

# Top of the Auction Block



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LIVESTOCK MARKETING ASSOCIATION

## Dustin Focht represents livestock markets in his year as World Livestock Auctioneer Champion.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

Most of us have heard an auctioneer's chant, but have you ever tried to do it? To get words out quickly, you may try just saying nonsensical words or just syllables, but often, even that gets tongue-tied. It takes years of practice, and the 2013 World Livestock Auctioneer Champion Dustin Focht, Stillwater, Okla., has been perfecting his chant since 1999.

On his chant, he says he constantly critiques himself so he can develop something unique. His mentor, 1974 World Livestock Auctioneer Champion Ralph Wade, helped him build the rhythm of the chant and helped add filler words that are easy to listen to. Then he developed his own style through repetition and experience.

"It's an ever-changing evolution. We all have our unique way of marketing our products. It takes many months of trial and error," he explains. "Our sales at times can be rather lengthy, and you want to make

certain that you're protecting your voice, as well. You also need to make certain that it's very pleasing for buyers to listen to hour after hour."

Focht admits there is much more to being an auctioneer than just the chant. There's market and industry knowledge, of course — plus a lot of heart.

### Roots

Focht came from a farming and ranching family, and his grandfather was an auctioneer for most of his adult life. When Focht was in middle school, his grandfather was diagnosed with lung cancer, and died a few years later. Focht was heavily involved in athletics and says he didn't spend much time with the livestock industry at that time in his life.

After college, he went into the advertising business and moved to Chicago. After about eight years, he realized he wanted to come home. In 1999, a good friend, Greg Griffith,

was auctioneering at the Oklahoma National Stock Yards at Oklahoma City. Griffith introduced him to Wade.

"Ralph spent a couple days with me — a Wednesday and Thursday — and the next Tuesday, he put me in the auction block at the Oklahoma National Stockyards. Talk about indoctrination by fire," he says, grinning.

The fire start launched his 12½ years of experience in the industry. He currently sells at three stockyards — Woodward, Okla.; Cherokee, Okla.; and Anthony, Kan. — every week. At these three yards, he sells 600,000-700,000 head of cattle each year. He has also sold purebred Angus lots around the country.

He says he is blessed to work with ag professionals on a regular basis, including Tim Starks, Jerry Nine and Jay Gates. These mentors keep him sharp and help him improve, which is apparent through his performance in previous World Livestock Auctioneer Championship competitions,



► The LMA compiled a video featuring Focht's path to becoming the World Livestock Auctioneer Champion. Digital subscribers can click on the image above to listen to Focht's interview and auctioneering skills. The video is available online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fr0tNb8YD1w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fr0tNb8YD1w).

which are sponsored annually by the Livestock Marketing Association (LMA).

There are many avenues to pursue the career of auctioneering, he says. Many resources are available and [www.auctioneers.org/schools](http://www.auctioneers.org/schools) has a list of schools by state. Previous champions host individual schools or are willing to help those who are interested in getting started.

Focht encourages anyone interested in auctioneering to seek out experienced auctioneers.

"I would always encourage those who want to get started to saturate themselves with people who actually do it for a living," he expounds. "Most everybody I've encountered has been eager to help."

### The contest

Though he got a later start than most in auctioneering, he was quick to jump into the competitive arena. He has competed in the World Livestock Auctioneer Championship 12 times and credits perseverance for his success.

The competition starts with three quarterfinals across the country in different regions, he explains. Anyone 18 years or older who is employed by at least one fixed-facility livestock auction market as an auctioneer, and who has not sold at the competition host market, can compete.

The top 10 in each of the quarterfinals advance to the semi-finals, plus the international champion who is crowned at the Calgary Stampede, so there is a field of 31 competitors, he notes.

The semi-finals start with an interview, which accounts for 25% of your score, Focht explains. In the second half of the semi-finals, each auctioneer conducts a livestock sale, and each contestant sells eight drafts. They do this at an actual sale at the host market. This year

the sale was at the Montgomery Stockyards in Montgomery, Ala. The top 10 combined placings advance to the finals.

Focht says they draw for order of appearance in the finals.

"Obviously, in a contest, you're going to try to showcase a little more about marketing and a little more about yourself, so you'll take maybe a little longer in a contest setting," he notes. "Typically, in most markets, a draft of cattle won't take more than 30-45 seconds to sell. You're talking about 5 to 7 minutes, really."

During the auctioneering phase of the competition, he was judged on the clarity of his auction chant, voice quality, his ability to catch bids and conduct the sale, and whether the judges would hire him for their own livestock market, according to the LMA.

As the champion, he spends his year traveling the country to share his skills with other livestock markets and to serve as a

spokesperson for the industry. Knowledge of the industry was a necessity in the interview process of the competition. He says his background in advertising helped him in understanding value, budgets and marketing trends, plus how to maximize income potential with the least amount of effort. That real-world advertising experience helps him appreciate the value a producer can place on a market and on an auctioneer.

"The Livestock Marketing Association puts the contest on, and it is to showcase local livestock markets and the important role of an auctioneer in ascertaining true market value through competitive price discovery," Focht says. "My role as the champion this year is to show each customer, or potential customer, that livestock markets are such a viable resource for individual producers. It's a transparent way for a producer to maximize income potential for his products.

"As auctioneers and livestock-marketing professionals, we are in a very volatile market, it's ever-changing by the minute. We need to stay abreast of the market trends and important issues that we face, and that's why the Livestock Marketing Association is so instrumental in educating and keeping us up-to-date on industry-related topics, whether it be regulatory or legislative, and the impact they can have on our market. It helps us maintain a strategic way to market products properly."

With the drought the past few years, he emphasizes that local livestock markets are vital to many rural communities.

"With drought and ever-changing input costs, a livestock market is a viable resource for producers to stay abreast of changing market conditions. With a decreasing cow herd, it's another way for producers to tap into a valuable resource."

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► The *Angus Report* featured Dustin Focht in its Aug. 19 episode. Digital readers can click on the photo above to see the clip provided by the American Angus Association, which is also available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=G50tgOUONX8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G50tgOUONX8).