

# A Bully Pulpit

American Angus Association President Joe Elliott knows when and how to get down to business.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*

Joe Elliott has no problem describing his jolly good time as president of the American Angus Association. He just borrows a quote from another fun-loving president, former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt.

"I've got a bully pulpit!" says the Adams, Tenn., Angus breeder.

Leave it to the gregarious, joke-a-minute Elliott to make light of his time-consuming and pressure-filled role. But according to his fellow Board members, past and present, his humor is only part of the package.

"On the outside, Joe comes off as a Tennessee hill farmer," says Minnie Lou Bradley,

currently the Association's vice president. "I think that's the way he wants it. But he is a pretty deep thinker."

Bradley, of the Memphis, Texas, Bradley 3 Ranch Ltd., says, "He is a history buff, and whether it is the American Angus Association or our country, he can go back and draw from the past to look into the future."

Bradley describes Elliott as unselfish, looking at what's good for the entire membership rather than what is good just for himself.

"He really wants to be fair," she adds.

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► American Angus Association President Joe Elliott brings more to the table than his infamous sense of humor.



► Anne and Joe Elliott have been married 29 years.

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“When he makes mistakes, and we all do when we grow, they are sincere mistakes. He’ll say, ‘Let’s back up and start over.’”

He also keeps the bottom line in focus, she says. “He is a farmer. He understands budgets and finances and the fact you have to live within a budget. Still, he understands you can grow even in hard times.”

“Joe’s articulate, he gets along with people, and he is easy to talk to,” says Keith Arntzen,

who served on the Board with Elliott for six years.

“He has a unique personality,” Arntzen continues. “He likes to have fun, but at the same time he is very serious about what he is doing. He is very committed to making the Angus breed better.”

The Hilger, Mont., Angus breeder adds, “Joe is real smart. He definitely has ideas, and it doesn’t take him a long time to make decisions. He usually makes good ones.”

“Joe has a mind like a machine,” says past Association President Leroy Baldwin, Ocala, Fla. “He has a knack about comprehending things, storing them and remembering them in detail. . . . He can sit

through a meeting and

listen and figure out a solution before the problem ever comes up.”

“Joe will cut up until it is time to do business,” says Elliott’s wife, Anne. “Then he is serious. When he gets serious, he knows how to get it done.”

## Getting the job done

When it comes to Elliott’s background, forget comparisons between him and Roosevelt. The 55-year-old farmer was not raised an aristocrat. The 750-acre cattle, grain, hay and tobacco operation he shares

with his father, Robert, and brother, William, is a blue-collar kind of place where people and cattle have to work to make a living.

“We have a rule here,” Elliott says. “We don’t use any genetics unless they come from a place where the cattle operation has to pay for itself.”

While there is a serviceable and attractive sale barn for their annual February bull and female sale, luxury items aren’t in view. Mineral feeders for the 150-cow seedstock operation are made from used spreader tires and fence posts.

And rather than Harvard, Elliott graduated from the University of Tennessee (UT) with a double major in animal science and business.

However, his farm background has provided useful lessons for his present office and life in general.

First, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. “Daddy started in the registered Angus business in 1935 right out of high school,” Elliott says. “He purchased four bred heifers. The Angus worked. We saw no reason to change.”

There’s also the use of humor to get through not-so-funny situations. Anne says Joe learned that from his mother, Margaret. “Their house burned to the ground in ’61, and they lost everything,” Anne says.

“Margaret’s only comment was, ‘Oh, well. Now we don’t have to clean out the basement.’”

Joe also learned about relying on others. On Oct. 1, 1963, his father’s right hand was caught in a corn picker, and he lost three fingers.

“That was the first day of corn harvest. I was a freshman in high school, and William was in the sixth grade,” Joe recalls. “The whole neighborhood came in and picked our

## Taking a stand

While Joe Elliott is well-versed in the art of compromise, when he feels he is right, watch out.

“He’ll back you up to the last tooth,” says John Barteo, longtime Montgomery County Extension agent. “The University of Tennessee tried to increase the costs dramatically at our bull test station. Joe was president of the Tennessee Beef Cattle Improvement Association at the time. We fought that thing. The bull test is operating like it was before.”

Then there was the hungry cattle incident. “Some woman showed up on our front porch,” recalls Anne Elliott, Joe’s wife. “She was a retired Army major and worked at the Humane Society as a volunteer. She said we weren’t feeding our cattle because they were eating the

► Joe Elliott is known for standing up for what he believes.



bark off a tree and threatened to bring the sheriff to confiscate them.”

The cattle in question were sale bulls. Two days before the woman’s visit, a veterinarian had inspected every one of them while he did their breeding soundness exams. Bulls being bulls, they had rubbed the bark off a dead tree.

Long story short, the Humane Society called and apologized to Anne, and the major no longer volunteers at the Humane Society.

In the process of settling the misunderstanding, Joe discovered a state law from the 1870s that allowed anyone who worked at a humane society to confiscate livestock that weren’t being cared for properly. After Joe got through, the law now says a large animal veterinarian or an Extension agent experienced with livestock has to make the call before the animals are confiscated.

corn and sowed our small grains and helped us do whatever needed to be done. It was a long winter, but good people made it go faster.”

The accident also ended the honey enterprise. Robert wanted his sons to take over the 20-plus hives of bees, but they refused. “I didn’t like the bees, and they didn’t like me,” Joe says.

Of course, there is teamwork. “People have to be able to work together without getting their feelings hurt,” Joe says. “And major decisions have to be made together.”

At Robert Elliott & Sons, Joe is the cattle specialist, but he still puts the tobacco crop in the ground while William is busy growing and marketing a million plants a year for other tobacco growers.

The three-man team has also made a name for themselves in the Angus industry. With their no-frills philosophy and insistence on sound feet, legs, udders, fertility and disposition, they have loyal customers in seven states. Plus, they’ve sold bulls to ABS Global Inc. and Select Sires Inc.

### Board teamwork

Baldwin says that same brand of teamwork came in handy while he and Joe served on the American Angus Association Board of Directors. “We’ve accomplished a lot working together,” he states.

One accomplishment was to reorganize the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program into a limited liability corporation (LLC). “We built them a new headquarters — and paid for it,” Elliott says.

“We’ve also built a new headquarters for the *Angus Journal*, while increasing the communication to our membership and the beef industry,” he continues. “We are constantly looking for better ways to communicate. It used to be just with the cow-calf producer, but now it is bigger than that. We need to communicate with the feedlot, the packing industry, the wholesale industry, the feed industry and the consumers of the food we produce.”

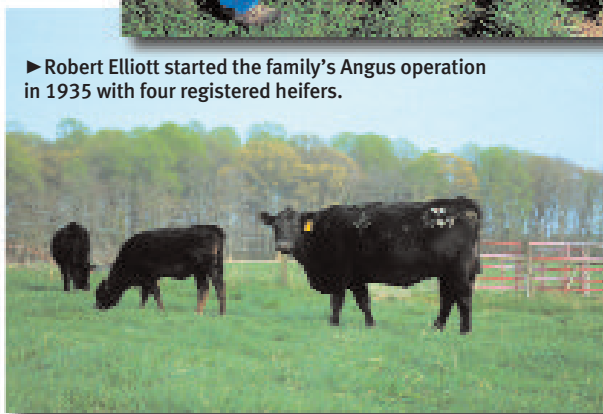
He adds, “Many registered breeders thought communication was telling commercial producers what they need. That isn’t communication. That is dictatorship. Yogi Berra said, ‘You can hear a lot by listening.’”

Joe’s also proud of the Board’s decision to protect services offered by the Association and its affiliates.

“One of the biggest things we’ve done as a



► From left, William, Robert and Joe Elliott work as a team at Robert Elliott & Sons.



► Robert Elliott started the family’s Angus operation in 1935 with four registered heifers.

Board was protect our mailing list. We took a lot of heat for it. If we hadn’t protected the mailing list, we wouldn’t be raising thousands and thousands of dollars for Angus Productions Inc. and the Angus Foundation. We have helped hold down costs for the *Angus Journal* and the services the American Angus Association offers.”

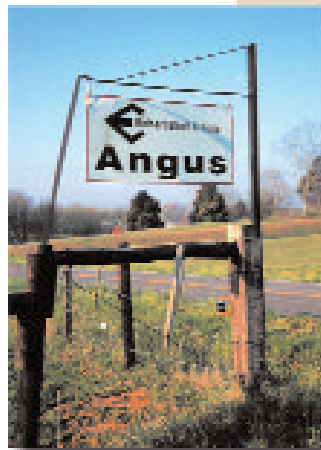
Another significant change is the electronic submission of all Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) data and registrations.

“Other changes have been subtle,” Elliott says. “We’ve added to the strength and

predictability of our database. The position of the American Angus Association has risen in the minds of commercial cattlemen because they see our data is believable. It works for them.

“We’ve taken ultrasound from research to reality on EPDs (expected progeny differences),” he adds.

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### Home team

On the farm, Joe Elliott has his father, Robert, and brother, William, to support him. At home, it is his wife of 29 years, Anne.

“She teaches family and consumer science,” Joe says. “That’s a politically correct term for home ec teacher.”

While Joe counts on Anne, it doesn’t always work in reverse. “He does the stuff with the cattle, but he isn’t too good about things around the house,” Anne reports. “We built the house 23 years ago. He left off a doorknob. I told him it would be on when we got the house paid for. That was 13 years ago, and I still don’t have a doorknob on my utility closet.”

Sons Lake, 25, and Bennett, 21, round out their family.

“Lake wants to come back to the farm, but I told him he had to work somewhere else first. He works at Toebben Triple T Angus in Union, Ky.,” Joe says. “He isn’t the manager; he just works there.”

Bennett is at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., and is spending the summer working for Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.).

“He’ll either be a bum or a U.S. Senator,” Joe teases. “Some say there isn’t much difference.”



## Peer review

During their time together as directors of the American Angus Association, Board members get to know each other on a different level than most producers. Here's what Joe Elliott's fellow Board members had to say about him and his role as a leader of the Association.

**"Whether fixing you oatmeal in his kitchen early in the morning, or addressing the delegations of the American Angus Association Annual Meeting, you always know where Joe Elliott stands. He is an articulate and motivating speaker."**

— *Jay King*

**"I will always have a special place in my memory for Joe because he will be the first Association president with whom I have had the opportunity to serve. It's been nothing but a pleasure to be associated with Joe these last six months, and I'm looking forward to more of the same."**

— *Al DeClerk*

**"Joe is a friendly, outgoing, easy-to-get-to-know kind of guy with a great sense of humor."**

— *Dave Smith*

**"Joe conducts business in a business manner. He looks at both sides of the issue when it's brought before the Board. He is a good leader."**

— *Leo Baker*

**"Joe is a hands-on type of person with a very good understanding of all aspects of the Angus business. The Board of Directors of the American Angus Association is composed of men and ladies from all across this nation with widely different backgrounds and vastly different types of Angus operations. Joe has been a valued partner in leading the discussions to bridge some of those gaps and differences of opinions to allow us as a Board to come together and make unified decisions."**

— *Richard "Dick" Tokach*

**"Joe Elliot is a man that I admire for his ability to speak the truth, and to stand up and speak his opinion. Joe is a leader who does not necessarily choose the most popular path, or the easiest decision; however, being the true leader that he is, he has always chosen the best path for Angus cattle and the beef industry."**

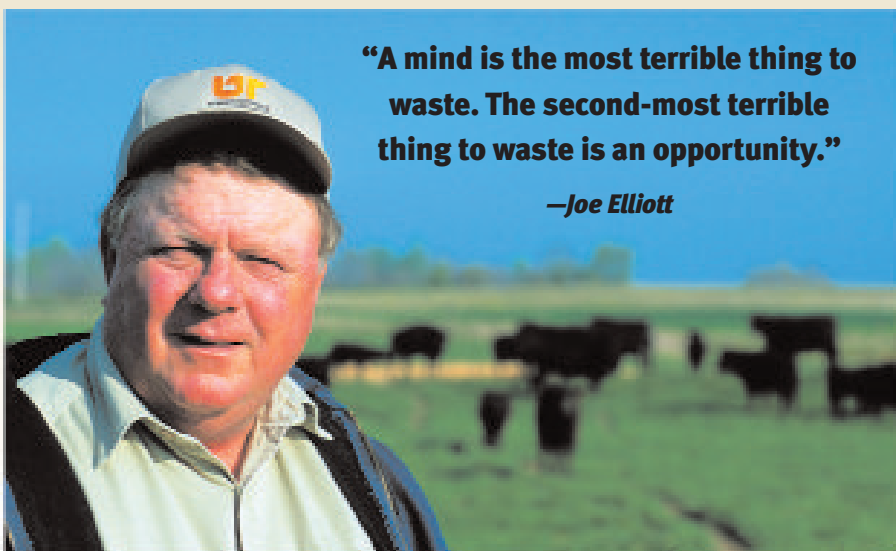
— *Mark Gardiner*

**"Joe being from Tennessee, the other members of the Board were not always sure he spoke our language, but he did create some good, solid discussions for us to digest. Joe thought issues through from end to end and helped us all analyze the issues better. Joe headed up the entertainment department, and sometimes he didn't use as good a thought process on the jokes as he did on the serious business issues."**

— *Cecil McCurry*

**"On the five years we served together on the Association Board of Directors, I developed a great deal of respect for Joe and his thinking process. I always knew when he spoke on a subject (and that was usually on all issues) he had done his homework and had developed an opinion based on solid facts. These are qualities that make for a great leader, and Joe is serving the membership well."**

— *John Curtin*



However, when his turn as president is complete, don't expect this Tennessee cattleman to rest on his laurels. He'll still be knee-deep in politics, especially the politics of conservation.

He is one of four farmers on the 24-member board of the Cumberland Region Tomorrow. Elliott says it is made up of people from Nashville, Tenn., and the nine metro counties surrounding Nashville. Their directive is to look at the possibilities for smart growth. It is a challenge near and dear to Joe's heart, as subdivisions continue to spring up all around the family operation.

"We can't go from Wal-Mart to wilderness," he says. "Unbridled growth will end up starving America. Not in my lifetime, but it will."

Conservationist, leader, cattle producer, Republican (or at least for awhile — Roosevelt defected, but that's another story) — you'd think Elliott and Roosevelt were mirror images.

There is one major difference, though. It's the hat thing. Whether Roosevelt was leading his Rough Riders to Santiago, on a big game safari in Africa, rounding up cattle on his Dakota ranch, or heading off to a meeting with royalty, he always had a hat for the occasion.

And Joe? "When I went to his place last June he put on a pair of overalls and a baseball cap," Bradley says. "Out here in ranch country, a hat is a symbol of a man."

"Our tour was coming up in North Dakota. I said, 'Joe, you can't go to North Dakota in a baseball cap. We are going to put you in a hat. When we're in Saint Joe, we are going to the Stetson factory.'"

Bradley continues, "When I told the staff at the Association they all had a fit 'cause you have to know how to wear a hat. I told 'em not to worry. We'd train him."

Association Executive Vice President John Crouch, who Bradley says knows how to wear a hat, helped Joe pick out a hat and showed him how to wear it.

"He has been such a good sport about it," she says. "He looks like a real cattleman now. I'm really proud of him."

Betcha T.R. would second that.



**Editor's Note:** Elliott answers questions about the Angus industry in the "President's Perspective, Q & A" beginning on page 88.