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The President's Perspective

President Tom Drake receives a history lesson while reflecting on future goals of the American Angus Association

by Jerilyn Johnson

The value of history lies in the use we make of it in planning for the future.

This proverbial message comes from a speech presented by Allan Ryan at the end of his American Angus Association presidential term in 1965.

A copy of this speech was sent last winter to current president Tom Drake at his farm office in Davis, Okla. The timing couldn't have been better. Drake and the Association directors and staff were putting together a strategic long-range planning session.

Ryan's comments provided a lot of food for thought. After carefully reviewing it, Drake discovered he shared more than a title with Ryan.

Ryan served during the Angus industry's heyday—more than 384,000 registrations were recorded in 1965 by 54,000 active members—but he wasn't content with that achievement and encouraged his fellow directors and breeders to direct their thinking and energy toward strengthening the leading position.

"We cannot afford to rest on past accomplishments," he said. "Nor can we afford to expose the breed's achievements to the hazardous efforts of contentment, complacency or political preoccupations."

Ryan's insightful speech titled, "No Time for Complacency," outlined the responsibilities and goals of the Angus industry in 1965. Those goals were:

- Strengthen the leading position which our breed occupies.
- Reduce the degree of variation in carcass merit and production efficiency.
- Continue work in the area of herd improvement through progeny testing of sires.

- Upgrade the quality of bulls available to commercial producers to retain their confidence.
- Improve the quality of our products and our methods of merchandising.

Drake is also serving during a successful time in the Angus industry. Although registrations are a little less impressive at 160,000; active membership at 22,000, the Association is witnessing renewed demand for Angus seedstock.

In its quest to satisfy consumer demand and be economically efficient, the industry has gone back to the basics. Angus cattle serve as a basic component in improving carcass quality and production efficiency.

Ryan believed the Association could not attain its goals unless Angus breeders first objectively appraised their position, kept their minds open to new ideas, respected the competition and worked in unity.

Those four recommendations are just as applicable today, Drake says.

The first, objectively appraise our position, was accomplished at the long-range planning session. "This should be done at least once a year so we don't become complacent," Drake says. "Our No. 1 position in the purebred industry should remind ourselves that we have a lot of responsibility to members and to the beef industry to produce the kind of cattle that will keep them in the mainstream and not get them in trouble."

To add to that responsibility, the time has come for Angus to become an international breed. "The actions we take through our Association programs and the actions of breeders affect Angus cattle worldwide," Drake says. "We don't always realize the consequences of Board decisions. They go beyond St. Joseph, Mo. and Davis, Okla."

Here are the top five goals the Board of Directors voted on during the 1991 long-range planning session:

- Increase efforts to expand carcass EPDs to identify high marbling sire lines.
- Expand promotion to the beef industry to establish the Angus breed as the breed that can be successfully used in a straight-bred commercial operation.
- Increase member education and improve member awareness of Association programs and activities with emphasis on value and benefit to the member.
- Encourage research on the relationship of outside fat reduction while maintaining reproduction efficiency.
- Expand value and use of the Angus performance data base.

How much has the industry changed in a quarter of a century? If you compare the two lists, the goals are remarkably the same.

The Association started collecting carcass data on bulls through a structured sire evaluation program in 1974. "But we are still talking about many of the things Mr. Ryan alluded to in his speech," Drake says. "Now's the time to quit talking and go in and do something about it."

In 1978 the Association did take action in developing its own branded beef program. Thirteen years later we are marketing more than 85 million pounds of CAB and demand is far exceeding supply.

"I doubt if anyone in 1965 would have perceived of a branded beef program based strictly on quality or one breed," Drake says.

And, thanks to Association action, expected progeny differences (EPDs) are

reality. Angus breeders of the '90s can reduce the degree of variation in their calf crops and genetically improve their cattle with less guesswork.

"With the advent of EPDs, performance breeders are now having their time in the sun," Drake says. "Now all segments are talking performance simply because of EPDs. When more accurate carcass EPDs are developed, the breeder who has the right carcass bulls will be sitting on cloud nine. I don't know when that will happen, but I will be there trying to buy semen."

Drake also predicts that in the next 10 to 15 years, genome mapping will become a reality. "When that's done, we will have the ability to do what we've been trying to do for the last 25 years," he says.

Before carcass EPDs or genome mapping can be applied industry-wide, however, further research and funding are needed. "In so doing, maybe at least one will be the answer we're looking for. We've had a lot of people give carcass EPDs lip service, but the American Angus Association is the only breed association putting their money where their mouth is. We don't have the finances to go it alone. We need help from Checkoff dollars and USDA."

The remarkable Angus cow deserves credit for holding the Association together over the past 25 years and longer. "Fortunately, in 25 years of breeding extremes, our cattle's carcass quality, grading ability or reproduction efficiency hasn't been greatly affected," Drake says.

No one has said it better than Don Painter, according to Drake. Painter, member services director for the American Angus Association, made the following comments during a Board of Directors meeting:

"In my 30 years with the Association I've watched all the different Boards do things to the Angus cow to make her big, little, thin, thick—everything in the world to mess her up. But she has resisted every single one of these changes. She is still the thread that holds this whole thing together."

Drake believes the industry is back on track. "Right now, we are producing a more desirable beef product than we have since the mid-'70s," he says. "Just looking at my market here in southern Oklahoma, our commercial industry wants moderate bulls—frame 5 and 6

— and moderate 4 or 5 frame cows. We sent one set of steers (frame 4s and a few 5s) to the feedlot. Ninety-two percent graded Choice. They had a kill weight of 1,208 pounds. If that's not meeting industry standards, I don't know what is."

Keep your mind open to new ideas was Ryan's second recommendation in attaining Association goals. Drake says he's been fortunate in his seven years on the Board to see a lot of new ideas come and a lot of ideas go.

"During our long-range planning session everyone had input and came up with at least one idea," he says. "To have that much input from that many people with no duplication was impressive."

"Timing is everything in decision making. And objectively keeping your mind open is a 365-day job. Our Planning and Industry Committee is set up for brain-storming sessions. I have to give the Association staff and members credit for generating new ideas, too."

From a breeder's perspective, Drake believes a cattleman who doesn't make mistakes isn't trying new ideas. "When we first started in the business in 1953, we made a lot of mistakes," he says. "We made some mistakes after 15 years and still more after 24 years. I'm sure we will make a few more."

Respect the competition. This is even more important in today's beef industry. In 1965 there were only a handful of breeds competing with each other and beef was king. In 1991, more than 60 breeds are out there fighting for the commercial producers' dollar. Growing consumer demand for chicken, fish and pork products has forced cattlemen to take a look at their production and marketing techniques.

"We have to respect our competition," Drake says. "One of the world's best crossbreds is the black baldy— that takes care of two breeds. I respect anyone who is trying to sell a product. Although there's one or more breeds hammering to have grading standards lowered simply because their cattle won't fit today's market. They want to lower standards to fit their cattle. I have a real problem respecting that."

Working in unity and effective communication are the final ingredients

needed to successfully attain our industry goals. Drake follows in Ryan's footsteps when it comes to carrying out this message.

"I was pleased with how well the Board and staff came together working for the same goals," Drake says. "We established 17 priorities then voted on them. The near unanimous choice for our No. 1 priority was expanding carcass EPDs to identify high marbling sire lines. It all fell together nicely."

Drake believes the strongest point of today's Angus industry is the number of service programs available to breeders. "I also admire the work of the field and office staff and their dedication in representing Angus breeders," he says.

The industry's weakest points are the low percentage of cattle qualifying for Certified Angus Beef, which affects supply, and the low percentage of member participation in the Association's breed improvement programs.

For the future, Drake has made the following predictions:

- Breeders will be more aware of industry issues and problems and involved in national politics.
- Breeders will be affected by environmental, animal rights and food safety legislation.
- All breeders will use breed improvement programs.
- The show ring will be more meaningful.
- Angus breeders will adapt their cattle to their environment, management and resources.
- Angus breeders will still select for a balance of traits.
- Our industry will have instrument grading, hot fat trimming and value-based marketing.

Drake's goal as a cattleman is to simply survive. "Too many people get into the purebred cattle business for the wrong reason," he says. "You need some idea of what you're after before you start. Plan and do research. Know your potential market area, customer base and the capabilities of your land, resources and management. Take all these, put them together and come up with a program. By doing this you have a great deal more chance of success in this industry."

