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CAB Honors Woodhill Farms' Commitment to Excellence



Wisconsin farm recognized for Angus breed improvement with the consumer in mind.

STORY & PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

Woodhill Farms, a Viroqua, Wis., Angus operation, won the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award at the CAB "World of Opportunity" annual

conference in Whistler, British Columbia, Aug. 26. Brian and Lori McCulloh accepted the honor for Woodhill.

Two cow-calf producers and five licensed cattle feeders were honored at the conference for their outstanding contributions

to the CAB Program, the Angus breed and the beef industry.

The annual award recognizes a producer who works closely with CAB and the American Angus Association to improve and to expand the Angus

genetic database. This is accomplished by evaluating progeny to improve the accuracy of expected progeny differences (EPDs) and by cooperating in other areas. Information exchange and honest assessment is vital to



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everyone involved in the process.

Woodhill Farms started in 1984 when Daniel and Anne Borgen offered McCulloh the position of managing partner on their family’s place. The McCullohs moved to Wisconsin from Saint Joseph, Mo., where Brian served as junior activities director of the American Angus Association. He would pursue a dream of taking an Angus herd from concept to national acclaim, starting with 35 cows.

The Woodhill program

Having increased the herd by careful evaluation each year, Woodhill will register 260 Angus calves this fall, including those from a new embryo-transfer (ET) program. To gain uniform predictability, most of the herd ties to just 12 proven cow families, and the five sire lines of Traveler, EXT, ScotchCap, Bando and Ambush.

McCulloh’s management, steeped in positive attitude and passion for Angus cattle, adds

to the predictability. He acknowledges his inner fire for what he is doing but stresses none of it would be possible without the Borgens and his own family — “it’s a team effort.”

Well-spoken and an attentive listener, McCulloh says he enjoys interactions with customers, visiting their farms and meeting with his associates on the Association Board of Directors. But his introverted side wants to be home in the rolling hills with Lori; their sons, Ryan and Matt; their daughter, Allison; and their cows.

That’s where he works to fine-tune grazing rotations on 340 acres of improved and native bluegrass pastures, 300 acres of alfalfa and grass, and interspersed woodlands. Through the winter, his cows live on hay and feed from 100 acres of corn silage. In March they calve on wooded slopes unless weather calls for shelter in nearby barns. Heifers start calving in mid-February, closer to those barns.

Life’s lessons

At home on the farm, McCulloh draws on his sense of observation, sharpened 20 years ago on the Iowa State University livestock-judging team, to help interpret and apply the volumes of information he gathers on his cattle. His observations don’t begin and end with the bovine form, however. Travels to New Zealand and Australia help him judge grazing systems, for instance, but McCulloh finds lessons in virtually every experience.

“I grew up on an Iowa farm [near DeWitt], raising hogs and feeding cattle,” McCulloh says. “I saw the value in selecting for animals that want to compete, and we could see things quickly because of the short generation interval in hogs. I saw that the key to getting the most out of

the herd was getting the sow herd right first. You don’t make excuses to keep them; you don’t keep the best 10 in the front lot and hide the rest. In the same way, you have to be honest with yourself and your cattle.”

The cattle-feeding experiences keep McCulloh focused on the end product, he says, and made his choice of breed inevitable. “When I got out of Iowa State in ’81, you couldn’t tell people you wanted to breed Angus cattle; the odds of making it work were slim, but I had my goals.”

Just out of college, McCulloh got what he calls “pregame training” with Continental-breed cows. He even raised Holstein bucket calves to yearling weights just to start growing the capital, focus and dedication it would take to make it to the “big leagues” of seedstock Angus production.

When the Woodhill Farms opportunity came, McCulloh believed he was ready. He figured cattlemen near his age would be more open to a new Angus seedstock program than veteran producers.

“I tried to establish Woodhill as an honest, straightforward source of information for the young producer so they felt comfortable asking my advice on which bulls they should use,” McCulloh says. He reflects, “You come into this business young and idealistic, but the more I got into it, the more I realized how much I didn’t know — and you accept that. It’s part of being honest with yourself.”

Data-driven

What McCulloh doesn’t know isn’t from a lack of trying to learn. To date, progeny carcass data have been recorded on 900 calves from 29 Woodhill bulls. (In 1999 more than 100 of those calves were born on the Gebhart Ranch at Meadow, S.D., this year’s CAB

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Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award winner).

The *Fall 2000 Angus Sire Evaluation Report* features 42 Woodhill sires, and all but one older bull feature EPDs for carcass traits. Several of these are widely used through artificial insemination (AI) from bull studs, and that generates a lot more progeny data. Some Woodhill sires are trait leaders, in the top 5% of the Angus breed for marbling.

In fact, most of the Woodhill herd is in the top 20% for marbling. “I need retail product now,” McCulloh says, “moderate-size, easy-doing cattle that will peel off outside fat. I try to make my cows produce bulls I think the Angus breed will need.”

Toward that end, he has characterized his entire cow herd for these traits, and he can tell you from memory both the EPDs and four-generation pedigree on any of the uniform black cows in his pastures.

A walk through the Woodhill pastures with McCulloh is an opportunity to hear him recite what most breeders must look up in file cabinets. It’s automatic, on sight of any animal you come near: “There’s a 1.3, 85, a 598 out of an EXT. ... This calf is a 0.6, 67, and plus 0.5 on retail product. ... There’s a Time Saver daughter out of a Valor daughter, out of a 9J9 daughter of Miss Traveler 58. ...”

As you talk cattle, you find that McCulloh’s genetic focus is on a wide spread between birth weight and yearling weight, so you can decode the comments knowing that those are the first two numbers in any quoted EPD. His focus fits his theory that high-yearling-weight cattle are better competitors for food, whether in the pasture or the feedlot.

You’ll also hear about the good fortune McCulloh says Woodhill found in buying Miss



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Traveler 58 from John and Marty Anderson. “We owned a cow that, when she died last February, had a 0.95-accuracy EPD — the kind of accuracy number you look for in a bull. But her progeny, along with Evergreen cows in particular, have worked well for us.”

At breeding time, McCulloh individually matches each cow with the sire that should complement her strengths and weaknesses. And he knows every animal has weaknesses — if you talk to him about any Woodhill Farms animal, he will point out those facts.

Though he has served as official cattle judge from Denver, Colo., and Fort Worth, Texas, to Melbourne, Australia, McCulloh hung up the microphone because, he says, “You can’t tell which animal is best just by their phenotype. We have to admit we don’t know that until they calve, wean and breed back.”

Realistically, he also admits that the showing serves a purpose for many Angus producers and phenotype ranking will continue.

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“Seedstock producers must be students of the industry,

honestly evaluate their cattle and give straightforward advice to their customers,” he says. “Take a sincere interest in where they want to go and help them get there.”

Targeting CAB®

Helping them get there includes pointing out the increasing rewards the market offers for hitting the *Certified Angus Beef*™ (CAB®) target, but it also means helping customers find market solutions when their cattle have far to go.

Such integrity has paid off in seedstock sales. During the past 11 years, Woodhill sold 473 bulls for an average price of \$3,043. In addition, Woodhill’s top-selling 11 bulls during those years averaged \$22,800.

Ultrasound holds a lot of promise for McCulloh, especially in characterizing the female side in progeny testing. DNA technology may have a huge effect in the future, too, but for now, ultrasound is the key tool, he says. Throughout the 1990s, Woodhill Farms was a major participant in sire evaluation through progeny testing, but McCulloh sees that evolving.

The progeny carcass data and individual ultrasound data

never will mix, he says, but the future may see progeny testing of ultrasound-scanned sires on females that have been characterized by ultrasound. “We’ve got better tools now; we’ll be able to use the full-animal model and the dam effect.”

That should make EPDs even more accurate and help McCulloh test his many genetic theories. Still, some mystery may remain for years.

“It’s humbling to work with biological systems,” he says. “The longer we do this, the more I realize that most traits are only 20% to 30% heritable. The other 70% to 80% is environment, management and unknowns.”

McCulloh says the CAB Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP) holds great promise in nailing down much of that 70%-80%.

“We haven’t even had a system of similar management or documentation of implants in sire testing in the past. Now, through these feedlots and use of ultrasound, we can characterize more cow herds and document management on feed — that will add validity to carcass data.”

The Angus breed and Woodhill Farms both have had a good 15 years, McCulloh notes. The future depends on how well the various new technologies — like ultrasound, the FLP, the Angus Beef Records Service (BRS) and DNA testing — can be tied together.

“We’re very close,” he says. “Everything is coming together. Producers are asking, and they will make sense of it all through their seedstock provider — that’s our responsibility.”

