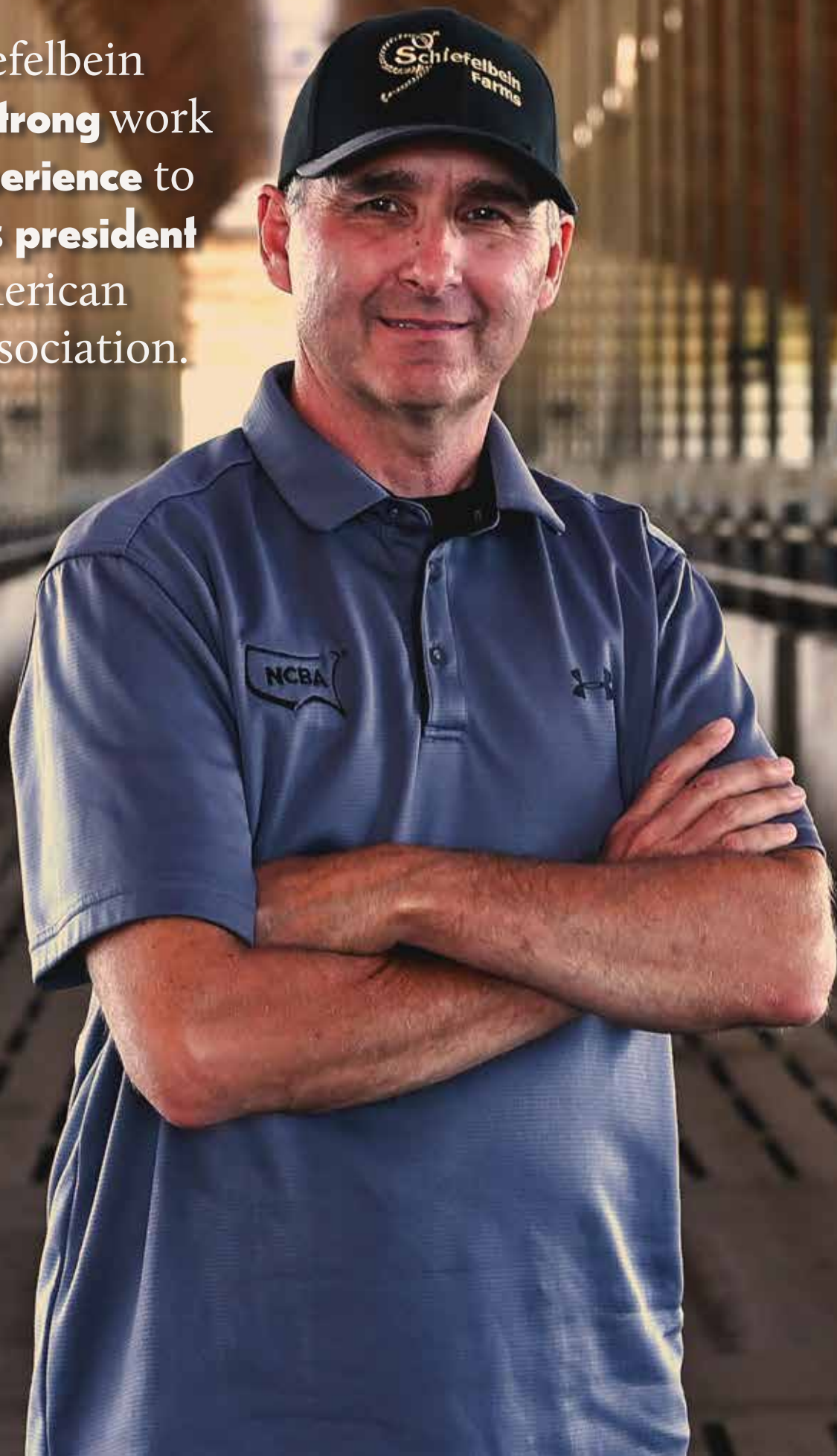


**Don** Schiefelbein brought **strong** work ethic, **experience** to his role as **president** of the American **Angus** Association.





# Make The **BEST** Of It

*Schiefelbein's life experiences shape his leadership both on and off the farm.*

*Story & photos by Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

It wasn't much like home. The cattle just a few feet outside his bedroom door were about the only things that felt familiar when 18-year-old Don Schiefelbein spent his first night as a freshman at Texas A&M University. Just earlier that day, the beef unit tack room was hastily converted into his new living space. It was hardly comfortable, but it was all that was available to the student who hadn't filled out his housing forms. An entire summer traveling on a harvest crew left Schiefelbein little time to prepare for the 1,200-mile journey south from his family's Kimball, Minn., farm to College Station, Texas, to start his animal science education.

"Everybody leaves and I'm in this room — it's a wreck. The ceiling's coming down. I got this old suitcase. My parents are gone. I got no way of getting ahold of them because they have no phone. I have no car. I have no place to eat. I don't have a meal plan. I got nothing," he says. "So I just sat there and said, 'What have I done?'"

He might have thought about it once or twice, but he didn't cry.

He looked around at his secondhand bed and rickety desk, finds from the university's surplus warehouse, and took note of one of the most important things he did have: his work ethic.

"Let's make this the best I can," Schiefelbein told himself. And so he did.

It's that "want to" attitude he's brought with him to nearly every challenge he's tackled and every opportunity he's seized since. He carried it into his eight years of service on the American Angus Association Board, and the presidency he wraps up this month.

## **Early competition produces drive**

In 1966, he was the seventh child — all boys — born to Frank and Frosty Schiefelbein. Two more came after.

"Growing up, we were always very competitive," he says. Being sandwiched between a 13-months-older "tough, strong" brother and the two-years-younger "super star" athletic standout led Schiefelbein to carve his own place. "You had to struggle to be good at something, so I took more the route of trying to use my brain."

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His plan was straight As and outthinking the next guy. Money was tight, but he knew he had to go to college.

“We grew up in dire times for the beef industry,” Schiefelbein says. American agriculture was hurting as a whole, but the breed they were raising — Angus — was extremely tough. Nationally, the all-time registration low hit just a couple years before his 1985 high school graduation.

By Christmas break of his freshman year at Texas A&M, Schiefelbein was out of financial aid. With no way to pay the spring tuition, he packed up and headed home.

Schiefelbein didn't figure he would get another chance at college ... until his father got a phone call from a professor who noticed the eager student was absent when classes resumed.

“It was 10 o'clock in the morning, and I was spreading straw, bedding the animals by hand, and Dad hollered at me and said, ‘Hey, Donnie, get up to the house. Mom's packing your stuff. You've got college, and they're already a week into it.’”

Howard Hesby and Gene King found a way to secure him a full-ride scholarship, and he reclaimed his tack-room living quarters (he continued to live there all four years of college, and half a year afterward as an employee).

## Get the big ones right

“My whole life was changed because two people cared,” Schiefelbein says. “I decided right then and there, ‘Boy, if you do hard work, you put your nose to the grindstone, people notice you and you'll get rewarded in life.’”

The rest of his college career was defined by time spent on the meats and livestock judging teams, working at the beef unit and fixing up the old farm truck he took back with him that first spring. It's a blur of studying and social gatherings that run one into the next, until the night his senior year when he met Jennifer Justiss.

A pair of sunglasses accidentally left behind at a party turned into a bargain.

“To get them back, it will cost you a date,” Schiefelbein retells of her skillful negotiation. It

was the first time he was blatantly asked out, and a year and a half later, Schiefelbein married the only woman he's ever dated.

“Whenever decisions come along, get the big decisions right,” he says. “Don't worry about the little ones, but make sure you get the big decisions right. The single biggest decision you make is who you're married to for eternity.

“Marrying Jennifer is the best thing that ever happened to me,” he says without hesitation.

## From “just average” to elite

After his new bride finished up her master's program, they made their life in Colorado where Schiefelbein somewhat accidentally went to work in youth activities for the North American Limousin Foundation.

“I didn't show sheep. I didn't show cattle. I had never been a part of any youth program ever in my life,” he says, but a board decision just days before he was to take a different position found himself learning the ropes. “That was my entry into the breed association world.”

It was also his introduction to a lifelong friend and a man who helped shape the Schiefelbein program from afar: geneticist Kent Anderson.

“I tell my girls, the greatest thing you can do as you move forward is to develop a web of life of individuals and learn from them,” Schiefelbein says. “So I got to meet Kent, and he was telling me about this new stuff called EPDs (expected progeny differences) and how they work. I didn't really know anything. He was my professor, if you will.”

The two friends stayed late at the office, often discussing the family operation back home and how these new prediction tools could potentially change the business. Schiefelbein was sold.

Bringing the commercial herd back to registered status was no easy feat. There was eight years' worth of records to track down from the period when bull sales tanked and papers seemed to carry no value. Date nights often saw Don and Jennifer at that same hand-me-down desk, now in their apartment, poring over data and entering it into spreadsheets.

“I caught up all of our registrations at my cost,”



he says, signaling his belief in their future. But when the numbers came back, they were just middle-of-the-road.

“My family was very skeptical of the numbers: ‘Well, none of these are right. Our cattle can’t be average.’”

Working for an association himself, Schiefelbein had heard that line before.

“It was a complete transformation of the farm in that period,” he says.

They started individually mating animals and using artificial insemination (AI) heavily.

“From Day 1, Dad always said, ‘If we’re in the beef business, we better raise good beef,’” Schiefelbein says. Yet, as they paid attention to the details, they were still getting paid exactly the same as those who didn’t care as much.

## Minnesota bound

That’s when the cattle-feeding enterprise was born. Schiefelbein and his brother Tim, who was working for a packer at the time, developed a customer buyback program, investing their own money in feeding Schiefelbein-sired calves. They “didn’t have much,” but they stretched it further by partnering on loads.

It increased customer loyalty, taught them more about how their own cattle worked for the next segments and gave the brothers a way to help the family business from afar.

“When you came back, you didn’t just come back automatically,” Schiefelbein says. “You had to come back with a plan of how you would add value to the operation.”

Don made a career stop as executive director for the American Gelbvieh Association, but when daughters Shelby, Abbey and Bailee came along, he knew the family’s time in the Denver suburbs was up.

When they say Schiefelbein Farms is a family business, they mean it. “Big” Frank and Frosty are pictured with all but five of the family members. Today that includes eight living sons and daughters-in-law, 32 grandkids and 26 great-grandkids.

“My lifelong goal was to get home. I really wanted to raise my kids in the country. It was absolutely paramount to me,” Schiefelbein says. Shelby was entering second grade when they moved to Kimball.

## Leadership: home and away

Getting a pacemaker put in created a thought in the back of his mind: nobody’s future is guaranteed. So Schiefelbein led the family through estate planning. He came out of the process as president of the farm, a title he considers a vote of confidence, but one he doesn’t take for granted.

“Every year there’s a reelection process,” he says. The vote has been the same each of the 15 years since.

The cattleman is quick to note the farm’s growth and improvements have come from everyone working together, no one single person’s efforts provide more value than the next person’s.

“It’s really unfair to the ones at home, because they all equally contribute to the farm’s success, so the only thing that bothers me is that I’m often the one in the spotlight,” Schiefelbein says. “From the brothers to the nephews to all the wives who offer their support — everybody deserves credit for making this thing run.”



The young family moved back to Minnesota in 2003 so they could raise their girls on the farm (left).

All grown now, (left to right) Abbey, Bailee, Don and Jennifer recently celebrated with Shelby as she married Connor Padgett.



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With seven of the nine “boys” on farm full-time, and several of the next generation, too, there are a lot of opinions in the room.

“The group rules the day,” he says, “but we seldom go to a vote. It becomes consensus because we don’t want anybody left behind.”

That applies to every decision, from building slat barns (“If you’re going to spend this many dollars on creating and buying back genetics, you don’t want Mother Nature to take any of that value away.”) to backgrounding cattle to moving their annual sale from South Dakota to the home farm.

Being part of that process prepared him for time on the Association’s board.

“If you believe I can bully anything through with seven strong-minded brothers ... zero chance,” he says. “We don’t make snap decisions here. It has to be a grinding process to get everybody up to speed, everybody comfortable.”

Don’t mistake that for a waffling sort of leadership style. Like his father, he’s direct and asks piercing questions, maybe not always politically correct, but always with good intentions.

At 54, he says he’s seen the breed at its worst and at its best.


“It’s got to get really bad before change occurs to make things really good,” says Schiefelbein, noting that can speak to many periods in Angus history. “You learn from it because it forces change.”

He says he’s leaving on a high note, and knows the Association is in good hands with upcoming leadership.

For all the tough conversations and added time spent on conference calls and in meetings, Schiefelbein wouldn’t trade the experience to go back to the level of engagement he had before.

“As our industry goes, so goes us,” he says. “If we aren’t working to make sure there’s a good stake in the industry for us, we’re really vulnerable because all of our eggs are in this basket. We’ve got to make sure there’s a basket to have.” **AJ**

*Editor’s note: Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for CAB.*



Don **Schiefelbein's**  
customer-first **mentality**  
is a hallmark of  
his **leadership.**