







# Eye on the Prime

*“Cowboy traits” are key to producing high-grade beef for Savannah, Mo., producer Steve Houston and his family at Houston Angus.*

*by Lindsay King, assistant editor*

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*Raising cattle is a family affair for the Houstons. All three of their boys are heavily involved with various contests in the NJAA. From left: Kyle, 13; Kelly and Steve; Sean, 16; and Cole, 19.*

The truck bumps down a treacherous-when-wet road to a pasture occupied by Steve Houston's second 40-hour a week job — managing his registered Angus cattle herd. A single strand of hot wire keeps the Savannah, Mo., cattleman's cows in the pasture decorated by rolling hills and multiple corn fields.

Growing up in the house across from his current home, Steve's dad raised a few hogs and milking cows until selling out for registered polled Herefords. Seven years after purchasing Herefords, a neighbor opened Steve's eyes to the world of Angus.

"Andy Byergo, who raised Angus at the time, and still does today, convinced me to sell off my Herefords," Steve says. "At that time, Angus was the complete breed, especially maternally. They still are the complete package."

Steve grazes 80 females and about 15 bulls with his wife Kelly and their three boys: Cole, 19, Sean, 16, and Kyle, 13. Both Steve and Kelly grew up in Savannah in the livestock industry, competing in 4-H and FFA. Steve jokes the easiest way to explain how he met his wife of 22 years was through FFA activities in 1991.

Both graduates of Northwest Missouri State University (NWMSU), Steve got a degree in agricultural education while judging livestock. Kelly received her bachelor's degree in animal science.

"Raising cattle is a full-time job after working another full-time job," Steve says. "Between 40 hours in town, 40 hours with the cattle and 20 hours chasing after the boys, there is not a whole lot of time for anything else."

Kelly works at the family-owned Reardon Machine Company as an accounting and human resources specialist. For five years, Steve taught agricultural education before becoming a loan officer for Nodaway Valley Bank in Savannah where he has stayed for the past 21 years.

### **Small, but mighty**

"We have 80 head of cows, some with calves and then some bulls," Steve says. "If it does not start raining soon, we might have fewer. We sell some bulls and feed out the bottom third of the calves."

After weaning in the fall, Steve sends some of his spring calves to John Osborn's feedlot before selling to U.S. Premium Beef. Doing this for the past 10



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years, Steve appreciates the data Osborn and U.S. Premium Beef collect on his cattle to help with future breeding decisions.

Osborn’s feedlot won the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Quality Focus Award for partner yards with less than 15,000-head capacity in 2010 and 2011.

“Several years ago John shipped out his first load of spring steers from the previous year on the first of June,” Steve explains. “That first load out was 100% CAB and about 20% of those animals were either mine or out of my bulls.”

Steve has a hard time remembering when one of his animals graded Select, boasting 3.5-3.8 average daily gain (ADG) on his heifers and 3.8-4.0 on his steers in the feedlot setting. His cattle come out with moderate to modest marbling more often than not, grading in the low to middle Prime frequently. The national average for Prime beef is only 2%.

“The biggest advantage of all this is the data we get back,” Steve says. “In the past five years, genomics have revolutionized things. Now we can incorporate all the information we get back from the DNA

samples into the pedigrees. I think it improves your odds for getting what we are looking for.”

The CAB program has built a market for Angus breeders and a brand

recognizable deep within city limits, and Steve has worked hard to get his animals to match that demand. Stacks of *Angus Journals* and expected progeny differences (EPD) charts are evidence of the hours spent scouring and studying their options.

“Angus EPDs have given us the tools we needed to make educated breeding decisions,” Steve says. “But there is more to cattle than just marbling. You have to take into account what I call cowboy traits. There are no EPDs out there for most of them. They come from experience and wisdom.”

### **“Cowboy traits”**

Steve’s “cowboy traits” reference things cattlemen observe over time: disposition, fleshing ability, soundness and breeding back history. The industry is quickly realizing the importance of those “cowboy traits” as docility is now an EPD.

“If you don’t get the cowboy traits in line, then nothing else really matters when the calf hits the ground,” Steve says. “The plan is to select for the

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cowboy traits first and then for the EPDs. You still have to look at them, you can't eat paper."

Disposition is a big factor in breeding decisions for the Houstons' herd. Cole works for a neighboring cattleman with Angus and Simmental. His aversion for that cross flashed across his face as he recounted several instances where disposition left something to be desired in the cattle he works.

"Experience is your best teacher, you are going to learn from things you see that did not work, especially economically," Steve explains. "Nobody wants to milk a cow with a bad udder or an animal whose feet do not hold up. And not a single person wants to chase a wild cow around. We try to spend some time with our cattle so they are easier to handle."

Some of the bulls can just about be ridden like a horse.

Birth weight is something Steve pays special attention to for his customers' and his own sake. Working a full-time job alongside calving means the mamas need to be self-sufficient.

"It's all economics," Steve says. "We have cattle now that are moderate to low birth weight that grow and do all the things you want them to. I can't remember the last time we had to pull a calf."

Even the heifers don't seem to have trouble, Cole chimes in.

Steve adds, "When I started in cattle, EPDs were in the early stages of development, there were only a handful to look through. I give compliments to the Angus Association for collecting data for years to develop the database we now take for granted."

Utilizing EPDs has been instrumental to Houston's success with Angus and for producers raising other breeds as well. They have helped Steve

match his cattle with their environment for optimal breeding and growth.

## Missouri Angus, NJAS and the future

Steve served on the Missouri Angus Association board for five years to give back to the association that has built him. Kelly has served as the treasurer for the Missouri Angus Auxiliary the past two years.

"The boys are junior members and don't currently

hold any offices but they certainly need to work towards that," Steve urges. "The boys have shown at nationals (National Junior Angus Show) the past three years."

Prize-winning photographs taken by all three sons line the walls of their home, and the kitchen has seen award-winning recipes made only from the best: Houston Angus.

"These boys can easily make five

pounds (lb.) of steak disappear in a meal," Steve jokes. "It certainly is a good thing we raise our own beef."

After completing one year in industrial engineering at Linn State Technical College, Cole will be headed to his first of two years training to be a lineman. Both Sean and Kyle want to follow in their parents' footsteps to NWMSU.

"Looking toward the future, it would not surprise me if the boys want to expand the operation once they are out of school," Steve says. "Buy some land of their own either for pasture or row crops."

And have more little Angus calves of their own, Kelly hopes.

"Hopefully we can start expanding on our hay ground and equipment base in the near future," Cole adds. "Then we can buy more bottom dirt for our corn and soybeans."



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## Just a “few” other animals

“We are just like any other farm, we have cats, dogs, chickens and cattle,” Kelly says. Laughter erupts as Sean chimes in adding one horse and a plethora of rabbits to the list, eyeing Kyle from across the room.

Claiming to only have a “few” rabbits, more laughter ensues at Kyle’s slight underestimation.

“We started out with four rabbits a year ago, now we have between 50-60 rabbits,” Kyle explains. “My great uncle got me started in it. We breed and show them now. Their personality is like a cat, you just work with them a little bit so they sit on the table correctly and ‘set up’ for the judge.”

Day-old babies huddle in a cocoon of their mother’s fur among several cages of Satin rabbits holding national champion bloodlines. Rabbit shows are even bigger and more frequent than Angus shows, according to Steve as he proudly walks amongst the cages.

“The boys used to show hogs also,” Kelly adds. “Our border collie Kate would help them walk the hogs. She kept them all in a group while they walked. She takes her job on the farm pretty seriously.”

The protector of the chickens, cats, rabbits and

ducks on the nearby pond, Kate completes the picturesque family farm in northwest Missouri.


## Angus today and tomorrow

“Back when I started, the exotic breeds, Charolais, Chianinas and Simmentals, were in the driver’s seat,” Steve says. “Now it is Angus.”

Steve remembers an older commercial cattleman telling him once that “as long as you have Angus cows, you are at least half right.”

“The maternal side of them is so strong, the carcass end products are outstanding, efficiency is high, they are the complete package,” Steve says. “The promotion the Association has done has helped keep producers in the game of raising Angus.”

Steve is thankful for everything the American Angus Association has done over the years to promote the breed and collect the information he uses to make his Prime cattle.

“Info is key, that is everything to producers,” Steve says. “Angus has the largest database around. That information is important moving forward to my family and many others.” 

*Editor’s Note: Photos by Megan Silveira. The lead eye illustration was created from a 2011 entry in the NJAA/Angus Journal Photo Contest by Kady Figge.*

