

*NJAA member Ryan Sweeney is putting skills learned in the cattle business to use in building his own equipment-fabrication business.*

BY DEANNA  
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DEANNA SCRIMGER PHOTOS

For Ryan Sweeney, Mason, Mich., juggling the priorities of being a business owner, college freshman and state FFA president is everyday life.

# Constructing the Future

**A**t 18, Ryan Sweeney, Mason, Mich., is knee-deep in the business world. President of RPS Enterprises, an equipment-fabrication business he founded in 1997, Sweeney is learning first-hand about the business world as he juggles the priorities of being a business owner, college freshman and state FFA president.

"It's pretty neat being the boss," he jokes. When Sweeney and his dad made their first blocking chute for a friend in December 1996, he had no idea things would take off from there. Only three short years later, his business is not only profitable, but he's won top honors from the National FFA Organization in Agri-Entrepreneur and Proficiency in Agricultural Mechanical Technical Systems Entrepreneurship. These prestigious awards are supported by the National FFA

Organization, Kaufman Foundation and U.S. Department of Education.

"Originally I planned to build blocking chutes on a customer-order basis. However, after receiving 14 orders in the first four months, I knew I had found a venture with a great deal of potential," explains Sweeney when asked how he landed in the livestock-equipment-fabrication business.

#### ■ Business owner

The product line at RPS Enterprises has expanded from the original lightweight chute made of galvanized tubing with unique safety features. Today it includes sheep stands, displays for show cattle, calving gates, custom handling facilities, hog gates, university research equipment

and showings for county fairs. The largest project so far encompassed more than 255 gates for the new hog barn at Michigan's Eaton County Fairgrounds.

Sweeney has learned many valuable lessons about life and running a business during the past three years. "First, you have to make sure you like what you are doing and be willing to dedicate the time to it," he explains. "When getting started, ask industry professionals what has worked for them. Talk to successful business people; they will help you."

Sweeney, who has been interested in building projects most of his life, remembers helping his dad build barns and cattle sheds when he was younger. He learned to weld in his eighth-grade shop class. His first project was a fork and halter rack that is installed today in their show barn.

He thanks Dave Bruer from Riverrode Sales, a cattle-equipment-fabrication company in Illinois, for helping him get his start.

"He helped me get started with ideas and agreed to sell me galvanized tubing on a small scale," explains Sweeney. With only two companies in the United States using the particular process for galvanized tubing, being able to buy in less than 20,000-pound (lb.) lots was a tremendous advantage.

Growing up on a large beef cattle operation with excellent handling equipment and his father's expertise in working facilities have been valuable resources for Sweeney. With enthusiasm, he

explains, "It's great to review plans for a new facility and be able to offer ideas on how to make it more efficient, less labor intensive and easier to use."

Sweeney has put to work in his business the accounting skills he's learned through school and growing up. "So far so good with the paperwork because the numbers look good," he smiles. Managing the financial aspects of his business has driven home the importance of efficiency.

Part of any successful business is advertising and promotion. So far, word-of-mouth advertising has proven an excellent tool. Sweeney has exhibited his creations at several cattle shows and events.

"Before I exhibited at my first trade show at the Michigan Beef Expo in April of 1997, my goal was to build and market \$500 of equipment each month. After receiving orders of over \$4,000 at the show alone, I raised my goal to \$1,000 in sales each month."

In his second year of business, Sweeney met his goal of doubling his first year's sales. At three years, he is on target for tripling his first year's sales.

Donating blocking chutes to various breed associations in exchange for booth space at the shows has worked well as a promotional vehicle, says Sweeney. "When someone wins the chute from another area, it helps to get the name out there."

Profits from his enterprise have been reinvested in equipment to help make the operation more efficient and productive.

The use of all raw materials has had a great effect on profitability. Purchasing fixtures and equipment parts from a local salvage yard has helped reduce costs.

The business is also helping Sweeney with college expenses. He admits that with college and his role as state FFA president it can sometimes be hard to find extra hours to put in at the shop.

For now, his main focus is the financial and promotional aspects of the business. RPS Enterprises currently employs one full-time employee, his father, and two part-time employees who focus on the fabrication of equipment.

#### ■ Cattleman at heart

Sweeney thinks RPS Enterprises shows promise for the future. After completing a degree in animal science and agribusiness from Michigan State University, he hopes to manage a beef cattle operation and maintain his business on the side. However, if the business continues to grow, it could become his full-time focus.

Still, the young cattleman-turned-businessman admits how much he enjoys just working cows for the day.

"We live the Angus business as a family," he says of parents Pete and Barb, whom he credits for his official start in the cattle industry. The first heifer his parents purchased him has been the foundation female for his herd.

"I'm glad they got me started," he says. "I've always liked working cattle with my dad."

He laughs as he remembers that when he was finally old enough for 4-H his parents suggested he show sheep because he wasn't very tall. "I remember thinking, I've watched my dad show cattle all my life — I can't show sheep."

Taking home champion Angus heifer honors and winning showmanship at his first show in the winter of 1989 are still favorite memories for Sweeney. He credits the decision to show Angus cattle as one of the best things he's ever done.

It's with a smile that he explains how much he enjoys working with cattle at home and at shows. He treasures the many great friendships formed within the cattle industry.

"Our family vacations are cattle shows. It's been our time together. I would not have been able to do it without my parents," he says. The National Junior Angus Show



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Sweeney credits his parents for his official start in the cattle industry; they bought him an Angus cow when he was only 6 months old.

(NJAS) ranks at the top of his show list. He hasn't missed one since his first in Milwaukee, Wis., in 1991.

"He has a competitive edge that has driven him in the right direction. He handles his competitive drive as well as any junior member his age," remarks Jerry Cassidy, American Angus Association regional manager. "He's a rare kind of young man — very intense and focused. Ryan doesn't do anything halfway, from Angus activities to FFA or sports; he always gives 100%."

■ **A natural leader**

With his mom a longtime advisor of the Michigan Junior Angus Association (MJAA), Sweeney has been involved since Day One. Today he serves as the organization's president.

"Even before he was president, he was a key leader in our group. He's such a natural leader, you don't even know he's leading," remarks Vicki Meiburg, past advisor of MJAA. "He blends leadership and humor. At meetings he makes sure everyone is involved and no one is left out. If someone is not speaking, he works hard to get them involved. He makes others want to do great."

Cassidy agrees about Sweeney's strong leadership skills. "He's always willing to pass on what he knows. He's a role model for young kids. Every state could use two or three like him to help the next generation," he explains.

To Sweeney one of the best rewards of being the MJAA president is working with the younger members. "It's neat to hear the ideas they come up with. They are a great group and all really care," he says of the

younger delegation of MJAA. As leader of the organization he hopes to encourage other members to set their goals high and to work hard to get there.

The pages of the *Angus Journal* have chronicled the results of his hard work, as Sweeney has been recognized for his accomplishments as a leader and competitor in junior Angus activities from the local to the national level. Just this year, he earned first place in the American Angus Auxiliary's boys' scholarship division.

■ **Diversified interests**

The Angus business is in his heart, yet

Sweeney is thankful for the many opportunities he's had through other activities. "The things I have learned through FFA have been great life lessons. They have taught me to be a more practical person," he explains. "Still, sports are probably the most memorable of high school. You learn things out there you can't learn anywhere else. On the football team, everyone depends on you. A great camaraderie is formed," explains Sweeney. "Wrestling taught me to be humble. You may lose the next match."

Sweeney's start in FFA was as a high-school freshman. His leadership track began as chapter reporter and progressed to chapter and regional president. The climax is his current state president position. Today you'll find Sweeney traveling throughout Michigan attending FFA chapter meetings and foundation functions.

State FFA Advisor Charles Snyder works closely with the entire state officer team to carry out the activities and goals of Michigan's FFA. "Ryan is committed to doing his best at everything he does," he says.

Snyder believes Sweeney's natural ability with younger members, work ethic and public speaking skills are his strongest traits.

"Ryan leads by example. He is excellent with time management. He can prioritize and focus on what needs to be done," explains Snyder. "He's also a very good public speaker. He has the ability to deliver a strong, memorable message. He's short and



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**— Jerry Cassady**



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to the point with his presentations; but, when you leave, you always know what he said and why he said it."

As state president, Sweeney has focused on improving the delivery and content of his presentations. "I always try to interact with the group when I'm speaking. I usually start with a story about deciding to play football since I am so huge. That usually gets a laugh," he explains.

At 5'8" and a medium build, the football story may be a good lead-in, but the truth is, he was a starter on his high-school football team. "He's an example of perseverance and hard work. Everything Ryan got with football was because of hard work. His size was to his disadvantage out there," explains the Mason High School varsity football team coach, Jerry VanHavel.

"It all boils down to work ethic. Ryan is willing to outwork others. If he was busy with FFA after school, he was here at 6:30 a.m. to do weight training," explains VanHavel. "At his age so many things can sidetrack students. Ryan took part in the fun but always had his work done first."

Beyond work ethic, his coach also compliments his communication skills. "He's very genuine and straightforward. You always know he's being honest with you. I think that's helped him with his business."

#### ■ A role model

Sweeney's FFA involvement has opened his eyes to a totally new arena. From making maple syrup with his own chapter to learning about other chapters' aquatic projects, Sweeney has enjoyed the many new avenues to which he's been exposed. The political world he experienced firsthand through a trip to Washington, D.C., has been the most fascinating for Sweeney.

His activities have landed him in front of a 10-member interview panel. "It's good to be a little nervous because it keeps you

thinking," says Sweeney. "You have to have a good time. Be confident in what you say. Talk to them like they are real people."

Sweeney offers advice to others as they prepare for presentations or interviews. "Remember, they aren't going to eat you, or they sure shouldn't," he jokes. "It helps to be prepared. Practice in front of parents, teachers or industry professionals — anyone who says they'll help."

What about those tough interview questions? "Be prepared. Answer to the best of your ability. But don't make it up; be honest," Sweeney says.

His active involvement in both the Angus industry and the FFA has been a role model for others. Mason High School teacher and FFA advisor Mike Prelesnik believes Sweeney has left a signature of work ethic and follow-through that still helps the chapter today.

Prelesnik compliments Sweeney for inspiring younger members to take an active role in the chapter. Evan Boehmer, friend and MJAA member, looks up to Sweeney and says, "His involvement in FFA and being state FFA president has given me the goal to go higher, beyond my local school."

Sweeney has been having fun with college life. He likes the independence of designing his own schedule and has become an active Block & Bridle member. He admits there are challenges involved with juggling his priorities and travel demands as state FFA president. Still there is no question in his mind it's worth it.

Take the advice of getting involved from someone who's lived it. "Take advantage of the opportunities that are available, and, most of all, have fun. Remember, the hard work you invest will be well worth it," says Sweeney.

