

Building Better Beef

FFA beef proficiency award winner focuses on a consumer-oriented end product.

STORY & PHOTOS BY LANCE ZIESCH



A young man with a clear goal in mind, Brandon New wants to improve beef. If he's recognized along the way, that's OK, too, he says.

In the showing, winning is big business. Brandon New knows about winning. However, it's a less important byproduct of what really excites him: building predictable beef carcass genetics.

New, a sophomore at Kansas State University (K-State), is the 1999 winner of the National FFA Beef Production

Entrepreneurship Proficiency Award.

He describes his award-winning Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) project as the culmination of maturing his artificial insemination (AI) skills and putting all the tools together to manage his own cow herd. He is quick to point out that he appreciates the recognition, but more

importantly, he enjoys seeing the improvements he has made in his product.

New has been in the Angus business since he was 7, when his father gave him a foundation heifer. The next year, he followed with another. "I've always been out in the pasture with Dad checking cows," he says. "I've always been involved. It's second nature, I guess."

That nature is a product of nearly 50 years of family experience at New Haven Angus. Located near Leavenworth, Kan., New Haven is a family-owned operation of about 140 cows managed by Bill and Loris New and their two sons, Damon and Brandon.

"My dad grew up on a dairy farm, and my grandpa always used Angus bulls on the Holstein heifers to get a smaller, live calf," New says. "Then Dad got his first Angus heifer 46 years ago as a 4-H project. It has really grown from there. My dad, my brother and I are the main operators and owners. But both of my sisters still have cows in the herd."

The project

When it became time for New to declare his SAE project as an FFA member, it was natural for him to start with a beef production entrepreneurship program, he says.

He decided to manage 35 of his cows in a spring-calving program. In the fall, New weans the calves and decides which animals he'll keep for replacement heifers. After that, he offers the weaned bull calves for sale. Remaining bulls are castrated and sent to the Kansas Angus Association Carcass Data Project feedlot, T-Bone Feeders Inc., at Goodland, Kan., where they'll be finished. It's through this program that he receives the carcass data he and his family use to improve their herd.

"It's a tool we're trying to utilize to help carry out mating decisions," New explains. "If a calf really performs well, we might breed that cow back to that bull and maybe get a heifer out of her to get some carcass base in a cow family. Then we go from there and keep breeding them to bulls that are well-known carcass sires. We'll do that for



Collecting carcass data on their cattle reassures New and his family about bulls. "If he's got some good numbers and his calves go out there and perform well, we'll go ahead and keep using the bull. If a bull goes out there and doesn't perform to the standards we have set for him, we might not use him as much," New says.

three or four generations to where we know that they're stacked for carcass traits. The carcass information will be that much better, and the eating will be that much better after that."

New says the project's feedlot protocol is comparable to any other in most ways. An owner pays for the yardage, feed, veterinary and processing costs. The feedlot deducts these expenses from the value of the carcass before the proceeds are passed to the owner.

Tools of the trade

Since his beginning in the Angus industry, New has been in the business to raise a good product by striving for a consistent phenotype. In the last few years particularly, he's paid a lot of attention to carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs) and bulls that consistently have three and four generations of stacked carcass merit. It all goes back to uniformity, he says.

In addition to using data collected from the carcass project, New incorporates embryo transfer (ET) and AI. In the four years of his project, he says he has raised his herd's average weaning weight by 60 pounds (lb.). "It was just a culmination of my maturing and putting all the tools together to manage my own cow herd," he says.

"A big part of getting a more uniform product is getting a more uniform herd," he says. "Flushing cows [for ET] has done that for me. I've got uniform heifers, as well as bulls. I think that in turn goes back into the bull-selling business. When you have uniform bulls, you don't have calves that are going to be 60 pounds at birth and some at 110. You're going to have that consistent 75-

or 80-pound calf that'll weigh 650 pounds at weaning and gain 350 pounds and be on the rail in 14 months."

When New was a freshman in high school he attended an ABS-sponsored AI school in Atchison, Kan., but he admits that his AI skills mostly come from practical experience working with his own cattle.

"My dad, brother and I can all AI," he says. "It's quite a process. With three of us doing it, it makes it go quicker."

Although New does his own AI work, he leaves the flushing to a veterinarian, who recovers and implants the embryos.

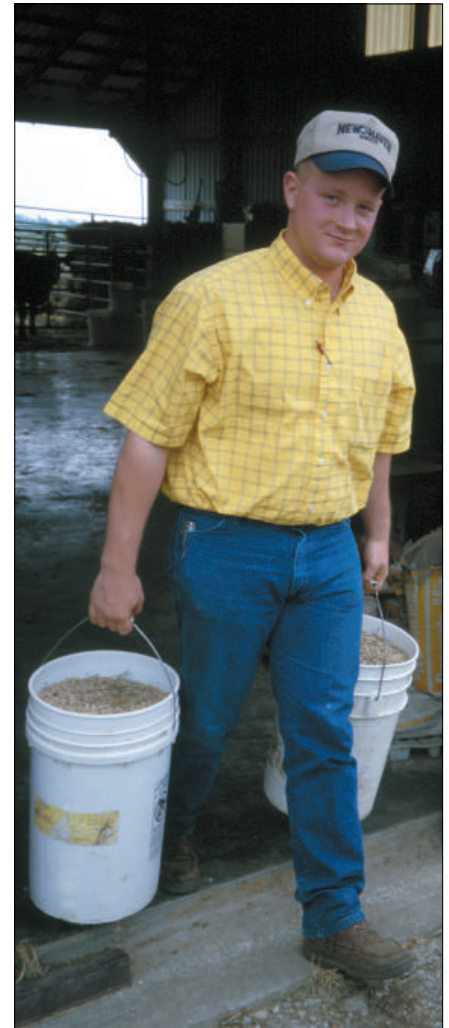
New's ET program involves a cooperator herd at nearby McClouth, Kan.

"I have 25 calves on the ground this spring out of about 42 eggs we put in. That's about a 60% or 70% conception rate, which we thought was pretty good," New says. "A lot of the bulls we sold this spring were embryo calves that came from the cooperator herd. We do that on a buy-back basis. We'll buy the calves back at weaning on the basis that they're an above-average calf. So we'll pay market price plus a little premium on top. It's on a per-pound basis."

All of these facts, figures, goals and improvements are carefully recorded in the pages of New's SAE recordbook. His recordkeeping skills and attention to detail have earned him various awards in the organization, in addition to this national proficiency award.

Evaluation

Going into the interview, New decided it didn't matter if he won or not. He thought he had a good program, but just to be in the



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national finals was an honor, he says.

"I just went in there and told them what I do and how I go about things. They asked me their questions, and I answered the best I could. I tried to get to the point. I can't say what I did different than the other finalists because I wasn't in on the interviews, but I must have done something different."

Russell Plaschka, New's high-school agricultural education instructor and FFA advisor, says New did do something different.

"What Brandon did that stood out was that he was progressive. He was doing the embryo transfer," Plaschka says. "At a younger age, he saw what the possibilities were, and he just built on it. He had a good foundation laid down in front of him from his grandfather and father. Brandon is just continuing the tradition, but he is taking it a step further with his ET. He's branching out and looking for new opportunities. That's what stands out."

Plaschka notes that in addition to the modern methods New uses to drive his operation, his former student also is a self-starter.

“From the time I have known him, any conversation I’ve ever had with Brandon has stemmed around what’s going on with his cattle and what’s happening in agriculture in general. He’s very concerned about the beef industry itself. That’s probably what drives him more than anything — his love of agriculture.”

NJAA & FFA

New credits a lot of his personal development from being involved in various activities within the National FFA Organization and the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA).

“I was, believe it or not, a rather shy person when I joined FFA. It has helped me in my people and public-speaking skills,” New says. “I also got to meet a lot of different people. I think that helped out a lot, just learning to accept the way other people do things. That was a big part of it.”

“You are placed in a tremendous amount of leadership roles. On the FFA level, I served as my chapter’s president my junior and senior year. I also served on the district level for two years as the secretary and the treasurer. I have pondered running for state office, but I decided that I had other areas I wanted to concentrate on in terms of my own cattle herd. I would really like to concentrate on school, too.”

Last year, New received his State FFA Degree. This coming fall, he will receive his American FFA Degree, which is the highest honor the national organization can bestow on its members. Of roughly 450,000 students, about 2% of the organization’s members receive the degree.

In addition to his honors in the FFA, New has received recognition from the NJAA. At the 1999 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS), he received the second-place boy’s scholarship, which he says was a big honor.

Advice

New strongly encourages youth considering the NJAA and the FFA to get involved, even if they don’t have agricultural backgrounds.

“You just have to go into everything with the attitude of ‘even if I don’t think I have anything to offer, I still need to be there.’ In the long run, things will work out,” he says.

It’s just a matter of setting goals and working toward them, he adds.

“Don’t hold yourself to limits. Push yourself. Do what you can,” he says. “If someone needs help clipping, go and help them clip. If they have a couple of heifers in the same class, show a heifer. That’s what we’re there for. Not everybody can have the champion heifer every time, but everybody

Character

There are four words that come to mind when describing Brandon New, says Russell Plaschka: morality, integrity, dependability and Angus. Plaschka was New’s agricultural education instructor and FFA advisor at Tonganoxie High School.

“Brandon is somewhat reserved. He sits back and looks at things,” Plaschka says. “Brandon’s not a very outspoken individual. He’s not the type to really catch your attention right away. But he was able to motivate the kids and get them to do things as president of the chapter. He was able to get things done because they believed he was sincere in what he said. There is nothing fake about Brandon. When he talks, he knows what he’s talking about and, I think, people understand that.”

Another word to describe New is humble.

“Brandon had some leadership roles and won a lot of awards in FFA,” Plaschka says, “but he never let that go to his head.”

Dustin Guthrie, a senior at Tonganoxie High School, has known Brandon for years. He agrees that New concentrates on technique and quality instead of show results.

“He’s really competitive in shows,” Guthrie says. However, the skills and techniques New acquires at the show are what he first mentions to friends, not the show results themselves.

Plaschka adds that this humble attitude is the philosophy of the New family in general.

“The past several years they have tried to focus on developing an end product and getting the carcass merit in their animals. If they win some shows along the way, then that’s great. But that’s not what they’re in it for.”

“Brandon would like to see more success in the showing, but at the same time, he hasn’t lost sight of what he’s in the business for — to provide a quality product.”



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With all his work, New adds that youth need to take time to have fun along the way.

“All work and no play is not any fun. You need to have some fun,” he says. “I know cattle can get frustrating sometimes [when you’re] trying to work them and they don’t want to go into the chute. Just get on with it,” he says with a smile.

After he graduates from K-State with his degree in animal sciences and industry, New plans to return to the farm.

“This is truly what I love to do. I’ll never get tired of cattle,” he says.

In the beef industry, New says he realizes that it all comes down to providing what the

consumers want and are willing to pay. New understands this and strives to produce the best product he can.

“Everybody’s focusing on the carcass genetics. I’d like to say that we focus quite a bit on them at New Haven Angus. It gives us a good feeling,” New says. “There’s always going to be demand for quality meat. I think everybody can probably deliver that piece of meat. But is it going to be on a consistent basis, a uniform basis?”

When customers tell him his program has provided the best steaks they’ve had in a long time, New knows his SAE has been a success. More importantly, he knows his program has been a success, and that is why he is in the beef business — to make it better.

