

Beyond the Breed

The Beef Leaders Institute resumed this year to provide Angus breeders a unique opportunity to experience the beef value chain from pasture-to-plate.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

The glare of the sun only seemed to highlight the dust speckled across the tour bus windshield. The road seen through the glass appeared to stretch endlessly, even as the vehicle progressed forward steadily. Still, the lively conversation inside the bus never once died down, except for the occasional catnap.

Through twists and turns and last-minute airport complications, the 16 participants of this year's Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) connected with fellow Angus producers and gained an inside look at the work it takes to get a high-quality meat product in front of consumers.

"BLI provides American Angus Association members a unique

educational opportunity to experience the beef value chain from pasture to plate," says Caitlyn Brandt, events and education coordinator at the American Angus Association. "Overall, the goal of the program is to provide an opportunity for Association members to discover what happens after cattle leave their operation, build lifelong relationships with cattlemen from across the country and take that knowledge back home."

Like many other events, this *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)- and Angus Foundation-sponsored event was unable to be hosted in 2020 due to complications created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The program

resumed this year, continuing to achieve its goal of helping young beef producers grow in their ability to promote and serve the cattle industry.

BLI is a five-day expedition Brandt says exists to create stronger and more effective leaders within the industry. The tour schedule, she explains, helps meet this goal by encompassing destinations like the American Angus Association headquarters and industry stops such as feedyards, the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) headquarters and more.

Day one: faces to names

Monday marked the arrival of the participants, with a welcome to Association headquarters in Saint



The 2021 Beef Leaders Institute gave Angus producers an inside look at the work it takes to get a high-quality meat product in front of consumers. Pictured back row (from left) are Dustin Frey, Michael Jensen, Chad Horsley, Gabriel Connealy, Joshua Neal, Kim Skinner, Joe Hortsman and James "Rooter" Gray. Front row (from left) are Shelby Oldenkamp, Dylan Massa, Travis Howard, Alex Bauer, Jordan Hunter, Danny Beckman, Josh Gilbert and Bradley Wolter.

Joseph, Mo. While event attendees have worked with several of the Association's staff members since they started in the Business Breed, few had ever been able to do more than talk to Angus employees over the phone.

"I really enjoyed being able to put faces with names of staff that are carrying out the work," says Bradley Wolter of Windy Hill Meadows, Aviston, Ill. "We have a resource that's every bit as important as the genetics — this Association is blessed in animal and human resources."

Wolter and his peers were treated like parade stars as they marched past each of the 100-plus faces that work in the Missouri building. Historical elements of the headquarters — such as the original tiling in the main lobby known to Association staff as the "green room" and paintings commissioned specifically for the building by famed artist Frank Murphy — were highlighted to the participants as their boots spanned every inch of the office.

Angus Media, Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), the Angus Foundation and the various departments of the Association introduced their purpose and mission to the breeders. From conversations revolving around the science behind the progress of genetic evaluation to discussion of how to best leverage print and digital marketing, these Angus producers gained new insight on ways to promote the Business Breed.

For Wolter, picking the brains of the AGI staff stood out as a key moment of the week. Prior to the event, he considered the Angus breed as a resource for the growing beef sector. After attending BLI, he says he now possesses the ability to help customers better utilize the genetic tools provided by the Association.

"I wish every breeder could



experience the positive culture and depth of talent that we have at the Association, and understand the importance of continuing to invest in the people as well as the science," Wolter says. "Breeders should never underestimate the importance of remaining engaged with Association staff to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current system."

Day two: feedlot focus

After catching up with more Association news and information, BLI participants had the unique opportunity of traveling to Herington, Kan., to meet with the staff behind Tiffany Cattle Co., a complete cattle feeding and marketing service.

Brothers Shawn and Shane Tiffany co-own the custom feedlot. Shane led the Angus group on a tour of the unique facility, an army air corps bomber base built during World War II-turned cattle facility.

While on the surface it may not seem like producers focusing on registered cattle should be all that concerned with a feedlot environment, Danny Beckman of D&D Angus Ranch, Danville, Iowa, says this tour revealed just how closely related his work as a seedstock breeder is to the commercial producer.

"The animals we raise have progeny that end up in the feedlots," he explains. "We need to understand what the whole chain of the beef industry needs to be successful instead of being so segmented."

Beckman said the tour of the Kansas operation was more than just a quick look around — Shane ensured BLI participants understood what the company does to care for the livestock from start to finish.

During the tour, Shane brought forth a challenge to BLI participants. He encouraged the producers to continue to pursue the highest degree of genotypically and phenotypically correct cattle.

"We can only build on the foundation that's set on the ranch. It's all about genetics," Shane explained. "I can feed for Choice, but I can't feed for Prime. That's got to be in them."

For Beckman, this statement further solidified the role he plays as a breeder. He says it's up to himself, his fellow BLI participants and every other Angus seedstock breeder to pursue genetics that can rise to the top in any and all environments.

Day three: the long road to Ohio

On the third day of BLI, participants rose before the sun at 3:45 a.m. — before a hiccup altered

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the day's plans. An entire group flight was canceled, but the group refused to let the change in scheduling diminish their determination to reach Wooster, Ohio, to complete the week's schedule.

With a few tips of their cowboy hats and a couple of well-timed smiles, BLI participants convinced their bus driver to head a road trip from Missouri to Wooster that same day.

While none of the cattlemen had imagined their week's itinerary would include a 14-hour bus ride across the country, Wolter says it actually became a highlight of the trip in regard to connecting and networking with Angus peers.

"The participants in the group were every bit of important resources as the Association was," he explains. "I took learnings away from each one of them and the systems that they're operating."

Day four: behind the brand

Despite the late arrival to Wooster the night prior, BLI participants were up and ready to explore the CAB headquarters and Culinary Center Wednesday morning.

John Stika, CAB president, was eager to break down the meaning behind the brand.

"This brand started because of people. This brand works because of people," Stika explained. "It's all about the experience. Blend emotion with science, and that's the space where we like to live."

Participants spent the rest of the day exploring the inner workings of a segment of the beef production chain most were largely unfamiliar with.

Daily activities included a virtual tour of a packing plant, an in-depth discussion about the distribution of CAB branded products, and hands-on identification of various cuts of

the carcass and their value.

When surrounded by CAB professionals, the BLI participants were happy to partake in plenty of fine-dining experiences. A little pre-dinner snack included tasting various grades of beef and sampling aged beef — a food preparation process most participants had never tasted before.

Day five: retail reality

Entering the final day of BLI, attendees explored the final segment of the beef industry — the world of consumer demand and retail merchandising.

With boots clicking gently on the floor of a local retail store, BLI participants wandered amidst morning shoppers to examine CAB products on real grocery shelves. Studying the different packaging choices and shelf placement of various products, breeders experienced firsthand what a shopper experiences when they're on the hunt for the star protein of their next dinner party.

Registered Angus breeders serve as the foundation for the CAB brand, says Kara Lee, assistant director of producer engagement at CAB.

From time in the cooler discovering more about carcasses to this grocery store field trip to reveal the consumer's perspective, Lee says activities for BLI participants during the week's end were varied in order to help seedstock producers gain a broader perspective of the entire industry. She says most breeders have an idea of the brand's mission to increase demand for registered Angus cattle, but lack true insight on the deeper meaning behind the CAB seal.

"When BLI participants spend a couple days in our shop, our goal is for them to gain a more complete appreciation for how this brand



drives success for our partners and how that success ultimately adds value to their business," she explains. "We want them to not only know who we are, but to go home with an appreciation for where the brand stands in the greater scope of the cattle industry."

Wolter says he leaves the week with a renewed sense of respect and admiration for not just the CAB brand, but also black-headed cattle and the faces that both breed and market them so successfully.

He, like his peers who attended BLI, spent a week looking beyond the Angus name, taking an opportunity to truly understand the business that goes on behind the breed.

"I walk away with even more appreciation for how the breed is differentiated from any other breed in the industry," Wolter says. "I leave this week with a better appreciation for the youth education and development programs at the Association. We can build the leaders of tomorrow." 