

# President's Perspective

American Angus Association President Steve Olson shares his perspective about serving on the Board of Directors, including what he sees as the opportunities and challenges facing the breed.

Story & photos by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

## What interested you in running for the Board?

Our kids had done extremely well in the junior program, and the American Angus Association had offered so many opportunities for leadership and such a strong junior program, I thought I needed to give back by serving as a Board member.

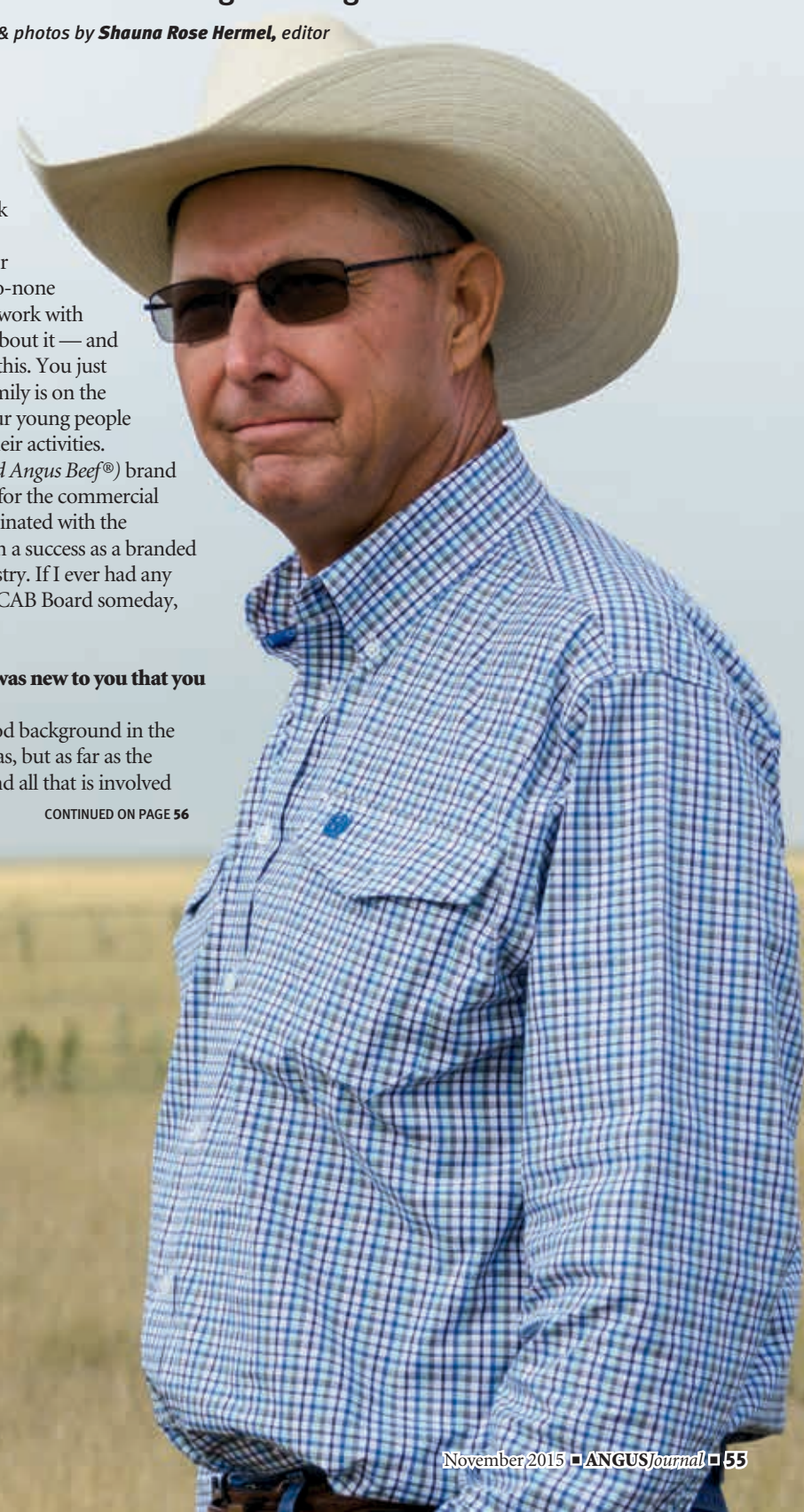
To me it is the best youth program available today for young people, especially ag people. Really, it's second-to-none with the opportunities our juniors have to compete, to work with other kids, for leadership programs, social, everything about it — and still be with the family as they grow up and go through this. You just don't find that. With all of your athletic events, your family is on the sidelines. Here they are involved. I think that's key to our young people today — that they have family involved with them in their activities.

I was also extremely interested in the CAB® (*Certified Angus Beef*®) brand because of the marketing of our cattle and what it does for the commercial industry, as well as the registered breeder. I was just fascinated with the whole program that was established and how it has been a success as a branded program — the first branded program in the beef industry. If I ever had any goals or desires as a Board member, it was to be on the CAB Board someday, and I was privileged to do that.

## Thinking back to your first year on the Board, what was new to you that you didn't expect?

Everything. It was a huge learning curve. I have a good background in the beef industry and quite a bit of knowledge in lots of areas, but as far as the workings of the Association, the day-to-day activities and all that is involved

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in making decisions, and *what* decisions the Board faces, I didn't have a clue. I would say most Board members experience, to some extent, the same thing. It's a learning curve.

It's a pretty humbling time, too. I thought I knew more than I did. CAB, which traditionally convened a December Board meeting, was the first I was exposed to. At the December meeting they bring in all the different facets of CAB, from foodservice to retail to culinary to international and value-added products in addition to the packer division and feedlot division. I was blown away by the whole program.

### What are some of the Board's most significant accomplishments during your tenure?

I was chairman of the CAB Board when CAB purchased the Education & Culinary Center. The Board was somewhat reluctant, but as we analyzed it we weren't borrowing money. The money was in a fund, and as one of the Board members said, it's got to

do us a whole lot more good invested in this project than sitting in the bank. Because of our hesitation, the staff became more driven to make it succeed, and they have.

Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI) was formed late in my first year. I served under John Crouch that first year and a half. As I look back on it, creating AGI was a significant thing.

We knew DNA technology was going to become affordable for the membership to use, and we certainly needed an avenue that we could funnel that technology through so results could be used in performance pedigrees. Plus, it gave us the ability to do some work for some other breeds and generate a few bucks that way, utilizing the computer capacity that we had to do some of those things also. If we didn't start doing that ourselves, somebody else was going to be doing it for us before long.

### Is that one of the things that's kept Angus at the forefront of the industry?

Performance programs in general have,

and the database that we have compiled. AGI certainly bolstered that position, even to the point where we incorporated all the DNA results into expected progeny differences (EPDs) and then eventually started running our evaluations on a weekly basis. All of those things were a first for the industry.

I would like to say it was amazing to be a part of that, but that would be wrong. It was amazing to be there to witness that, because most of it was done by staff and other people who had far more knowledge than I ever dreamed of having.

### How does the Board work with staff to gain the knowledge to make the decisions you are asked to make?

It's a joint effort from all aspects in terms of ideas. Some ideas come from the Board, some come from the staff. When those ideas surface, the Board and staff work together to explore those ideas to begin with and then to consider, are there ways for us to implement what comes from that exploration?

Our visioning session in February — which brought together the Board, the staff and key personnel from the DNA companies — was a prime example of the Board and the staff working together for that visioning session. The end result was a low-density DNA test that has been given to the membership at a lower cost and with great accuracy.

### DNA testing has gone from a defensive measure to control defects to an offensive

►At Olson Land & Cattle, calves don't receive creep feed, even in years of extreme drought. Steve explains, "It masked the genetic differences in some of the cows." Adjusted 205-day weights still average above 600 pounds.



## Advice to new board members

### What advice would you give newcomers to the Board?

My objectives for the Board this year were to

- 1) be informed;
- 2) be engaged in the workings of the Association;
- 3) evaluate programs and policies;
- 4) make improvements where needed and possible; and
- 5) take ownership in the decisions of the Board.

That's what I have tried to push and to do, and I think that would be my advice to new Board members.

Also, be ready to take off your personal hat and put on the hat of a Board member for the Association.

**measure to better predict traits of importance in the breed during your tenure. How do you see us using DNA testing in the future?**

Yes, certainly DNA technology has become our friend in the genetic predictions of our cattle and to speed up the advancement of herd improvement. It reduces the time needed to establish genetic predictions because it can be collected on a day-old calf. We need to be prudent about continuing to collect phenotypic weights and measurements that will help prove the DNA profiles and increase the accuracies as the technology improves. The future is bright for the use of DNA technology to propel our breed further and faster to the top of the beef industry.

**What are some of the other significant Board accomplishments during your tenure?**

We weathered the obstacle of the genetic defects. It took a lot of time to set policy and go through what we did for those first genetic defects. To look back today, I think I can say we did the right thing in trying to eliminate those first lethal defects, and we were the only breed that really did that.

It was a struggle for the Board; it wasn't a decision the Board made lightly. We were ridiculed by members looking for someone to blame because the defects hurt many of them financially.

**How do you deal with that?**

I struggled immensely with it at that

► Docility is an important trait to Steve Olson's commercial customers, he says. With cattlemen retaining more heifers to build cattle numbers, calving ease is also a popular trait.



time. I struggled with it so much that I didn't want to run for the second term. The part that bothered me the most was not people who asked questions and wanted to understand. It was those who started off the conversation making personal attacks on Board members rather than seeking the truth. That was disappointing. As time went on, more people accepted the action taken by the Board.

**Has the criticism made any difference in how the Board functions?**

Any time there's a controversial issue, the Board spends more time researching both sides of the issue and trying to get their arms around what is the principle here that needs to be enforced or stressed. As a Board, it makes you stronger, and in essence your

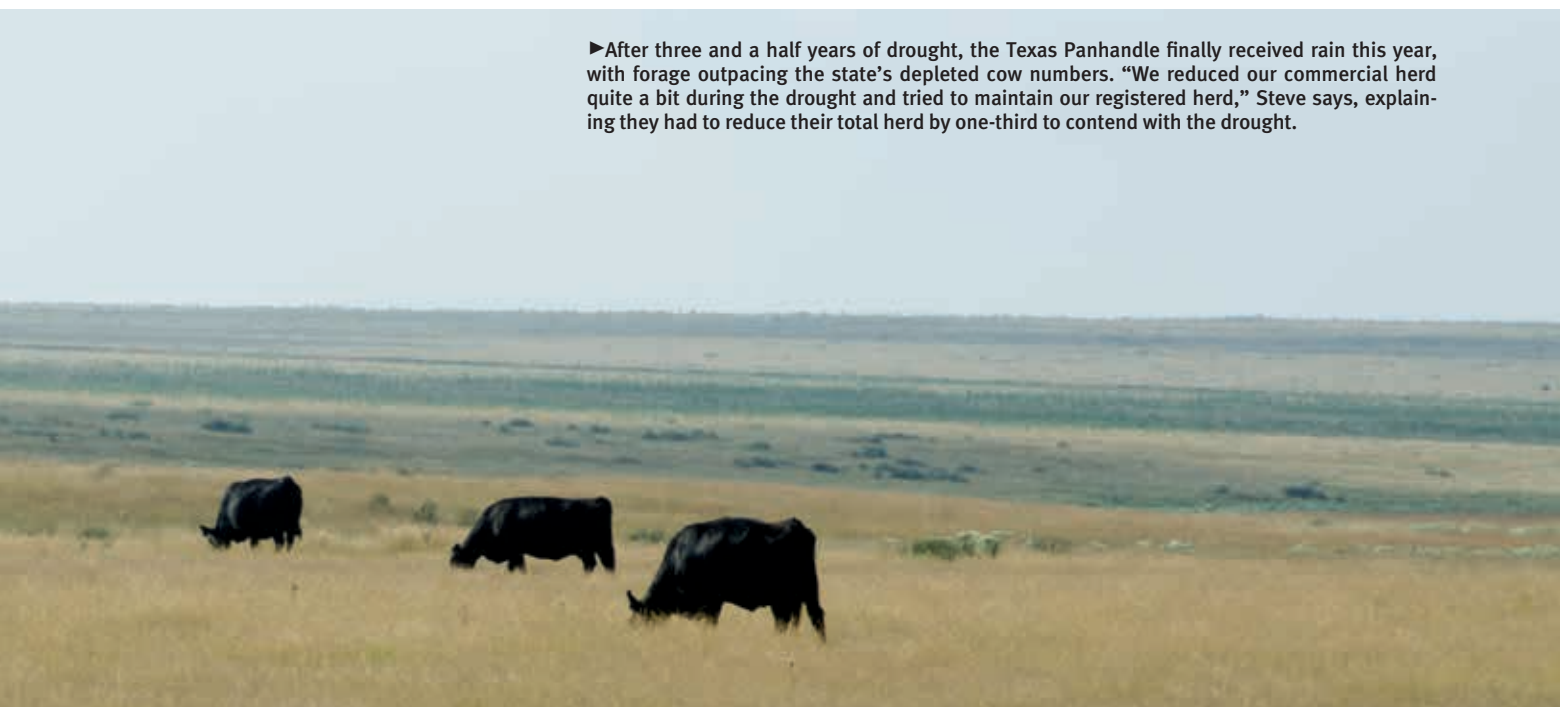
decision-making is stronger. I'm not sure you make better decisions, but you certainly spend more time trying to make that decision correct.

**What are some of the major challenges the Association and its members will face in the next three to five years?**

► *Keeping ahead of technology.* Technology has come a long ways and is increasing at a faster rate. Every couple of years it seems we ramp up that much faster. Of course DNA technology in our world of animal genetics has been the major contributor to the advancement of the breed. It will continue to be a challenge to stay up with those advancements and to continue to offer the type of products that will help our breeders

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► After three and a half years of drought, the Texas Panhandle finally received rain this year, with forage outpacing the state's depleted cow numbers. "We reduced our commercial herd quite a bit during the drought and tried to maintain our registered herd," Steve says, explaining they had to reduce their total herd by one-third to contend with the drought.



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continue their advance and stay on top of the beef industry with their genetics.

The Association's involvement and responsibility there is to provide the tools for the breeder and to explain the use of the tools, but not to tell breeders where to put their emphasis. That's always a challenge.

Just like the visioning session in February, we have to bring in some outside sources of scientists and geneticists that are on that cutting edge that are exploring those possibilities and let them help educate us as a Board and staff as to what is available and what's possible.

► *Not cutting corners.* In order for us to continue down this road of DNA technology and profiling, we have to continue to verify the accuracy of that. We need to continue turning in weights, doing ultrasound,

doing carcass measurements. All of those phenotypic data still are very important. Just because we have some DNA technology, we can't assume that's all we have to do today. We still need to be prudent as breeders to continue to collect actual records.

► *Protecting the database.* Keeping our data from being stolen or plagiarized is also a challenge.

► *Assisting commercial cattlemen.* One of the other things that I think is still very needed is how do we help the commercial producer with his breeding program, other than just providing the genetics in the sires that he uses? Are there other avenues where we can help them discover more value in their cow herd than what they have today? Very difficult. We've worked, and we've had a visioning session on that. We've tried

to establish some possibilities and parameters as far as what we can do. It's still a work in progress. It's going to take a while. That's something that we have in the future.

► *Consumer skepticism.* Consumers today are skeptical about their food supply. We have to be very prudent today in

how we present our product, or how we represent it. The necessity for us to defend what we do has become more important.

Social media has brought on skepticism in lots of things today, and some of it is good. Some of the skepticism has made us look at our programs and our handling equipment, our handling systems, our care. It's challenged us to look at our own systems because we feel others are watching a little closer than they used to. Then some of the social media banter, without accountability for what they are saying, has been harmful because there has not been real truth to what they were presenting.

► *Coming together as an organization.* Our greatest challenge may be to put the political division and emotional upheaval of the last two years behind us so we can better position the Association to face external challenges and to take advantage of the opportunities that benefit our members and their commercial customers.

We need to move forward with the common goal of achieving what's best for the entire membership, because that's a universal goal that nearly everybody has some feeling for.

### **What are the greatest opportunities for the Association and its members in the next three to five years?**

The opportunity for Angus is not so much in increasing market share, as more than 70% of our national cow herd has an Angus base, but in building customer loyalty. We do

► Steve and his wife, Ginger, have long been proponents of the CAB® brand, serving as hosts for chefs and retail specialists even before Steve's tenure on the Board.



that by providing the genetics they want in an Angus bull and the services to help them evaluate their cow herd and show them how they can improve their bottom line.

The same holds with our branded-beef program. As more brands set similar specs, service to customers becomes a bigger part of how you create loyalty to stay at the top. From menu service to marketing items, CAB offers a whole buffet of services to its licensees.

The American Angus Association has a pretty wide array of selection tools for its breeders. Are there more tools we could give to the commercial cattleman? They wouldn't be the same tools as our members use because they wouldn't be registered animals, but there could be some others. GeneMax<sup>®</sup> Focus<sup>™</sup> and GeneMax Advantage<sup>™</sup> are examples.

In today's market, all classes of cattle are bringing lots of money, more than we ever imagined. Will that continue? No. I think we've already seen the highs of this cattle-market run back in the spring. As we go back down in value, producers begin to look at, "How do I keep mine at the top of the market?" There will be more concern for being at the top of the market than just being wowed by where we are, so you try to develop programs to assist them in times when it is not as good.

#### **Why did you run for the Board presidency last fall?**

I had a strong belief that the membership

►Drought has reconfirmed to Texas cattlemen that there is a limit to the amount of milk you want a cow to give and still get her rebred, says Steve. He targets an expected progeny difference of 20-25 lb. as a maximum.



deserved a choice in leadership in light of the turmoil that occurred in the past year. I also had a strong belief that for the Board of Directors to ever come together, it would take leadership that was not present during that tumultuous time.

Those were the two drivers. Then came, who fit that? Who could do that? Logical reasoning would say I was probably the most recent of those who had gone off the Board, but who hadn't been there for the upheaval.

Many others also believed that there needed to be a change in the direction of the Association at that time. I struggled with the decision, but through prayer and searching the Scriptures for direction, I felt impressed that to step up to serve would be the right

thing to do. I shared that with a group of supporters and it got back to social media, and I was ridiculed for my faith. I never believed the position to be a divine right, but rather a responsibility — a rather humbling one, I might add — to an organization and a membership that has meant so much to me and my family.

#### **You started your presidency with five new Board members. How does that change the complexity of the Board?**

Obviously, you have five Board members going through that learning curve. My objectives as chairman were to have an informed board and for them to engage. We called the December special meeting in

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►The Olsons' cow-calf pairs graze black and blue grama grass, as well as some sideoats grama, on a ranch Steve's great-grandfather purchased near Hereford, Texas, in the 1930s. Before the drought, the land's carrying capacity was about 25 acres per cow.



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conjunction with the normal orientation time at CAB and AAA to help the Board members get informed and to get familiar with the structure of the committees and what all we would be doing for the year.

To wait till February before you really got started seemed like a waste of a lot of good time. I think December is a great time to start your goal-setting for the year and to get organized as to what you want to accomplish

and what needs to be tended to. Each of the standing committees had a little time, not very long, but they did begin to overview what they needed to be doing.

Several of the Board members — and

### Board timeline

The following list contains highlights of actions taken by the American Angus Association Board of Directors and the boards of its subsidiaries during the tenure of 2015 American Angus Association President Steve Olson of Hereford, Texas.

#### 2007

- Served on Activities & Events and Industry Relations committees
- Approved release of heifer pregnancy (HP) expected progeny differences (EPDs)
- Created Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI)
- Approved Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) as educational program
- Established guidelines for funding the National Junior Angus Show
- Implemented a new Angus Foundation Graduate Student Scholarship Program
- Launched Creative Media within Angus Productions Inc. (API)

#### 2008

- Served on Information & Data Management and Industry Relations committees; served on Angus Productions Inc. (API) Board
- Oversaw the retirement, search and hiring of an Association CEO and endorsed creation of an executive management team
- Adjusted requirements for carcass data collection submitted to the Association
- Approved guidelines for feed intake data submissions
- Approved efforts to pursue development of marker-assisted EPDs
- Combined carcass and ultrasound data into a single set of EPDs reported on a carcass basis
- Approved readership surveys for the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*

#### 2009

- Served on Activities Committee and as vice chairman of the Industry Relations Committee; served on Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) and API boards; served as Board chaplain
- Launched industry's first genomic-enhanced EPDs (GE-EPDs)
- Adopted a combined policy regarding both arthrogyrosis multiplex (AM) and neuropathic hydrocephalus (NH) protocol
- Introduced AngusSource Gateway
- Initiated a Research Priorities Committee to identify and prioritize potential areas of research benefiting the Angus breed
- Created an in-house advertising campaign focused on the value of Angus
- Rolled out an innovative information, advertising and public relations campaign including television, print and Internet
- Created *I Am Angus* documentary series
- Debuted the *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* newsletter as an offshoot of Board emphasis on commercial cattlemen
- CAB 30th Anniversary events include consumer and trade media reception and dinner at the Bull & Bear Steakhouse at the Waldorf=Astoria Hotel and a dinner at the James Beard House prepared by top chefs. The Olsons served as producer hosts.

#### 2010

- Served on Activities, Breed Improvement, Research Priorities committees and as chairman of the Industry Relations Committee; served on AGI Board and as chairman of the CAB Board; served as Board chaplain
- Identified, developed and implemented a diagnostic test for contractural arachnodactyly (CA)
- Approved the introduction of the Century Award, celebrating families in continuous production of Angus cattle for 100 years or more.

- Approved development and implementation of the residual average daily gain (RADG) EPD
- Approved release of docility EPDs
- Developed a radio presence through the Public Relations Department

#### 2011

- Served on Executive and Breed Improvement committees and as chairman of the Communications & Public Relations Committee; served on AGI Board and as chairman of CAB Board; served as Board chaplain, the Board's representative to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and on the NCBA Product Enhancement Committee
- Approved Long-range Strategic Plan
- Implemented single-nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) parentage with in-house databasing
- Approved purchase of CAB Education & Culinary Center
- Approved implementation of MaternalPlus® as a voluntary, inventory-based reporting system to capture reproductive data
- Approved Angus Foundation-funding of research on bull fertility and feed efficiency
- Approved development of GeneMax® DNA prediction tools for marbling and postweaning growth
- Approved weekly run of National Cattle Evaluation
- Approved submission of Pfizer genomic profiles for incorporation into Angus EPDs
- Launched *The Angus Report* as a weekly nationwide television program
- Constructed a studio in the Association headquarters to serve as the home for *The Angus Report*

#### 2012

- Served on Executive and Communications & PR committees and as chairman of the Breed Improvement Committee; served on AGI and CAB boards; served as the Board's representative on the NCBA Product Enhancement Committee
- Approved funding for University of Missouri research on genomic sequencing of Angus bulls
- Adopted updated version of "Suggested Sale Terms & Conditions"
- Adopted amended version of genetic defect policy
- Approved two-year advertising campaign centered on white paper, *Crossbreeding: Considerations and Alternatives in an Evolving Market*
- Expanded AGI staff
- Launched Angus Ambassador program

#### 2015

- Chairman of the Full Board; chairman of the Executive Committee
- Approved publishing dry-matter intake (DMI) EPDs
- Approved low-density genomic test options through AGI
- Developed foot-scoring system
- Approved funding of high-altitude disease and fescue toxicosis research in hopes of developing genetic predictions of resistance
- Integrated commercial focus into responsibilities of the Communications & Public Relations Committee
- Updated the economic assumptions used in calculating dollar value indexes (\$Values)
- Lowered the minimum age to participate in National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) events to 8 years old
- Approved electronic voting process for Annual Convention of Delegates
- Conducted search for CEO of the American Angus Association

several of the old Board members — said they thought it was good to have that time of jump-starting our year.

**What have you learned about yourself as you went through this whole process?**

When I first got on the Board, my people skills were lacking. I want to say they are greatly improved. That doesn't mean they are good, but they certainly have improved with time. I have been challenged, and it is good to be challenged.

**What did you find most challenging?**

Dealing with lots of people. Managing the Board certainly required more time than I expected. Being diplomatic and respectful to other people's opinions even though you disagreed with them has been an ongoing challenge that certainly I feel a lot better about than I did several years ago.

**What's been most effective in generating consensus among the Board?**

The question, "What's best for the Association and its membership and the breed?"

**Does the diversity of the membership we have complicate those decisions?**

We have a diverse breed of cattle. They fit application from the showing to the

► Knowing from experience how important the National Junior Angus Association is in developing young people in the industry, Steve Olson served as an advisor to the National Junior Angus Board for three years.



performance breeders to the commercial man that wants a mother cow that is very trouble-free. Therefore, we have lots of people with different emphases depending on how they're marketing their cattle and where they're marketing their cattle. You can't make one program that fits everybody. So you try to take a balance of things.

**Does being on the Board change your perspective?**

Yes. It does. Lots of times you had an idea of what would work, and maybe that's what

would work for your herd and your situation, but it didn't fit breeders in a different area.

**What else have you learned about yourself and your program as you've served on the Board?**

I made the statement I wanted to give back. I learned pretty soon that I couldn't give back enough. The more time I spent giving to the Association, the more I was given in opportunities, knowledge, relationships with people and opportunities

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to go places and to see things that I wouldn't have normally seen. I've come to the realization that I'll never get totally paid up.

### Are you glad you ran for the Board and the presidency?

Yes. I don't have any regrets. I've

contributed in an effort to forward the Association, and I've gained so much in the process.

### How do you want to be remembered as president of the American Angus Association?

I'd like to be remembered as one who cared about the future of the Association and was there to serve. My legacy is not as important to me as knowing that when I voted, I voted for the good of the Association. To do the right thing has not always been the easiest decision to make. 

## On hiring a new CEO

**As we compile this article and go to press, the Board is in the process of hiring a CEO. Have you ever been through a process like this?**

Yes. I was on the Board when John Crouch retired. I am the only one of the current Board that went through that process.

### How does this process differ?

We didn't hire an outside search firm at that time. We did it in-house. A search committee consisting of several Board members and several outside members did the initial screening and brought five people to the full Board to interview.

### How did you decide to hire an outside search firm?

We don't want the hiring process to ever be a stumbling block for the success of the person we hire. It is about the process being aboveboard, having integrity and transparency, yet still having confidentiality in respect to all the candidates and their present occupation.

I asked the Board to hire an outside search firm to take the political bias out of the picture for at least the first part of the process. I asked the Board to allow the Executive Committee to look for an outside firm to do the search. We ended up with proposals from four different firms. ... It took us nearly a month to decide. We recommended Witt-Kieffer to the full Board. The full Board approved, but wanted us to negotiate some on the contract. We did get some negotiations made, and then we started the process with them.

### Walk us through that process.

We then asked the full Board to allow the Executive Committee to serve as the search committee to work with this company, and the full Board agreed. The Witt-Kieffer folks met with the search committee in Kansas City right after the National Junior Angus Show, and they interviewed each of us separately. Then they interviewed many of the employees separately and as a group.

Based on interviews with the Board and staff, they developed the job description and leadership profile that we posted to the website (see <http://bit.ly/10iLUT>). They included a history of the Association and an organizational overview. It had a page on each entity and then overviews of the Board of Directors, the role of the chief executive officer, responsibilities of the position, required

characteristics and skills, opportunities for leadership, a little about Saint Joseph, and the procedure to apply.

Witt-Kieffer received more than 40 applicants and brought eight candidates to the search committee to interview in person in late September. The search committee narrowed the field of candidates to three to bring before the full Board in mid- to late October with the hope of introducing our new CEO by the convention.

### Was one of the things that gave the full Board a comfort with the search firm the fact that it had worked with another big breed association?

That was probably a factor. The main factor was the profile of their client list. A lot of ag companies are big business — lots of dollars, lots of money — but not all CEOs have an industry presence like the CEOs of the American Quarter Horse Association and the American Angus Association do. That was the real difference.

In the realm of big business today, we're not a big company. I mean \$50 million is not a big company. It's not a little company, but it's not a big company. The complications with the subsidiaries and the CEO's presence within the membership and the industry make it a very complicated position. It is still classified as a nonprofit, so it's a member-service organization.

### Is it hard to operate the business of the Association while being accountable to a membership that takes a lot of ownership in the organization?

There's a balance between confidentiality and transparency. There are items that have to be kept confidential — personnel and comments about personnel. Those are

in place to protect those people and the Association. They have to remain in place.

Contracts that are being negotiated have to be kept confidential. Even some of the details afterward need to remain confidential.

Transparency in the general minutes and general policies of the Association is something I appointed a task force at the September Board meeting to examine. We have to have the conversation about transparency with today's cry for open meetings and transparency in membership organizations. We have to evaluate ours and look for any improvements that we can make.

**“We don't want the hiring process to ever be a stumbling block for the success of the person we hire. It is about the process being aboveboard, having integrity and transparency, yet still having confidentiality in respect to all the candidates and their present occupation.”**

— Steve Olson

