

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

A belief in better paved the path for Bob Funk's success story.

by Jera Pipkin, American Angus Association

“Good. Better. Best. Never let it rest. Until good is better and better is best.”

This same mantra and quest for success led Bob Funk into the Angus business.

From humble beginnings on his family's dairy farm in Washington, most would consider Funk's path an untraditional one. Yet, one thing stayed consistent — his persistence.

As a young boy on the dairy, Funk dreamed of one day calling it his own; but his family and future had other plans.

They pushed him to pursue other things — attend college, get a job and create a life off the farm.

However, that inborn fondness toward agriculture remained in Funk's mind.

THE BACK STORY

From the minute he could milk, Funk worked on his family's dairy in Duvall, Wash., until he was 25 years old. He used the money he earned on the farm and scholarships to fund his college education. He earned two degrees and began working at ACME Personnel, an employee resource and recruiting agency in Seattle.

With sights still set on purchasing the farm, Funk was turned away by his cousin.

“Two years, and I'll reconsider,” his cousin said.

With a glimmer of hope he would receive the land in his cousin's will,



Bob Funk

Funk held onto his dream.

“I thought my name was on the will, but as it turned out, my name was on everything except the will when he passed away,” Funk says. “I lost my opportunity to be in the ranching business.”

A philanthropist at heart, Funk continued to work daily, helping people off the streets find their next career through his personnel job. He enjoyed helping others and continued to flourish. At age 29, his company transferred him to Oklahoma. Through it all, he still yearned to be involved in agriculture.

“I decided that because he wouldn't sell me his ranch, that I was determined, I was going to have some cows,” Funk says.

THE DOMINO EFFECT

In 1989, Funk seized an opportunity and purchased 20 acres of land and a herd of registered Limousin cattle in Oklahoma.

“That started the domino effect,” Funk says. “I purchased some more cattle; then I didn't have enough land, so I bought more land. Then, more cattle. And, it's been going that way for the last 35 years or so.”

Unsure of how he was going to pay for the land and amid doubts from the loan officer, Funk defied the odds and took the chance anyway. Thanks to hard work, a stubborn mind and strong persistence, Express Ranches came to fruition.

Risk-taking is an art, Funk says, and it is one he's used to his advantage. His keen eye for advancement pushed the envelope in his personal and professional lives.

“I am a risk-taker, because I think that's the only way that you can really get ahead quickly or get ahead in life,” Funk says.

He was rising through the ranks at ACME Personnel, but an unexpected death left Funk and his colleagues with a choice: buy the company or go bankrupt. They acquired the franchise rights, additional offices and created Express Employment Professionals, which today has more than 850 locations worldwide.

Amidst change came more risk for Funk. An opportunity to buy an Angus herd would change his



"I am a risk-taker, because I think that's the only way that you can really get ahead quickly or get ahead in life." — Bob Funk

original business model.

However, seeing the chance for improvement, demand in the marketplace and potential for progress, Funk began to see the 1994 start of his journey as an Angus breeder as more opportunity than risk. He purchased Billy Yarbrough's herd and brought on Jarold Callahan full-time.

"We became Angus breeders because they're the best breed of cattle," says Callahan, now president of Express Ranches. "If you want to be the best and have the best, you want the best breed."

Together the pair drove the dream of the modern-day Express Ranches.

THE DREAM

When Funk and Callahan charted the course, they didn't want to be like any other Angus operation. They wanted to rise above the rest.

"The neat thing about working for Bob is he provides you with the resources needed to be successful," Callahan says. "He's always willing to try new things, and is interested in what we can do to make the next calf crop better."

The initial herd of Angus cows was instrumental. Compared to the Limousins, they were easier to raise,

required less labor and less inputs, and allowed the operation to grow quickly in size, Callahan says.

"They're the easiest breed to raise, calve and to get bred back," Callahan explained. "We actually run twice or three times as many purebred cattle as we used to on less help."

Taking advantage of tools helped Express Ranches make rapid progress. As early adopters of genetic technologies like flushing and genomic testing, they capitalized on the top genetics available.

"What we want to do is try to use all the tools available to improve cattle," Callahan says. "Then, we're also improving the product that we're selling our customer."

Understanding each animal's potential is key to progress in Callahan's mind. After years of frustration in academia, he wanted to make rapid advancement in the cattle industry like he was seeing in agronomy and other agriculture sectors.

"We genomic test every animal here, even the ones that don't make the cut," he says. "It's not the total answer, but it's another tool in our toolbox we have to use."

Across-the-board genomic testing

creates more confidence in unproven bulls or females, Callahan says, by increasing accuracies on expected progeny differences (EPDs) before progeny can even be reported. It's marketability at its finest for the commercial cattlemen.

"I think as a seedstock producer, our primary focus should be to produce the best seedstock we can to benefit our customers and to hopefully make them more profitable," Callahan says.

The team at Express identifies superior genetics. Through conventional flushing and in vitro fertilization (IVF), they're able to multiply them.

"Instead of that really good cow having one calf a year, we hope through flushing and embryo transfer that we will get multiple calves, both bulls and females," Callahan says.

Though it's high input, Callahan believes in capitalizing on the tools available, but also backing them with common sense.

"There's still practicality in our operation," Callahan says. "There are

Continued on page 48

certain things that go on in cattle selection and cattle production that we don't have an EPD for. We can't lose sight of just good old cowboy logic."

Funk agrees. The belief in better keeps the operation moving forward.

"We just don't have the propensity to be the second best," Funk explains. "We want to be the best. The reason for that is we want to try and help others to be the best as well. So if we can provide the genetics that will help them to be better and help them to be the best, we're delighted to do so."

Funk's belief of being top tier goes beyond performance in the pasture, it also stretches into success in the show ring.

"I think showing cattle tells you how you compare with the industry," Funk says. "If you don't have quality show cattle, that means you need to improve your genetics."

The combination of production and show cattle allowed Express Ranches to diversify and serve multiple customers, all while

providing the quality the EX brand demands.

"I hope Express is remembered for not only the quality of their cattle, but for trying to be a good partner and support the industry," Callahan says. "More importantly, I hope

"We just don't have the propensity to be the second best. We want to be the best. The reason for that is we want to try and help others to be the best as well. So if we can provide the genetics that will help them to be better and help them to be the best, we're delighted to do so."

— Bob Funk

Express is remembered as the ranch that tried to do things right by their customers and by the people that they worked with."

Express Ranches' commitment to their

customers goes beyond bull buyers, stretching to youth in agriculture. Funk values giving back just as those before him did.

"I believe in the young people in the cattle business, their future and helping them to start in college," Funk says. "Had I not had my scholarships, I wouldn't have been able to go to the university. I think we can help them have a better lifestyle."

Through Funk's vision, Express Ranches has donated \$4.3 million in


scholarships to Angus youth. Their annual scholarship program awards funds to Express Ranches customers, based on a tiered approach from local to national levels.

"Once they get started, hopefully they'll finish their education and have dreams of their own," Funk says.

It began with a dream for Funk — perhaps a crushed one — to create the magnitude that is Express Ranches today.

As an inductee into the Angus Heritage Foundation, Funk says he's flattered to be included with such an elite group of cattlemen.

"It's a great honor," Funk says. "I'm surprised and shocked that they would select someone as inexperienced as myself."

Funk and his crew assembled an Angus empire from bare bones and big dreams — proof that determination and a success-driven spirit lead to experience of the most unique kind. 



SCAN FOR MORE on The Pursuit of Excellence and the Heritage Herds or visit www.angusjournal.net

