

Committed to the Brand

The 1999 Certified Angus Beef Program's Commitment to Excellence awards honor three parts of a working relationship.

BY STEVE SUTHER

The Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program honored three producers along with several licensees with Commitment to Excellence awards during its annual conference in Minneapolis Aug. 26-29. The Supply Development Team recognized the producers for their dedication to and cooperation with the CAB Program and the American Angus Association's Sire Evaluation Program.

Each category has its own criteria, and the CAB Program staff determines the winners.

The Seedstock Producer of the Year Award recognizes a producer for working with the Program to improve and to expand the Angus genetic database by testing bulls for their progeny carcass merit. The producer evaluates a large number of a sire's progeny to improve the accuracy of expected progeny differences (EPDs). Information exchange is of critical importance.

The Commercial Producer of the Year Award is based on the



ranch's efforts to cooperate and communicate while evaluating registered Angus bulls for carcass merit through the Sire Evaluation Program. The winner takes time to ensure proper identification of sire groups, maintaining in-depth records on calves for Angus Herd Improvement Record (AHIR) reports.

The Cooperating Feedyard of the Year Award is based on a feedyard's ability to keep cattle in contemporary groups and to properly tag and identify them. The feeder informs CAB Program staff of harvest dates and plant destinations but also keeps excellent feeding records and closeout data, making every effort to ensure the success of the Sire Evaluation Program.

Somewhat unique to this year's winners in seedstock, commercial and feedyard production is that they have business ties to each other. This demonstrates the growing connectivity in the beef industry.

SEEDSTOCK PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

VAN DYKE ANGUS RANCH

Clarence Van Dyke, Manhattan, Mont.

Growing up as one of 12 siblings on what was then a dairy farm helped Clarence Van Dyke, Manhattan, Mont., learn the lessons that made him stand out in the Angus seedstock industry. He learned early on to be competitive. He learned to build what had been a "hobby" Angus herd into something great by using artificial insemination (AI), a tool that spreads his herd's influence today. He learned the precise relationships between inputs and outputs, and he learned to manage with the end product in mind.

Admittedly fussy about the red meat he prefers, Van Dyke began trying to "get

carcass on our cattle" in about 1975. Three years before the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program was born, Van Dyke figured everyone preferred quality beef. "I just assumed that someday that's what people were going to demand, and it came to be true."

Van Dyke started his Angus herd by answering a classified ad and buying a small herd of registered Angus cattle, leasing the land on which they were running. "That hobby got to be a challenge, and the challenge developed into a program," he says.

"At that time there was no AI in beef

cattle," Van Dyke recalls. "We struggled with trying to buy the right kind of a bull for a few years." They were already accustomed to using proven bulls on their dairy herd when the American Angus Association opened the rules on AI, he adds. "It seemed like the natural way for us to go with beef cattle. We never used a bull until they were really highly proven, and proven mainly to produce outstanding daughters."

The operation today includes some 1,500 acres of fertile farm ground, 10,000 acres of leased mountain rangeland, and some lower deeded pastures and subirrigated meadows for summering the bull calves.

If you don't know the 1999 Seedstock Producer of the Year, you probably do recognize the VDAR prefix ahead of names of bulls that have had a lasting impact on the Angus breed. VDAR New Trend 315 stands out as a marbling sire (EPD .44 with .98 accuracy), but producers also recognize the maternal value, with 3,336 daughters in 994 herds contributing progeny weaning weight records to the Fall 1999 *Sire Evaluation Report*.

"Our philosophy has always been that the improvement in cattle has to come through the cow," Van Dyke explains. "The bull, of course, has to make the cow, but if a bull can't make a daughter better than her mother, then we've made a mistake."

For several years, before the CAB Program offered data collection opportunities, Van Dyke operated on the assumption that there was a strong correlation between maternal and carcass cattle. Certainly there is that correlation in several VDAR sires. VDAR Lucy's Boy, born in 1990, is a couple of years younger than 315, but he already may be in the top five sires for registered progeny in 1999.

"Both are really balanced-trait bulls, leaving nothing behind in order to get the carcass," Van Dyke says. He allows that those bulls "fit the bill as well as any bull in the industry today," but he shares the credit. "Some of this was luck, and some of it was on account of our breeding program."

He also credits the CAB Program staff who have helped him document the quality in those genetics by identifying and tracking progeny. "Without their help there's no way we could do it."

The Sire Evaluation Program keeps Van Dyke on track, he says. "We have to identify these bulls for what they are. The only way we can do that is to get them in test herds and then prove them against reference sires to find out where we're standing. We like to do at least five or six young bulls a year."

Van Dyke chooses the bulls he thinks have the most promise to see where they stand against the competition. "Just breeding for the carcass for the sake of carcass is wrong," he adds. "You can't lose any other trait in order to get a carcass animal. But when you can have everything else and keep the whole animal in balance — then add the carcass as an extra benefit — I think we owe that to the industry and to ourselves."

If there were more consistency and



quality in the beef industry today, it would have fewer problems with consumer demand, Van Dyke says. He heartily recommends *Certified Angus Beef*™ product because of that consistency and quality. "It's always the same, so when you tell people it's good, you know it's going to hold true. One thing I appreciate more than anything is the quality control they have in producing that consistent quality product wherever you go."



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In the first decade of the new millennium, Van Dyke hopes to see more consistency in the cattle business in general. "When the housewife goes to the supermarket to buy that piece of meat, we've got to have a quality product that's consistent so when they take it home it's always the same. If we can do that, I don't think we'll be able to produce enough meat to supply the market," he says. "But that's gotta get done first."

An important step in Van Dyke's route to proven genetics for quality and consistency is long-standing cooperation with excellent commercial test herds, including Robert Fastje, Wilsall, Mont., the 1999 Commercial Producer of the Year (see page 216). "Over the years, he's carcass-tested a lot of bulls for us," says Van Dyke.

He likes Fastje's system of randomly selecting the cows to go with each test sire. "There's no picking and choosing; the chips fall where they may, and we get really accurate data out of that. That's what we want; my philosophy has always been that poor data is worse than no data. When our bulls come for the test, our main objective is that the first information that comes out on them is accurate and that it's going to hold. We feel the data from [Fastje] has been second to none."

— by Steve Suther

COMMERCIAL PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

FASTJE RANCH INC.

Robert Fastje, Wilsall, Mont.

From sheep to Herefords to Angus. That was a natural progression for the Fastje family of Wilsall, Mont. The 3,000-acre ranch was established with sheep after World War II but added Hereford cattle in the 1950s. When Robert Fastje, the 1999 Commercial Producer of the Year, joined the operation in 1962, he began using Angus bulls.

"We could see that the crossbred cows were better mothers, so we've been using [Angus] semen and black bulls ever since," Fastje says.

"This is a small operation, generally able to run about 300 head of cows. And if we didn't lease outside pasture in the summer, we'd probably only be able to run about half that many," he says. But with the leases, Fastje maintains his improving herd.

"When I started using AI, I could see that the way to go was to use the best bulls we could possibly use. So I started going around to the production sales here in Montana and visiting with the Angus people. Clarence [Van Dyke] showed us a lot of hospitality, so I started using his bulls right away, and consequently he started helping me get the best semen that I could use economically. As soon as the carcass-testing program started, he said we should get involved in that together.

"We started carcass testing the first year the Certified Angus Beef Program had a carcass test, I believe, and basically we've done it every year," Fastje says. With what results? "It's definitely put more milk into our cows. Clarence's herd is a maternal herd — probably the most beneficial of all has been the female end of the program. We don't lack for milk in our cows."

The ability to track proven pedigrees also has been a boon. "As we carcass tested different bulls, we found out which were the proven carcass bulls. As other bulls come up to be tested, I've just selected sons of them or sons of the female on the male side that have good carcass traits — so you're not gambling so much on what you're carcass testing, you know."

Fastje works well with Van Dyke on one end and with Iowa feeder Doug Alesch (see



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page 217) on the other. "Doug's been buying my steers for the last five or six years, and he's been very cooperative with the CAB Program, informing them when the steers would be slaughtered and making sure somebody is there to collect data. He's a top-notch feed man."

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Fastje sees progress over the years and



enjoys the security of a ready market in Alesch, even at a slight premium. That despite the fact that Alesch's first experience with Fastje's calves included

treating 50 head for pneumonia and losing one of them. "He turned right around, bought them again the next fall, and he's been buying them ever since. He says the steers always gain good for him."

Fastje remains committed to the brand as evidenced by the continuing relationship with Van Dyke, Alesch and the CAB Program. Progress lies in selecting the right bulls, he says. "We've got the cows — we can't do anything with them other than select the semen to do better."

— by Steve Suther

ALESCH FARMS

Doug Alesch, Marcus, Iowa

There are producers who are willing to go the “extra mile” for the quality of their cattle and commitment to the brand, whether it is taking extra-special care of the cattle they feed or looking to far-from-home sources.

Doug Alesch, Marcus, Iowa, does both. He prefers Angus cattle because “they grade a little better, don’t get as big and overdone as some of the exotics do, and they’re a little more efficient.”

The 800-head feedlot might seem small by some standards, but it comes with big service, first-rate care and Alesch’s personal attention. He goes to great lengths to do the best job possible. He also goes to Montana to fill his pens. For the last several years he has bought cattle from Robert Fastje, 1999 Commercial Producer of the Year.

The cattle came with strings attached: There was an obligation to work with the CAB Program in gathering data for the Sire Evaluation Program. Over the years Alesch went beyond meeting that obligation, which earned him the Program’s 1999 Cooperating Feedyard of the Year Award.

“Some of the larger operations are concerned with just profit, but that’s not the whole picture,” Alesch says. “I guess I take a little more interest than that.” Alesch’s ongoing partnerships with producers such as Fastje have built trust and an understanding that both are doing their best for the cattle.

“There’s something in that he [Fastje] owns the cattle, then sells them to me” but still has an interest in how they do. “It isn’t like they go into a big feedlot where it’s just somebody coming to work,” says Alesch. “As a small, independent operator who owns his cattle, we’re able to give a lot more personal care to the cattle, and they tend to do better in the long run.”

Fastje’s experience with AI and new genetics helps Alesch see positive results from his hard work.

“I’ve been doing a little bit of ‘grading and yielding’ the last few years, getting the results back,” says Alesch. “It’s showing that his cattle, those genetics, really do a lot better than the other cattle.” Much of the



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carcass data was gathered through cooperation with the CAB Program.

Until recently, a steer was a steer for most cattle feeders, but that is changing, Alesch says. “It’s a lot different than years ago when we’d just get cattle in from a buyer and you didn’t know what you were getting. Now that we’ve identified better cattle, it just seems a lot easier to market them.”

Higher quality cattle have been in more demand, as consumer satisfaction has become more of a challenge in recent years. “Over the years [beef] consumption went down, and I think part of it was probably because the meat wasn’t quite as good,” Alesch says, adding that producers need to do a better job of pleasing consumers in order to survive.

“If we want to stay in business, we’re going to have to do a better job and give them something they want, or consumption will keep going down.” Alesch says the CAB Program is up to that challenge. “Now that they’ve identified better cattle and carcasses, once people have had good meat, they kind of stay with it and don’t mind paying a little

bit extra for something good.”

That’s a hopeful note for the future. Alesch says, “With the help of the Certified Angus Beef Program and the kind of carcass data that we can exchange with the producers, we can give a better product to the packer and, therefore, to the consumer.”

Alesch adds, “Seems like more people are catching on to what *Certified Angus Beef* [product] is when they [see it] on the restaurant sign. They have a tendency to stop there.”

From a producer’s point of view, Alesch says the CAB Program gives him a sense of job security. “I want to do a top-notch job, and I know they’re doing a good job, so it seems like I’ll be able to stay in business down the road. They’re the largest brand of beef in the world. They’re the ones [who] set the precedent, set the standards, for everybody else [who] has followed. And I think if you’re hanging your hat on a program like that, wouldn’t it make a lot of sense to be with the front-runner?”

— by Jennifer White

