

Mile-High Tradition

The National Western Stock Show is a gathering ground for cattlemen.

Story & photos by **Corinne Blender**



► The dominant feature of the Yards remains the Angus bull.

For 96 years the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo., has been the Western breeding ground for beef advancement, mystique and tradition.

“I don’t think there is any other show ... that has the same number of quality cattle any place in the United States or the world as they do there,” says John Schurr, Schurrtop Angus, Farnam, Neb.

The Stadium Arena, steeped in a tradition of its own, carries an allure that no other livestock arena does. Built in 1909, many consider the stadium the cathedral of cattle exhibition.

Banners of red, white and blue, draped from the ceiling rafters and set aglow by sun from the skylights above, shed light on past, present and future chapters of the American beef industry.

The long and illustrious line of champions that has been paraded around this ring carries with it a folklore that has been followed by generations of Angus breeders and cattlemen across the world.

“Denver is probably the most prestigious livestock show in the world,” Ron Springer, R&R Cattle Co., Keithville, La., says. “So, that’s where we certainly

want to exhibit every year.”

Springer speaks from experience. He joined the prestigious line of grand champions with his female at last year’s show.

The National Western separates itself from other shows by promoting the beef industry in its entirety.

“I think what makes the Denver show so popular is that it’s so diversified,” says Dean Hurlbut, former director of activities for the American Angus Association. “You can go see your competitors. You can see your fellow breeders, use it as a promotional tool or rub elbows with one another at the reception they have. You can go to the rodeo, you can see the horse show, you can see so many different things.”

The freshman class

One of the most anticipated features of the Denver “Hill Show” is the incoming freshman class of show cattle.

“Up until this time they’re basically the same animals being shown all the time, clear on through the show circuit,” Hurlbut says. “When you start out the new year in January at Denver, you’re getting more of those young calves nobody has seen before. So, you’re getting to see something new.”

The presence of this new generation of stock allows producers to analyze cattle from all over the country and to relate them to the genetics that they have at home.

“We really feel that Denver is one of the best places to get a good comparison on your cattle,” says Mark Malson, Malson Angus Ranch, Parma, Idaho. “You get the chance to bring them out and compare them with other cattle from all

over the country.”

The Hill Show is known for its champions, but its focus still lies on good Angus cattle.

“Our goal is not to raise a champion heifer. Our goal is to raise performance cattle that are good enough to be shown,” Springer says. “Quality cattle is No. 1, but you have to have the eye appeal.”

Breeders say the Hill and the Yard shows both have their strong focal points. The Hill, where cattle are stalled in the barn and shown in Stadium Arena, is known for promoting genetics to other purebred breeders; the Yards are traditionally known for promoting bulls to commercial buyers. But many will agree that the two combined is what makes the National Western the show of all shows.

“I think they are hand and glove,” Hurlbut says. “They complement each other.”

Merchandising in the Yards

Steam drifts from the nostrils of the bulls tied to the old wooden fence. The quiet, early morning chill is disrupted by the sound of gas-powered generators humming through the alleyways. This backdrop sets the tone for one of the most prominent ways to showcase Angus cattle.

“It’s a very unique way of merchandising cattle. The old mystique of the yards — you know, the Kansas City stockyards, Chicago stockyards, the Denver stockyards — there’s a lot of tradition,” David Breiner, Mill Creek Ranch, Alma, Kan., says. “There’s a lot of interest because you can go down there and walk through the pens and look at the different breeds. You can deal with a person on a one-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 174



► One of the most anticipated features of the Denver “Hill Show” is the incoming freshman class of show cattle.



► Angus breeders exhibit pens of three and carloads of Angus bulls before a five-member panel of judges in the Yard Show.

on-one basis. It's quite unique and intriguing to a lot of people."

The Yard Show has always been known for its service to commercial breeders. Hurlbut says the cattle used to be shown in their "everyday wear." There was no fitting of the animals for the Yard Show beyond clipping heads and tails. In the past, many exchanges of cattle took place by open bids and private treaties.

The function of the yards has changed with the times. Today, with many producers promoting their own production sales, the Yards have shifted to a marketing tool. But, they still act as one of the biggest gathering grounds for cattlemen.

For those who pick one cattle function to attend each year, the NWSS is the Super Bowl of cattle expositions for all breeds and types, says Mark Akin, general manager for Circle A Angus Ranch, Iberia, Mo. "When you have that large of an audience available, it's a good place to exhibit and talk to people about your program."

Along with many other breeders, Circle A Ranch focuses strictly on participating in the Yards. Akin and his crew set up a tent to answer producer questions about their breeding program. They also have a large number of cattle in the pens and display some of their top bull progeny.

The Yards have provided a growing number of marketing venues, Breiner says. Private treaty sales are still common, but other events have been added to the Yard Show. Auctions in the auction arena sell elk, buffalo and other animals, as well as cattle. But the dominant feature of the Yards remains the Angus bull.

"The different environment in the Yards is that it's pretty

much all male progeny down there," Akin says. "The biggest consumer of male progeny is the commercial cattleman and other potential registered breeders."

Commercial producers and purebred breeders, alike, take note of the progeny in the Yards.

"It's also a learning experience for us," Schurr says, adding that he uses it as an opportunity to view other producers' cattle. "If somebody has better cattle than we do at the Denver stock show, maybe we should be investing in that breeding or bloodline."

The breeders in the Yards say they are at the mercy of Mother Nature. Breiner and Schurr both say they remember years when the bulls would be buried under several inches of snow, and it would take all day just to clean out the pens.

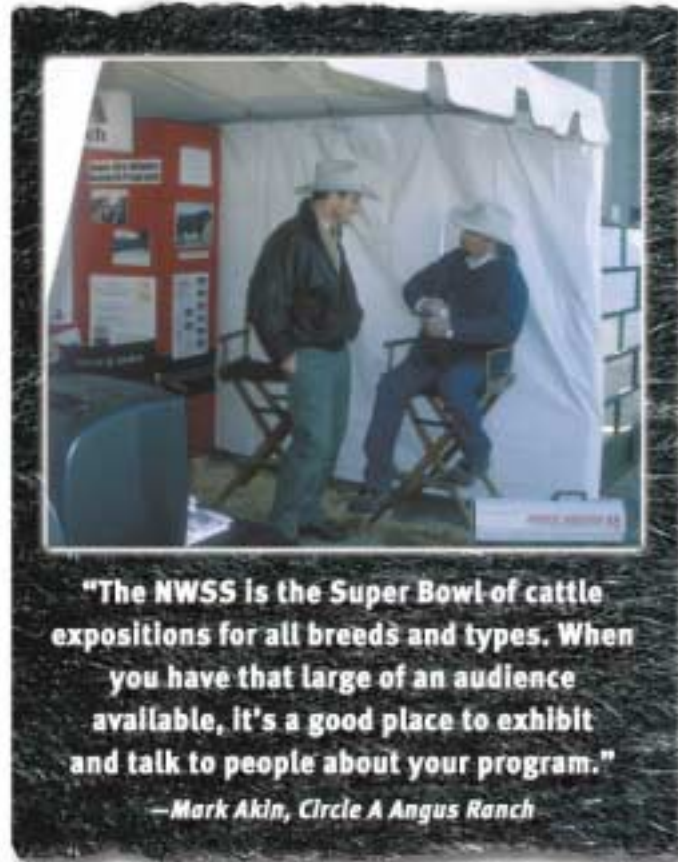
"It is a little colder — it's outside — so if people want to come down there then they are serious about what they are going down there for," Akin says. "It's not just a bunch of through traffic."

Traffic is always moving through the stockyards, offering breeders one common benefit that doesn't limit itself to the Hill or the Yards.

"When we come to Denver it's basically advertising what we have, what our program is," Akin says. "We do exhibit bulls and hope that we have people in the crowd that can recognize them, and it's beneficial for us."

With its tradition and marketing opportunities, the NWSS truly offers a one-of-a-kind environment for cattle breeders.

"Why mess around with the smaller-type show?" Schurr says. "Why not go out where the best are? And the best are in Denver."



"The NWSS is the Super Bowl of cattle expositions for all breeds and types. When you have that large of an audience available, it's a good place to exhibit and talk to people about your program."

—Mark Akin, Circle A Angus Ranch



▶ With its tradition and marketing opportunities, the NWSS truly offers a one-of-a-kind environment for cattle breeders.