

# A BIGGER PERSPECTIVE

*Diversity in experience for a diverse organization is what Mark McCully, the American Angus Association's new CEO, brings to the Angus breed and its members.*

*by Julie Mais, editor*

A believer in perspective, who has a passion for finding connections, Mark McCully found himself entering 3201 Frederick Avenue under a new viewpoint in June. Though far from new to the Angus breed or understanding what his next role as the American Angus Association CEO would entail, McCully felt the significance of what he was taking on. However, his experiences have uniquely prepared him for the great responsibility now weighing on his shoulders.

From growing up on a small farm to leading supply development for the world's leading branded beef program, McCully sees and values each link in the beef industry production chain.

McCully's involvement in the beef industry started on his family's north-central Illinois farm where their

small herd of registered stock caught his attention over row crop farming.

He quickly found the opportunities and people met through the 4-H and FFA programs aligned with his interests and in essence he never looked back.

"I always say the show ring was my on-ramp to this industry," McCully explains. "It was the junior programs and showing cattle that introduced me to people with similar interests. My friend group in high school were involved in other things, and I loved cattle."

McCully led cattle through the rings of small-scale shows, but it was opportunities while attending college that began shaping his new perspective of the beef industry.

After high school McCully joined the livestock

judging team at Lakeland Community College, where he met his soon-to-be wife, Gerry. The pair went on to Western Illinois University to finish their bachelor's degrees and married before graduation.

It was at Michigan State University for graduate school where McCully describes incredible opportunities made available to him. "I think back now to how I got to work with Harlan Ritchie, Dave Hawkins, Maynard Hogberg and Ron Nelson — four Saddle & Sirloin portrait gallery inductees."

During his time at Michigan State, McCully coached the livestock judging team and taught a few courses. He also worked for Ritchie who was working with a five-state beef initiative. "It was about putting a beef improvement program together that was placing better genetics into these commercial outfits and getting those feeder cattle back together in the supply chain," McCully explains. "I was pretty fascinated by that and started working with it."

It ultimately turned into a job.

Michigan Livestock Exchange was very involved in the project and when they were purchased by Southern States Cooperative, a new position was created for that beef improvement program. McCully left the university to take on the new role. "In those years I got to better understand the feeder cattle market because we operated 22 sale barns, and I was buying bulls for folks and placing feeder cattle."

And it was at this time he first started working with the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand and connecting their alliance of cattlemen to CAB. "I

knew Larry and John, and a few folks with CAB," he says. "And as that relationship kept going, it worked into a job — I guess there was kind of a pattern there."

McCully joined the CAB team as director of packing in 2000 before transitioning to a new role in business development coordinating a regional sales team.

"That was really my first experience to the retail and food service business, both domestic and international," he says.

"I did that for a few years and then really moved to, I would say back to because it's my background, working on supply development."

In 2005, he transitioned to supply development and packing, and most recently serving as vice president of production.

If showing cattle was the on-ramp to the industry for McCully, then supply development was the highway helping him to better understand

the beef supply chain from seedstock breeders to foodservice and retail.

"One of my passions is to be able to see the whole supply chain," he says. "Because I'm a big, big, big believer in perspective. The bigger perspective you have on what you're doing, the better decisions you'll make."

McCully says his work in the past two decades changed his perspective of the cattle business.

"I still love the phenotype side of things," he adds. "I still love looking at a phenotypically great animal. But, I now have a bigger perspective that [showing] is not the only part of this. And, when you start tying this whole beef product into all of that, it just changes how you see things."



PHOTO BY ABBY BURNETT

Mark and his family have resided in Wooster, Ohio, for the past 19 years. He says his free time is spent on the two things he enjoys most — family and cattle events. Pictured is the McCully family (from left): Maddy, Mark, Gerry and Austin.

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## A balancing act

What McCully appreciates about the entire beef chain, is what he says is one of the Angus breed's leading advantages.

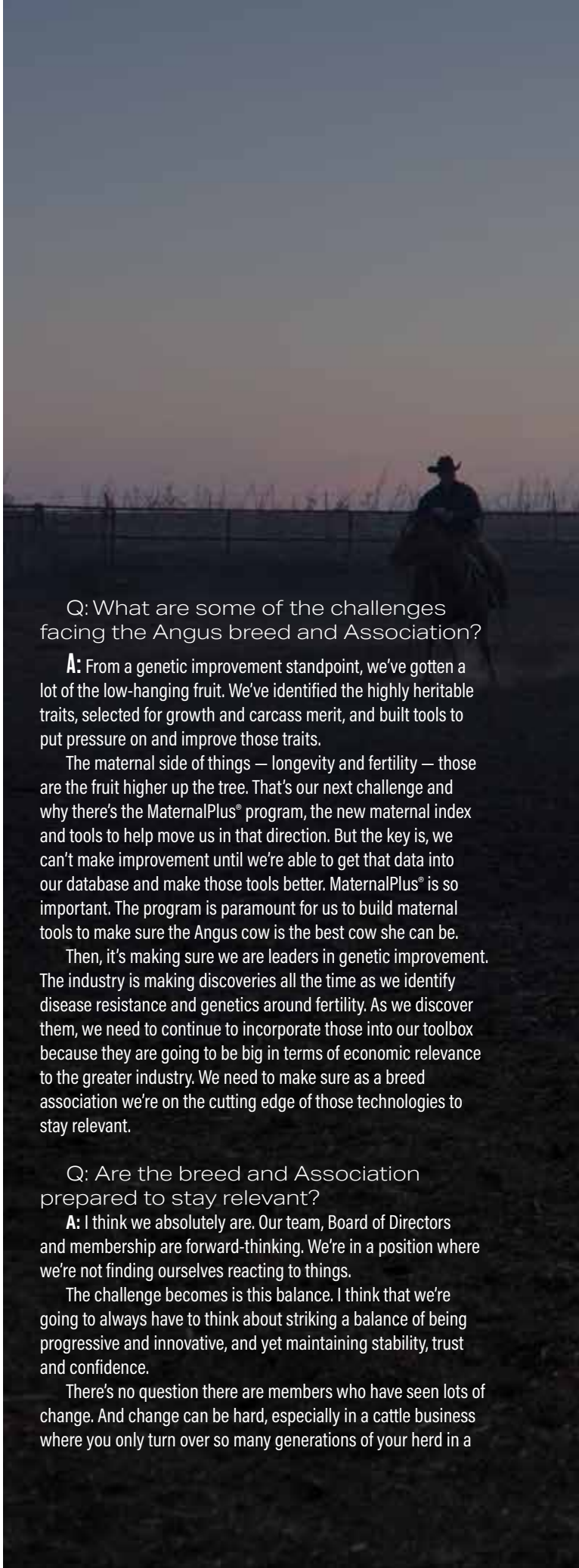
"The diversity of our membership is one of our biggest strengths," he explains. "I think it's also probably one of our bigger challenges, because as an association, we have to make sure we're providing value to all members. It's important to realize that those diverse members have different reasons they belong to the American Angus Association, and the value they put in a registration paper is different."

He adds, "It's a balancing act because we [the Association] want to make sure we're always being innovative and looking at what's new and providing new tools. And at the same time, we want to make sure that's just what we're doing. We're providing tools. We're not out there telling members what they should be doing. We're providing them the best tools for them to consider to use some of, all of, or none of."

This gained perspective is what McCully says prepared him for the job at hand, and gave him the desire to pursue it though he was "excited to retire" from Certified Angus Beef.

"Mark has a unique set of skills and experience we don't find in many people," says John Pfeiffer, American Angus Association president. "He understands all facets of the beef industry really well, and he also recognizes the different roles the Association plays including shows, junior activities and performance programs, and the fact Angus breeders are selling beef. His initial work was with a feeder calf program — this is an area in which the Association has a lot of opportunity."

McCully says this opportunity didn't come at a perfect time for his family, which includes his son, Austin, and daughter, Maddy, but "it was pretty close." Austin will be a junior at Case Western Reserve University majoring in computer science and economics with plans of attending law school. Maddy will be a senior in high school and in the process of making her college selection to pursue a degree in neuroscience. It was also something he'd always wonder, "what if?" had he not applied.



Q: What are some of the challenges facing the Angus breed and Association?

**A:** From a genetic improvement standpoint, we've gotten a lot of the low-hanging fruit. We've identified the highly heritable traits, selected for growth and carcass merit, and built tools to put pressure on and improve those traits.

The maternal side of things — longevity and fertility — those are the fruit higher up the tree. That's our next challenge and why there's the MaternalPlus® program, the new maternal index and tools to help move us in that direction. But the key is, we can't make improvement until we're able to get that data into our database and make those tools better. MaternalPlus® is so important. The program is paramount for us to build maternal tools to make sure the Angus cow is the best cow she can be.

Then, it's making sure we are leaders in genetic improvement. The industry is making discoveries all the time as we identify disease resistance and genetics around fertility. As we discover them, we need to continue to incorporate those into our toolbox because they are going to be big in terms of economic relevance to the greater industry. We need to make sure as a breed association we're on the cutting edge of those technologies to stay relevant.

Q: Are the breed and Association prepared to stay relevant?

**A:** I think we absolutely are. Our team, Board of Directors and membership are forward-thinking. We're in a position where we're not finding ourselves reacting to things.

The challenge becomes is this balance. I think that we're going to always have to think about striking a balance of being progressive and innovative, and yet maintaining stability, trust and confidence.

There's no question there are members who have seen lots of change. And change can be hard, especially in a cattle business where you only turn over so many generations of your herd in a

# Q&A

Mark McCully

lifetime. When we're rapidly changing these tools, I know it can get really, really frustrating to breeders.

So we've got to figure out how we balance that. We've got to stay progressive and yet do it in a way that members are able to use the tools with confidence and not feel like they're always playing a catch-up game.

**Q:** Where do you see the Angus breed in the future?

**A:** The Angus breed is in an incredibly strong position from a market share of the beef industry. Angus genetics are throughout commercial cow herds, they're throughout feedyards and I don't see that changing. The Angus breed needs to stay focused on making sure those cattle work for commercial cattlemen and that the Angus cow is still the cow she needs to be — maternally focused.

At the same time, that feeder calf that she produces has to be able to grow fast and efficiently and produce a high-value carcass.

We're also in a good position because of the diversity of our genetics and the size of our database. I'm not saying this out of a position of arrogance, but this is an absolute strength to be able to build cattle that fit both a maternal and a terminal standpoint.

I think we have the opportunity, and I think that's our challenge to keep both our breed and our breed Association on our members' behalf relevant to the beef industry, and I think we're positioned beautifully to get that done.

**Q:** What should be the Angus breed's role in the industry?

**A:** With the market share that we have, the percent of genetics that we as a breed contribute to this industry, with that comes responsibility to lead and to be a leader. Not to tell everybody else what to do but to truly be a leader in that industry.

We represent a large and diverse membership, and as an Association need to represent their voice as diverse as that voice is. We've got some pretty incredible opportunities to advocate for

our ranchers and our members. We have a brand that is touching the consumer, and there's no better vehicle to communicate with the consumer than through a strong, trusted brand that we have in Certified Angus Beef.

**Q:** What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

**A:** Family activities is where we tend to find ourselves. Whether it was with my son playing baseball and coaching his teams, or coaching basketball for my daughter, I just really enjoyed being involved in their activities.

Now my son is off to college and my daughter has a passion for horses. My wife Gerry and I spend a lot of time with her at the horse farm. It's her thing and we're just there supporting her.

I'm probably not terribly unique in that I love this industry, and so in my spare time I like to look at cattle magazines, visit cattle websites and go to cattle events. That's kind of the cool part. When your hobbies are the same as your career, you know you're in a good spot.

**Q:** What would you like to share with the membership?

**A:** I don't want to dwell on the negative, but I also don't want to ignore that we have some division and some fences that need to be mended.

I want to work on growing the trust that the membership has in the Association and the decisions it makes. I want to make sure that the membership gives this Association the license it needs to be progressive and innovative.

I think that only comes when our members truly trust the Association is working in their best interest. They may not totally agree with everything because of their vantage point and what's important to them, but they trust what this Association is doing.

If you ask, 'What do you hope to accomplish?' If we accomplish building a high level of trust, we'll be at a really, really wonderful spot.

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“My wife would kind of joke to me, ‘You’ve been preparing for this job your entire life.’ And that’s probably not intentionally,” he says. “[CEO of the American Angus Association] was not a goal written on a piece of paper in my desk drawer. But my interests, my skill sets, my experiences, things I’m passionate about ... They tend to align themselves to this opportunity, I thought.”

### A new role

So, on June 10, 2019, McCully walked into the Association office as its CEO. In his first few months, McCully plans to prioritize learning the Angus team. “We’ve got a wonderful team here, and I really want to understand the things we are doing. We’ve got folks who have been here a long time, and folks coming in with new ideas. I think it’s foundational to what we do making sure that this team is prepared and passionate. And so that’s been a priority.”

Pfeiffer says McCully’s servant’s attitude approach to leadership will benefit Association membership and employees.

“We were looking for someone who would continue to improve culture in the office, but also someone who considers this is a membership-driven organization when setting goals and making decisions,” he says.

From the eyes of the membership, McCully hopes he is seen as approachable, a trait Pfeiffer says he has.

“Mark doesn’t meet strangers. It was important to us to hire a person who is able to easily meet people, talk to them and be transparent and open. Mark fits the bill very well.”

McCully says he wants to listen to members and build perspective from what he learns. He adds he is in tune to some topics dividing membership. “I still think that we align as a membership on far more things than we disagree on,” he describes. “I want to champion that vision to make sure we do align and agree that we’re in this together. And then let’s talk about those things we have differences of opinion on. Good dialogue will lead to good solutions.”

Ultimately, he goes on to say, to be successful, the membership needs trust in the Association. “Anytime there’s an erosion of [trust], maybe a member not

thinking a program or a tool or an activity of the Association is in their best interest, and they start losing trust. That’s a really dangerous thing for us as an organization. So, I want to champion what I have absolutely seen in these walls in my first few weeks. What I knew I would find is a team of people who have the members’ best interest at heart and working on their behalf.”

McCully doesn’t expect the membership to always agree on the programs and tools the Association provides — after all there’s much diversity in the organization.

However, McCully says, “What I hope here is never question of intent, of purpose, of best interest. Those are the things I want to make sure that our membership is not questioning.

And to do that, it just comes with very open, and I hope very candid, discussion and dialogue. I hope that if members have questions or concerns that they would feel very comfortable asking. And I think they will. I want to make sure that this Association is progressive and innovative but will never lose sight of who we are and who we serve.” <sup>AJ</sup>

**“I WANT TO GET OUT AND LISTEN AND ASK QUESTIONS AND JUST LEARN, GETTING BACK TO JUST BUILDING PERSPECTIVE OF WHAT DOES THE MEMBER THINK. WHY ARE THEY A PART OF THIS ASSOCIATION? WHAT DO THEY FIND VALUE IN? WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT THIS ASSOCIATION HAS DONE IN THE PAST OR BELIEVES THEY CAN DO IN THE FUTURE THAT BRINGS MORE VALUE TO THEM? I THINK I HAVE SOME IDEAS OF WHAT THAT IS, BUT I WANT TO MAKE SURE I FULLY GRASP THAT.”**

**— MARK MCCULLY**