

2001 SEEDSTOCK
COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNER

Trend Designer

CAB honors the Rishel Angus
commitment to excellence.

Story & photos by *Steve Suther*



Twenty years ago, Bill Rishel proclaimed a “new trend” for the Angus cattle industry when he selected and named an unlikely bull for an elite sale. His greatest triumph as an Angus breeder, to date, has been seeing the AAR New Trend legacy unfold.

“He finally lived up to his name,” Rishel says with a reflective smile, “about the time he was dead.” The road to fame was similar, if shorter, for New Trend descendants B/R New Design 036 and B/R New Design 323.

Rishel says his own career closely paralleled those of the bulls he believed in. It took a long time and a consistent effort to develop their legacy, which is the Rishel Angus program as much as the herd of 250 registered cows south of North Platte, Neb.

The 2001 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award winner still winces at the word *seedstock*. He’s a “purebred Angus producer” in a world

where seedstock producers usually deal in more than one breed.

With his wife and partner, Barb, Rishel will accept the award at the CAB “Catch the Spirit” Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas, Sept. 13-16, where he will address the people closest to his ultimate customer. He’ll talk about the chain of customer relationships that extends from his ranch through those end-product CAB licensees. He’ll talk about the process of turning the industry’s pyramid model upside down.

The ultimate customer

“When we started on this trail of carcass evaluation work, we were trying to focus on the ultimate customer, the consumer,” Rishel explains. “To do that, to provide that more-consistent, more-uniform genetic package, we had to help our primary customer, the commercial producer, get ready for value-based marketing.”

In the mid- to late-1980s, most cattle industry leaders weren’t thinking about that.

“They made fun of the idea, said ‘You can’t make money doing that; it’s a waste of time,’” Rishel says.

Producers who had been dubbed “seedstock suppliers” considered themselves “at the top of the pyramid, dictating to everyone on down,” he says. “All of us who saw ourselves at the top — and we used to be there with so many others in the purebred business and the wider industry, academia, cattle judges, breed associations — produced what we thought was right and said, ‘There it is, buy it.’ The same thing happened on down the line, even when the consumer didn’t buy it.”

It’s no wonder commercial producers played along, Rishel says. “Everybody was telling them the only things that matter are efficiency and pounds of beef.”

Gaining focus

He owes a more enlightened perspective to his roots. The Pennsylvania native went to Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) in 1963 to work in the beef barn and be on the livestock-judging team coached by Herman Prudy, which he

likens to playing football for Vince Lombardi.

Three years later, the Penn State team took first place at Chicago’s prestigious International Livestock Exposition, with Rishel as second-high individual. Married by then, Rishel stayed on as assistant herdsman, earning a master’s degree in animal breeding before moving to Sayre Farms in Phelps, N.Y. He co-managed with his older brother Ed for two years, then took the helm at Topp Hill Farms, Hillsdale, N.Y., in 1971. The farm’s owner, Harold Toppel, was a pioneer in putting it all together with consumers, operating a chain of supermarkets in Puerto Rico and New York.

“It was a real eye-opener for me to join Harold on a tour of IBP’s first boxed-beef plant in the early ’70s,” Rishel says. “It encouraged some thought as to where that could lead.”

Toppel managed registered Angus cows in New York and central Nebraska, testing the bulls at Minden, Neb., and selling yearlings at auction in the days when 2-year-olds were the standard. When Toppel decided to sell the cows and to concentrate on his retail ventures, Rishel was at a crossroads.

“We had put together one of the best herds in the country, but I helped him sell them,” Rishel recalls. At 30 years old, he couldn’t buy the herd, but he held on to the dozen Angus cows he’d been allowed to assemble on the side. He yearned for ranch country.

Headed west

Turning down other offers from East Coast farms, the Rishels decided to head west to Nebraska or Montana. “Crazy as it was, we packed up the three kids and headed to North Platte,” Rishel recalls. “I had phoned ahead to National Livestock Brokers. They needed the help, so I hired on for two years.”

Proving his talent for hard work and learning from experience, Rishel saved enough

►Above: Bill Rishel, who with his wife and partner, Barb, manages Rishel Angus south of North Platte, Neb., will receive the 2001 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award at the CAB “Catch the Spirit” Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas, Sept. 13-16.



►Rishel says his cattle contribute to the Angus breed “because they carry the kind of genetic package value-based marketing systems demand.”

to buy an acreage, then started his own company, Rishel Livestock Services Inc.

“I got into sale management to generate an income, build a cow herd and work in the Angus industry,” he says. “It was better than the railroad because I met a lot of people and saw a lot of cattle. It introduced me to many sire lines and cow families, and I made the determination on those I felt were good and those that weren’t.”

Rishel says of his own cattle in the 1970s, “We had far too much inconsistency. We fooled around breeding cattle we thought were pretty good, but like everybody else, we didn’t know. We didn’t have the information and databases to benchmark our progress.”

Then a pivotal moment came. Rishel sees his selection and subsequent purchase of AAR New Trend for the 1981 Northern International Livestock Exposition (NILE) sale in Billings, Mont., as a catalyst of change. As sale manager, he’d seen the bull’s mother and grandmother repeatedly produce the top individuals in the Arntzen Angus Ranch herd, so he figured the industry could use those maternal values.

He chose the optimistic name, but skeptics remained.

Against the grain

“The industry was not about to accept a ‘new trend’ at that juncture — he wasn’t a giant — you didn’t have to stand on a bucket to look down his back, and the industry still wanted big, big, big. But he was

maternal, and he had cutability,” Rishel recounted. “What I couldn’t see was the marbling, which brings added value to the retail product.”

Knowing how good the bull was from the production, cow function and industry standpoints, Rishel says it was frustrating to live with what most of his contemporaries considered a mistake. He came up with a promotional slogan in the 1980s: “We’re not breeding cattle just for the times, but right for the cattle industry regardless of the times.”

“It sounds simple, but it’s pretty deep,” Rishel says. “It means true economics in the beef industry are based, not just on pounds of beef product, but the total value of those pounds. To those who kept saying, ‘You’re not getting paid for it,’ I had to shrug, ‘Maybe they’re right.’

“But I saw a mirror of the beef industry in the 1980s auto industry when shortsightedness among U.S. makers who paid lip service to craftsmanship and customer service left the door open for Japanese competition. I had sound economics on my side, and that will never lead you very far from the centerline.”

Steadfast in his beliefs, Rishel built much of his herd on Ken-Caryl Mr. Angus and New Trend daughters. When the mainstream industry realized it had chased frame to an extreme degree, Rishel recalls, “breeders who had said New Trend was too little now questioned if his daughters were too big.”

Rishel was at another critical juncture. Exasperation at an industry ruled by whims made

him focus all the more on consumer demand.

“After all, beef has to be paid for by consumer dollars at the meat counter,” he says. “I believed a value-based system would evolve. If our commercial customers were ever going to take advantage of such a system, the purebred breeder would have to lead them, supplying the genetics to get the job done.”

Herd focus

The renewed commitment meant more focus on the Rishel Angus herd.

“We tapered off sales management after 1987,” Barb says. “We’d put together a sizeable investment here at home.” Three daughters entering their teen years would benefit, too, of course. Time proved the wisdom of that course as a New Trend son, VDAR New Trend 315, sired B/R New Design 036 in 1990, who sired B/R New Design 323 in 1993. Now, 20 years after that fateful bid of \$10,000 on an unusual, weanling bull calf, Rishel’s cattle are examples of those new trends and designs.

“Our cattle are having an impact on the Angus breed today because they carry the kind of genetic package value-based marketing systems demand,” Rishel says.

The combination of using technology and numbers with the master judge’s eye keeps the Rishel herd uniform and predictable. “There is no substitute for seeing the cattle,”

he says. “Regardless of numbers, certain phenotypic traits make them the right ones vs. the wrong ones. You can have two cattle with the same numbers that are very different in functionality, and the good cowman knows what form goes with function. I don’t think I’m fighting progress to say you can’t take the cowman out of the equation.”

The 5,000-acre ranch, about evenly divided between owned and leased, today includes some dryland farming in addition to the 250 registered cows calving each spring and an embryo transfer (ET) program that features some “unique genetics.”

Rishel likes to walk among those calves that promise so much for the future — the full brothers and sisters to 323, the Basin Max 602C siblings out of 036’s 15-year-old mother. “We keep trying to utilize as much of that cow power and put in as much carcass balance as we can,” he says.

The last three years have been busy ones as the New Design genetics came into widespread use. The Rishel girls are grown up now, and the house is a little quieter.

“At this point in life, you think about timing and where you’re at in the industry. Wherever the trail leads from here,” Rishel says, “we’ll keep designing genetics that we believe keep our customers in business by increasing consumer satisfaction.”

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►The Rishel embryo transfer (ET) program features some “unique genetics,” including these full brothers to B/R New Design 323.