

64 Years in the Ring

From an Illinois upbringing to life in Arizona, Terry Van Hilsen's devotion to Angus — and the show industry — has spanned more than six decades.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

Terry Van Hilsen eagerly began showing cattle at 8 years old, and the now 72-year-old never stopped.

"I have never missed a year of showing," he says.

Van Hilsen has either shown his or someone else's cattle every year since 1960. This will make 2024 his 64th consecutive year of showing.

Of this, Van Hilsen, who grew up near Hartsburg, Ill., and has lived in Gilbert, Ariz., since the mid 1970's says, "I've been blessed to be able to do it. Cattle and the work I do keeps me going; I don't have to go to the gym."

Van Hilsen's contribution to the livestock show industry has included working with the Arizona National Livestock Show for decades, including 38 years as superintendent of the Open Cattle Show, and serving on the executive committee, which culminated in being the board president in 2008 and 2009. The 2023 Arizona National Livestock Show marked Van Hilsen's retirement from his superintendent role, and the show was dedicated in honor of his legacy.

As Van Hilsen reflects on the years gone by, he says it has simply been his "passion" to be a part of the cattle and livestock show industries.

Family foundation

The seeds for Van Hilsen's passion



were planted early, growing up on an Illinois dirt farm with his parents, twin sisters and a herd of 50 registered Angus cows. Both sets of Terry's grandparents lived nearby, and his paternal grandfather raised Hampshire hogs.

When Terry was 7, his grandfather gave him a pregnant sow, and his other grandfather provided the feed. The sow had a litter of eight piglets, which Terry raised and sold. He then promptly bought his first registered Angus heifer — which he began to show when he was 8 years old.

Active in 4-H and eventually FFA, by the time he was around age 12, Van Hilsen recalls going to six or eight shows during the summer with his parents dropping him off for the week, and then returning on show

day. He remembers one of his first times showing at Decatur, Ill., and running out of money before his parents returned for show day.

But he shares, "I didn't tell them because I didn't want to get in trouble. However, after that I learned to budget my money real fast."

Another lesson Van Hilsen has carried with him from his agricultural upbringing is that "it's a way of life."

Van Hilsen had initially wanted to pursue an agricultural career path, but upon graduating from Illinois State University in Normal in

1974 during a depressed ag market, he returned to school to earn a master's degree in special education.

His first teaching and coaching position brought him to Gilbert, Ariz., and his path unfolded from there. By 1977, Van Hilsen's dirt farming roots led him to establish his own landscaping business. Shortly thereafter, the success of Aztec Landscape Maintenance fostered the opportunity for Van Hilsen to purchase registered Angus cattle and establish Aztec Angus Farm.

As the years went by, Terry was a single father raising three sons, when he met and married Kathryn, who had three sons of her own. Their blended family was involved in 4-H and FFA, with all six boys raising and showing pigs. Three of the boys



The Van Hilsen family's 1965 Christmas card featured Terry (a 7th grader at the time), at the halter of an Angus bull that went on to win several championships, along with his twin sisters Susan (left) and Sandra (center).

also were involved in raising cattle, including exhibiting at the Arizona National Livestock Show and at two National Junior Angus Shows.

"It teaches your kids so much responsibility," Van Hilsen says.

Today, Van Hilsen and Kathryn continue to operate both the landscape and cattle entities. Their Angus herd includes 15 registered Angus cows and 25 commercial cows. They primarily market seedstock through consignment sales, with show heifers sold mostly in Arizona and bulls often sold in Utah, New Mexico and Idaho. They show in Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, New Mexico, Texas and at the Arizona National.

Servant heart

It was only a couple years after moving to Arizona in the mid-1970s that Van Hilsen started his

involvement with the Arizona National Livestock Show, and he hasn't missed one since 1979. His focus has always been in the cattle barn during the show and striving to make it a great experience for the breeders.

Among his efforts were getting the Arizona National Livestock Show to host a Roll of Victory (ROV) Show for the Angus breed, which required having more than 100 Angus cattle exhibited. Van Hilsen shares that he and director Grant Boice worked hard to make that happen, and it did twice.

Van Hilsen says, "The fact that we had two ROV Angus shows in this desert ... I'm pretty proud of that."

Working together, Van Hilsen and Boice are also credited with establishing the Supreme Bull and Female selection, as well as the

Interesting to Know

■ At the 2008 National Western Stock Show in Denver, Van Hilsen's Aztec Angus was one of four co-owners of the grand champion bull, which was Sankeys' Lazer 609. Other co-owners of the February 2006 son of Exar Lutton 1831 included Sankey Angus, Council Grove, Kan.; Craig & J.J. Reinhardt, Sloughhouse, Calif.; and HAVE Angus, Wilton, Calif.

Of this champion achievement, Terry Van Hilsen says, "You can put that on my tombstone."

■ Van Hilsen's favorite piece of advice from his paternal grandpa was this: "When you can't sell 'em, [because you are too attached to your livestock] you better get out of business because you're gonna go broke."

■ Landon Andrews, Angus regional manager covering Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah, first met Van Hilsen some 30 years ago, when Andrews was just a youngster showing livestock. "Terry was instrumental in my upbringing and a mentor to me," says Andrews, who grew up near Payson, Utah. "One of Terry's pieces of advice that has always stuck with me was 'If you don't like getting beat and adversity, then you better not show cattle.'"

From that, Andrews honed his work ethic and perspective. Andrews credits Van Hilsen with being a huge supporter of youth and livestock shows, and concludes, "Terry is always the first to donate; he is an all-around good guy."

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Supreme Cow/Calf division, all of which are still in place today.

Another unique memory is from Van Hilsen's two-year term as president of the board for the Arizona National Livestock Show in 2008 and 2009. The first year, the state had a significant financial surplus and the show received an extra \$150,000 for their budget, which allowed for many upgrades, including green shavings in the show rings. But by 2009, the state had a huge deficit and Arizona National funds dropped to even less than prior funding. Van Hilsen's leadership of the board is credited with keeping the show intact.

He's also made many lasting friendships over the years through his Angus and Arizona National affiliations. One special friendship was with singer and actor Rex Allen, Sr., who lived at Tucson and was well-known for singing the song "Tumblin' Tumbleweeds."

Van Hilsen tells that someone had the idea to ask Allen to do radio spots promoting the Arizona National. So, Van Hilsen called a phone number he was given and was shocked when Allen himself answered the phone.


"He ended up doing the radio spots, and we became friends," shares Van Hilsen.

Looking ahead, Van Hilsen says his goal is to keep showing Angus cattle while he can. He shares he had two strong-willed heifers he was halter-breaking this past year, and momentarily considered skipping showing for the year.

But his wife pointed out, "If you miss one year, you'll be done."

That was all the encouragement he needed to continue his efforts.

"We still get a lot of good kids coming through, and we have a great office staff and volunteers," Van Hilsen says, regarding the show industry, and specifically the Arizona

National Livestock Show. "My advice to the next generation is if they want to keep this way of life going, you need to step up and volunteer." 

“*My advice to the next generation is if they want to keep this way of life going, you need to step up and volunteer.* – TERRY VAN HILSEN



Top: Terry was presented a leather show harness and shared remarks during the dedication celebration on Dec. 28 recognizing him as the 2023 honoree at the Arizona National.

Bottom: Terry and wife Kathy (center) were joined by five of their sons and three of their daughters-in-law. Their oldest son and his wife were not able to attend because they welcomed a new baby boy on Dec. 21, 2023.