

# Taking the Luck Out of It

2002 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence honoree tests the best.

by Heather Hopper

**T**he Hubachs of Rea, Mo., can't afford guesswork. Their 250 commercial Angus cows serve as a test herd for structured sire evaluation. But for the winner of the 2002 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award, the guesswork is eliminated.

Johnnie Hubach and his wife, Kami, accepted the award at the CAB Annual Conference in Asheville, N.C., a crowning moment for a story that began 21 years ago. When Johnnie Hubach was 16 years old, he found himself at the reins of the 1,200-acre farm held since the early 1900s by the family of his mother, who had died when he was very young.

It was 1981, the dawn of a recession often called the "farm crisis" for its combination of drought, inflation and markets that turned many farm families out of their homes. Hubach's grandfather had just passed away, and because of his father's truck-driving job, it fell to Johnnie to look after the cows and farm.

He was up to the challenge, finding an ideal partner a few years later. Johnnie's father, John, retired from trucking since 1997, and Carolyn, mom to Johnnie, are equal partners in the farm now. Today the Hubachs' daughter, Jordan, represents the fifth generation on the land. Everybody pitches in to keep the operation self-sufficient. "The farm raises all of the herd's feed," Hubach says. "It supports itself."

Self-reliance is important to Hubach, who works the night manager's shift at a local steel-building factory in addition to managing the farm. The family teamwork is critical on long February nights at calving time when Hubach can't check heifers until he gets home from work just before midnight.

## The total package

The annual CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award recognizes a producer with "progressive management, exceptional recordkeeping ability and a history of working with Angus structured sire evaluation with a link to a licensed CAB feedlot."

Records were always important, but



► "Our genetics are getting better every year," says Johnnie Hubach, winner of the 2002 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award.

► From left, Jordan, Johnnie and Kami Hubach represent the fourth and fifth generations to tend the farm held by the family since the early 1900s.



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

became increasingly so as goals changed. At first, the only consideration was to maximize weaning weights, and the farm kept no replacement heifers. "I probably sold a lot of good females over the years," Hubach says. "Heifer development wasn't something I knew a whole lot about — I just felt like I was selling better genetics than I had in the cows."

That feeling eventually turned the focus toward keeping replacements, and that meant searching for "the total package." The farm began an artificial insemination (AI) program in 1990 with the help of American Breeders Service (ABS, now ABS Global) representative Alan Kapp.

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► Seedstock supplier C.K. Allen (right) and Johnnie Hubach agree on reference sires and test bulls for the structured sire evaluation program each year, considering pedigree and performance on unproven sires.

“We bred 10 heifers the first year,” Hubach recalls. To obtain proven genetics and high-accuracy bulls, the farm increased AI numbers to 60 heifers and 100 cows by 1996, buying most of its natural-service herd bulls from Mill Brae Ranch, Maple Hill, Kan.

Blessed by their proximity to American Angus Association headquarters, Hubach counted neighbor and former Association executive vice president, the late Dick Spader, as a friend and mentor. “I valued his opinion a lot, and we used to discuss breeding decisions once or twice a year,” Hubach says.

### Transition to a test herd

On one of those occasions in 1997, while at Association offices in Saint Joseph, Mo., he met John Crouch, then director of breed improvement. Learning of Hubach’s extensive AI program, Crouch suggested he consider being a test herd and introduced him to C.K. Allen of Woodland Farms. Allen is the 2002 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award winner (see story on page 179).

“I wanted good females that would produce calves that grow and grade,” Hubach says, emphasizing the need for balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs). That goal had guided his selection for years, but being a test herd allowed for free use of some impressive genetics that seemed a perfect fit. Allen and Hubach agree on reference sires and test bulls for the program each year, considering pedigree and performance on any unproven sire.

“We try to take the luck out of it,” Hubach says. “I haven’t used a bull that I don’t feel comfortable with in the herd yet.”

The average conception rate from AI over the last 10 years has been 75%, and that has allowed for rapid genetic improvement. To capitalize on that, the Hubachs keep up to 70% of the best heifers for breeding. And to make room, they sell 7-year-olds — “our most productive cows,” Hubach notes.

He works with one of the youngest herds in the state, the average cow being a 4-year-old. “Most producers don’t like to mess with heifers,” Hubach says. And with a decade of predictable genetics thrown in, “we think we are selling them a problem-free kind of cow,” he adds.

Besides the advantage to the farm for rapid genetic improvement, Hubach also avoids selling old cows at hamburger prices. Data collected at the farm, in the feedlot and in the packing plant show how proven genetics can increase profits. “Our genetics are getting better every year,” Hubach says.

“If you don’t know what you are raising, you will be discounted,” he says, quoting what seedstock producers have told him for years. Hubach took heed to that warning.

“All of our calves can be sire-identified,” he explains. “If we run multiple bulls with the herd, they are full brothers.” Each calf is double-tagged at birth, one in the left ear for the dam’s sire and a tag in the right ear for the calf’s sire.

Allen buys the calves, excluding heifers kept as replacements, and feeds them in

partnership with Gregory Feedlots in Tabor, Iowa (see story on page 191). David Trowbridge, feedlot manager, says the Hubach calves are always in excellent health and have the genetics to work in the feedlot. “We would love to have more cattle perform as predictably as the Hubach cattle,” he says.

In fact, the Angus steers fed there last year graded 91% Choice or better with 55% accepted as *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) and 81% Yield Grades (YG) 1 and 2. The group earned an average of \$132.55 per head more than Select YG 2s on IBP’s Real Time grid. This year, despite unusual weather and markets, Hubach steers improved average quality grade to more than 93% Choice and lost only \$10.67. By comparison, those Select YG 2 steers were losing \$104.44 per head.

Prior to the Woodland Farms connection, Hubach steers fed at Van Meter Feedlot in Guthrie Center, Iowa, from 1997 to 1999, typically graded near 70% Choice, with 62% to 87% receiving YG 1s and 2s combined.

To make the most of carcass data and keep track of such a young herd, the Hubachs use the Cow Sense computer program. Kami enters the data that includes weaning and yearling weights, conception rates on cows and all health records. The record shows an increase in weaning weights, daily gains, conversion rates and a considerable improvement in carcass quality.

**“CAB sets the target a producer needs to strive for. That’s how we tie quality to the breed.”**  
— Johnnie Hubach

“Few commercial cattlemen get carcass data. Not only do the Hubachs get the data, but they are meeting CAB standards, and doing it way above average,” Allen says. “Their herd does exactly what it needs to do, and that is to produce the end product.”

The landscape may have changed some over the years in the northwestern Missouri hills, but Hubach’s ultimate

goals have not. “We always wanted to raise efficient, productive, easy-keeping cattle that result in consumers having a good experience when they eat beef,” he says.

Through the test herd program, Hubach has learned how to improve the genetic capability and value of his females, which in turn improves the quality that ends up on the plate. “It is our livelihood. We have to produce something people will continue to enjoy,” he says. “CAB sets the target a producer needs to strive for. That’s how we tie quality to the breed.”