



PHOTO BY BILL SPIEGEL

The Nolans tune in to master their industry.

BY CORINNE BLENDER

Some people romanticize it; others live it. Those who live as successful beef producers and farmers do so by keeping up with their industries. On the beef side, that means adding more focus on quality, as well as quantity, when the world's leading beef brand builds demand for *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) products.

Agriculture finds its way into everyone's life, but the true masters of production acknowledge their heritage and tune into its progression to thrive. So it is that Bill and Marian Nolan, Scott City, Kan., were recognized as a Master Farmer and Master Farm Homemaker of Kansas this

spring. The award is given to five farm families across the state each year for outstanding stewardship of the land and accomplishments in agriculture.

"It represents what we have achieved as a family, first with Marian's parents, Richard and Adele Christy, and then with us



and the boys [sons Richard and William]," Bill says. "We are entwined in the farming and cattle and intend to remain that way until it is time for us to turn it over to the next generation."

This family heritage and a lifelong appreciation for farming and ranching have been the backbone of the Nolans' Angus operation, consisting of seedstock and commercial purebred cattle. "Angus cattle have been in this operation since 1928," Bill says. "[Richard Christy] always thought they should be the predominant breed in the beef industry, very much like the Holstein is in the dairy industry."

That guiding vision and

forward thinking has seen the 200-cow herd produce calves that consistently have graded 80% Choice over the past several years with recent harvest groups achieving as high as 57% CAB acceptance.

Yet the cows are not coddled. Wintered on milo and corn residue and summered on buffalo grass, "there is nothing artificial in this herd — what you see is what you get," Bill says. "We have continued the operation as a 'working' herd. Our cows work for a living."

But the Nolans knew when to fine-tune. Bill says, "Richard had the cattle business boiled down to one philosophy: pounds times price." Since these were Angus cattle, quality was built-in. Under Bill and Marian's management, the same emphasis is placed on performance and growth, but it is also balanced with an eye toward carcass characteristics.

"We keep the guidelines for the *Certified Angus Beef* carcass in our minds as we select breedings," Marian says. "But optimizing the animal for performance — which relates to financial returns — is foremost. All animals are required to meet criteria for breeding stock, whether registered or commercial."

A calf-fed bonus

An advantage for the Nolans has been their selection for feedlot performance, growth and for the calves' ability to grade young. "We strive to maintain performance and refine the calves' ability to grade at a very young age," Marian says. They typically reach harvest age at 13½-14 months.

Changing feeding companies last year helped the Nolans increase the number of calves achieving CAB acceptance. The feedlot, Pfenninger Cattle Co., is a partner in the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP) and markets animals individually as the calves reach their optimum level of finish.

Above: Bill and Marian Nolan, Scott City, Kan., were recognized by Kansas State University Research and Extension with the Master Farmer and Master Farm Homemaker Award for outstanding land stewardship and accomplishments in agriculture.

“When you feed an entire small calf crop together, it is difficult to finish them as a group,” Marian explains. That’s why she appreciates Pfenninger’s management and sales that eliminate high yield grades.

Greg White, Pfenninger manager, says sorting fits well with customer goals and those of the CAB feedlot program. “We are small enough to sort and take the time to do it. We’ll sell 20 head at a time if that number of cattle is ready for slaughter,” he says.

Last year’s fed-calf crop had 8% grading Prime with 38% of the entire group reaching CAB acceptance. The best cut of the calves made 57% CAB. “Our goal is to increase the percentage of these young calves making Choice or better to above 90%,” Marian says.

Fine-tuning the future

The Nolans have been using the same basic genetic pool with the herd for 15 years. They’ve found that fine-tuning requires

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constant assessment of their herd. Marian says the end product still will vary no matter how well you know your genetics.

“One day I see things clearly and know we are doing it all right, and the next day I take stock again and realize that I don’t have any idea of where we are headed,” Marian says. “Later refinements are always harder to work for.”

In the last 17 years, Bill and Marian have tuned in to a feedlot average daily gain (ADG) increase of 0.7 pound (lb.). Weaning weights increased by approximately 65 lb. on average but by 150 lb. in replacement heifers. Carcass improvements

have been made from 65%-70% Choice to 85% Choice.

The herd influence comes from bulls raised on the ranch that specialize in growth, gain and grade qualities. For Bill and Marian, avoiding the extremely low-birth-weight bulls has not led to calving difficulty in the herd. Marian credits this to ignoring the idea that heifers only can be bred to very-low-birth-weight-EPD bulls.

“Many cattlemen have wanted to eliminate [calving difficulty] with their selection of bulls. We have made an effort to cull for mothering ability and calving ability, which now allows our heifers to calve to moderate, 2- to 4-pound birth-weight-EPD

bulls,” she says. “I tell our bull customers that I do not have ‘heifer bulls’ as the seedstock industry has defined them.”

The Nolans have become masters at fine-tuning their herd and their family’s operation. “We are progressive but conservative,” Marian says. “Our effort is first for our herd and our operation. We also have industry goals in mind, but we’re realistic about our influence. Our goal is to raise good cattle and continue fine-tuning what we have done.”

The Master Farmer and Master Farm Homemaker Award acknowledges Bill and Marian’s efforts, recognizing family and a heritage upon which the industry relies. “Farmers remain the backbone of America and its production sector,” Bill says. “The award helps bring dedicated farmers and their efforts to the attention of their peers and also to many others in the state who really don’t know what it is all about.”

