



Building *for the* Next Chapter

Change is the name of the season for retiring president

David Dal Porto

by Julie Mais, editor



The knock, knock, knock of a hammer and the occasional hum of a circular saw cuts through the quiet, calm afternoon. Final touches are being added to the white remodeled homestead — the first of the buildings to be updated, but second to the pastures where the herd of Angus cattle are grazing on prairie grass on the cusp of the Sandhills.

There's not a chair on the place yet, or a neighbor to be seen. We find a shady spot under a cottonwood tree.

David Dal Porto, who has built a herd, a family and the respect of his fellow breeders, starts from the beginning — one Angus heifer.

Dal Porto pauses as he thinks back, almost as if there wasn't a time before Angus cattle were in his life. He recalls at just 9 years old, standing alongside his dad and older brother in a pen of 15 to 20 Angus heifers owned by Tony Pacheco in Galt, Calif. TP Echo caught his eye.

"We all looked at them," he says. "Everybody had an idea, but this is the one that I wanted to pick."

His father owned an ag construction business and managed some commercial cows and a commercial feedlot at the time in Oakley, Calif. Though he had purchased a few Angus heifers for his brother, the family didn't have strong ties to the breed. Dal Porto says he couldn't explain it at his young age, he was just drawn to Angus cattle.

"I just liked the cattle that were all black and were polled," he remembers. "And once I had that first heifer, I never even considered going any other direction."

With a little help from family and friends, Dal Porto halter-broke Echo and took her to the county fair. As his small herd grew along with his knowledge, the young cattleman started showing across California.

"My dad would take and drop me off with my show cattle at a county fair," he says. "And usually my mom and dad would come for show day. Sometimes they didn't."

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And then they'd come pick me up with the stock trailer. I just met people, and as I got into it, I had a lot of swings and misses. But isn't that how you learn?"

His youth was also spent playing football and baseball — a balance enjoyed by his competitive spirit.

Following high school, Dal Porto took a self-described ranching "hiatus" to attend college nearly 150 miles away. Part of his small herd was sold with proceeds going to help pay tuition at Chico State University as he earned a degree in ag business management. Those early summer breaks were spent back home, so he could show cattle. In his fifth year at college, while taking fewer courses, Dal Porto worked for Shasta Livestock.

Right out of school and with a nudge from his mother, Dal Porto attended a nine-month ag lending training program. He was placed at a branch as an assistant manager.

"I did that for about a month, and I said, 'Nope, I am not doing this.' And so that was the end of that career," Dal Porto laughs.

He soon headed back to the home ranch to work for his father and again start building his Angus and commercial herd to what is now known as Dal Porto Livestock.



PHOTOS BY ERIC MULL, COURTESY OF CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF



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Today, Dal Porto and his wife, Jeanene, manage the full-time operation. Together they have three children, Lindsey, A.J. and Dawson.

Dal Porto Livestock hosted its 30th annual production sale this past September alongside Rancho Casino, owned by Dal Porto's longtime friend David Medeiros. They sold bulls private treaty for more than 12 years prior to the inaugural sale. Since the late 1990s, Dal Porto Livestock has retained ownership of the commercial steers and heifers and feeds them out at Beller Feedlot in Lindsay, Neb.

The stillness of this Nebraska day is in contrast to what his West Coast hometown has become. The bustling overflow of traffic and people from the east Bay Area is encroaching on the once unmistakably rural Oakley.

“We're only an hour and 15 minutes from San Francisco, but we were in a rural ag area,” he says. “There were cattle, there were dairies, there was farming, there were trees. And so I grew up around a bunch of farming and ranching kids. Then all the other people from town were somehow related to agriculture — all good people.”

He describes small-town Friday nights centered around friends, sports and the comfort of knowing your neighbors.

“Growing up in California was great,” he says. “Weather was great. People were great. But I've seen over time and really rapid change in the last 15 years where there's just so many people moving in, and we've got problems with noise and people complaining about smell and dust and dogs, and it's just changed.”

That change? Dal Porto says it felt instant.

“It was that you'll deal with more people when you're moving equipment down the road or moving cattle around on leased ranches or park ground,” he says. “And the traffic was bad. But then about 15

years ago, all of a sudden the traffic was just horrible.”

A route that once took him a half hour drive to check cows has tripled in time. Ranch work is now scheduled around commutes.

Adding on

Dal Porto wasn't through building his operation, but when looking to grow Dal Porto Livestock, he was met with reduced inventory and inflated cost.

“We looked around California first, but just decided we couldn't expand there,” he says. “We couldn't afford land — too expensive. It looked to us like some of the other states we might have been interested in were heading the same direction.”

Determined to move forward, the Dal Portos looked east. Though he can't determine exactly why he was drawn to Nebraska, some visits to Terry Beller and other Angus breeders he has partnered with in the past piqued his interest. He and Jeanene started the process of relocating Dal Porto Livestock headquarters to the Sandhills a few years ago — purchasing land, developing a moving plan and making sure the operation back in California will continue on.

“We just liked it and decided this is where we were coming, right or wrong,” he explains. “And we'll make a lot of mistakes along the way. It'll be interesting, but we'll learn from them. The people are great. Our neighbors are great. They'll do anything for you, try to teach you. So, it's been good. It's been really good.”

As he looks out over the new homestead, Dal Porto sees potential and a lot of learning in this new environment. Part of the herd has made the 28-hour journey to the Sandhills over the past year. The difference in weather, forages and water supply can be sweeping, but he's adapting and so are the cows.

“The cows are amazingly hardy,” he says. “It's just amazing to me. You can go out there and they can have four inches of snow all over them, and the eyes just look like they're freezing to death. And then the next day is nice weather, and they're just out eating. They're fine. They're pushing snow. California cows learned how to

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push snow pretty fast. Feed them good and take care of them. A cow's a cow. But it's more work back here. I do believe that."

The next chapter

Another chapter ends this fall as Dal Porto retires as president and chairman of the American Angus Association.

With the full support of his wife and family, Dal Porto ran for the Board of Directors and was elected in 2014. He saw a lot of change in the Association over the past seven years and has played a role in rebuilding the trust in the organization and culture.

"I've enjoyed every minute of it. I truly have," he says. "I couldn't have done any of it without my family. Jeanene stepped in so many times to take care of stuff when I travel, and Dawson and the guys that work for us. It's been a great experience. The family works hard for people that spend their time on the board."

As his tenure on the Board comes to a close, Dal Porto looks forward to getting back to building. The Dal Porto Livestock & Rancho Casino will host their 31st Annual Performance Angus Bull Sale in Denair, Calif., next September. He's already making plans to grow a customer

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base in the Plains. Dawson will join his parents in Nebraska to help manage the growing workload.

With A.J. and Lindsey remaining in California, it's not just Angus cows he'll be traveling back for — he is the granddad of two, a role he's proud of.

Dal Porto says it will be bittersweet once the headquarters are officially relocated as he'll see something he and his family built become part of the urban sprawl. Still, he's looking forward to the next chapter of building a herd, building relationships and building the Angus breed. **AJ**

