle market,” Rumford says. “It’s the genetics that let us do that now.”

**Predominantly black**

As a custom feedyard, HCF will finish anyone’s healthy cattle, but market demand has exerted itself as anyone can see by driving the alleys.

“It’s cleaned up a lot from just 10 years ago,” Rumford says. “You look at the yard now and it’s got a black tint to it, I mean predominantly black. Angus.”

New Mexico customer Saulsberry sold his last Charolais bulls when he decided to try feeding again after the calf market topped out in 2014. The last of those crossbreeds returned \$35-\$40 per head in premiums and returned less overall than the straight Angus, thanks to their \$97 premium, he reports.

“We’ve been happy with the results,” the young rancher says.

Rumford especially enjoys working with the millennials like Saulsberry and Green, Kan., producer Andy Larson.

“It’s nice to see the younger guys get into feeding,” he says. “They’re well-educated, sharp in business and know how to manage

risk. They’re not just kids who decided to feed cattle, but they started with their dads, and they know what they want to do. I like to see that.”

Larson heads up the relationship started by his father and partner, Raymond, more than 15 years ago when their Angus-based cattle were already above average, achieving up to 40% CAB.

They started feeding out West to get closer to packing plants than the alternative of finishing steers on their northeast Kansas farm, which they still do, as well. Calves finished at home this year made 85%-90% CAB and CAB brand Prime, while 91 fall-born herdmates went to HCF for one of the specialty niches.

“Ty has helped us see what our cattle were made of over the years and really improve them based on the data we get back from the plants,” Larson says. “He’s our partner in progress.”

What stands out through the years is customer service, he says.

“A few years ago, Ty was even out here to verify age and source, but of course we’re mostly on the phone. He may call just to let me know how they’re doing, when it’s time to ship, and anytime I call he’s available.”

That’s almost expected now, for those who choose High Choice Feeders. Mostly, they show their mutual appreciation by keeping those relationships going and growing.



**Editor’s Note:** Steve Suther is senior editor of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

