

Advancing Angus

With the most competitive application pool to date, the Beef Leaders Institute entered its 20th year in 2019.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

In a year plagued by weather extremes, 20 Angus producers from across the country still managed to spend a week of their time advancing their own operation as well as the business breed. For producers, no time of year is ideal for leaving the cattle for seven days.

And yet, the selection committee saw the largest number of applications for the 2019 Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) class. According to Kara Lee, production brand manager for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), sometimes it takes a couple years of applying to actually be selected.

“Because we have an age range

for our applicants, if we have two people of equal qualifications but one is about to age out and the other is younger, we will choose the older of the two,” Lee says. “When we encourage people to apply again next year, we sincerely mean it.”

Lee emphasizes that age really is more of a tiebreaker than anything for applicants.

Day 1: Saint Joe, Mo.

“The American Angus Association headquarters is this mythical land where you send paperwork and get your registration papers from,” says William Nichols from Pennsylvania. “You hear of all these people that call

this place home and you see them on the road, but how many people get an inside look at it all?”

That’s exactly what the first stop on each BLI tour is all about. A comprehensive look at each department presents breeders the opportunity to put faces to names and voices. It’s also the perfect time for new programs to be outlined in great detail.

“I did not realize the depth some of these programs could reach, so that was incredibly interesting,” says Elizabeth Perkins of Kansas. I grew up in the Angus industry, but a lot has changed over the years. I think we all get stuck in our own little



Twenty Angus producers from across the country and a handful of Association employees embarked on a week-long, hands-on look at the beef cattle industry in June.

world sometimes, so this is a great way to step out and look at the cross section of the beef industry.”

Association employees were spotted also loading the bus destined for day two of the BLI tour. It’s an opportune moment for employees to meet the members that essentially drive the Association.

“Each employee that walks into the doors of headquarters every morning lives the mission statement,” says Jerry Cassady, director of member services for the Association.

Ideas and organization for the BLI class were in part from Cassady.

“Each year the trip improves,” Cassady says. “We learn as much from the participants as they learn throughout the week.”

Day 2: Genomic safari

Neogen Genomics is more than the address label on Angus DNA samples sent in by Angus members. Cattle might be a large part of Neogen’s everyday operation, but they can process anything with its own double helix.

“I was surprised by how minute the scientific details were that make everything happen,” says Levi Holt from Tennessee. “I can’t imagine



Drew Feller explained the corn flaking process at Feller & Co. Cattle Feeder in Wisner, Neb.



These cattlemen watched as DNA samples from a wide variety of animals were first processed and then tested during the Neogen tour in Lincoln, Neb.

trying to handle all those samples, not just from Angus producers but from dogs, cats, chickens, trees and everything else.”

More than 15,000 samples are received every day in the Lincoln, Neb., location. This office alone processed 3 million samples in 2018. Combined with the samples processed by the other locations across the globe, Neogen racked up a total of 4 million last year.

Angus is the only breed association that requires samples to be returned to its headquarters. To eliminate bias at the lab, each sample is blind labeled.

If the effect of ample spring rain in the Midwest wasn’t clear on the drive to Lincoln, then it was solidified while visiting Feller & Co. Cattle Feeder in Wisner, Neb. Experienced hands at the wheel proved to be pivotal as the charter bus navigated between soggy pens.

“Coming from the Southeast, we know our cattle head west but seeing it in person was absolutely amazing,” says Matt McBride of Tennessee. “Their flaking system is kind of revolutionary in the area.”

Although the pens were a kaleidoscope of hides, it was a pen at the back of the yard holding the business breed that visually stood out in the crowd.

“Obviously it takes all kinds to fill the food chain, but to see the uniformity of the Angus cattle was encouraging,” McBride says. “The Fellers even said they expected those cattle to sell for a premium on the grid. It just makes even more sense to help our bull buyers and commercial cattlemen get consistent cattle. Black really is the better route to go.”

A quick trip up the Interstate landed the crew on 215 pristine acres near Sioux Center, Iowa, at TransOva Genetics headquarters.

“We went on a tour of the facilities and all the services TransOva offers producers,” says Drew Schroeder of Iowa. “Cloning was especially interesting; they can do a lot of different species.”

TransOva started at their largest facility in Iowa, but reach eight other regional locations via satellite offices. Essentially, their services are available anywhere in the world.

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Day 3: Packed with purpose

No cattle tour would be complete without a behind-the-scenes look at a large-scale packing plant. Tyson Fresh Meats in Dakota City, Neb., took the BLI class through each intricate piece of the process.

“I have been inside small packing plants back at home that just do custom processing for producers, but never anything to this scale,” says Jesse Thompson from Montana. This was easily one of the highlights of the entire trip.

Perched on the miles of catwalk above the processing lines in the plant, BLI visitors saw everything from the hide removal to packing and boxing.

“I think it was helpful for us to see where our product ends up and how clean and safe the facility is,” Thompson adds. “This tour answered a lot of questions I had about how our beef cattle are processed. It gives me a lot of confidence in our end product and what we see on the shelves at the grocery store.”

Day 4: Fit for a consumer

Food can pass through the upward of 10 hands before finally landing on a grocery store shelf or a restaurant plate. One of those is typically through a retail distributor.

If you drive, you’ve seen the trucks on the road. Sysco Cleveland Inc. in Cleveland, Ohio, is a retail distributor that happens to push *Certified Angus Beef*® products.

“If you own a restaurant, we can pretty much sell you everything you would need,” says Chad Metzger, center of the plate specialist for Sysco Cleveland Inc. “Partnering with CAB is the perfect marriage. We set the standards and write the specifications, just like CAB.”

Positioned as the highest quality

product on the shelf, CAB is exactly what Sysco customers are searching for.

“People aren’t going out [to eat] as much as they did five years ago,” Metzger says. “When they do, they want a steak because it tastes good.” This is where CAB comes in clutch.

More than 4,600 retail stores are CAB partners. Most of those are concentrated on the eastern half of the United States and the western coastline.

“Sysco had an impressive belief in the CAB brand,” says Zac Hall of North Dakota. “As an Angus producer, it is nice to hear they are advocating for our product even though they don’t have an ag background.”

Market District is one of the higher-end supermarkets featuring CAB in their meat case. BLI visited their location in Uniontown, Ohio, before traversing to Wooster.

Day 5: Capped at CAB

Various stamps were found on the hanging carcasses at Tyson. One of those was G1. This is the mark which gives producers a premium for their animal as it stands for CAB.

“CAB doesn’t own anything in the market — not cattle, interest or shares in the packer, nothing,” says Clint Walenciak, CAB packing director. “That makes protecting the brand one of our main functions.”

With more than 160 USDA branded-beef programs in use today,



CAB meat science experts gave a hands-on explanation of the brand’s 10 qualifying standards. Participants had the opportunity to try their hand at slicing some of the lesser-known cuts of beef that help packers use all of the carcass.

it’s no wonder the CAB logo is so heavily guarded.

“Angus is perceived as a quality measure, but technically it’s not,” says Barb Burd, CAB senior brand manager. “It is one of the biggest things we fight with our retailers and restaurants.”

With bellies and minds equally full, the BLI attendees reluctantly left CAB headquarters Friday afternoon. The group started the week as strangers, but left with newfound friendships, contacts and knowledge of the industry forever binding them together. **AJ**

Editor’s note: Each year 20 applicants between the ages of 25 and 45 are chosen for this unique experience. Applications are usually due mid-February, so be on the lookout for more information on next year’s application coming this fall.