

The Cowboy at the Reins

American Angus Association members and staff will long remember the U.S. Marine, bull rider, cowpuncher and friend who guided the Association through turbulent times into its most productive and influential years to date.

by Keith Evans

Dick Spader came to the American Angus Association in the summer of 1969 riding a white Mustang (a Ford) and wearing a black hat. His Wrangler jeans and a few other clothes were in the back seat of the small car, along with a used TV. His prized possessions, his saddle and his good boots were safely stashed in the trunk.


Thin as a rail, all hard muscle and sinew, Spader fit the profile of a rodeo bull rider, and with good reason. He had ridden his share of bulls as a member of the rodeo team at South Dakota State University (SDSU) in Brookings. There he also earned a bachelor's degree in animal science, with a minor in agricultural journalism. Polite, quiet, self-effacing, but never intimidated, his manner reflected his three years spent as a U.S. Marine after graduating from high school.

Years later someone observed that it was debatable whether his experience as a U.S. Marine or as a bull rider provided him with the more valuable training needed to be executive vice president of the world's largest beef breed association. While he was single, he spent many of his evenings and weekends riding and training horses for people and helping work cattle. He was known simply as "Cowboy" to one old-time cattleman he helped.

No one would have guessed in 1969 that 12 years later this cowboy would be chosen to lead the American Angus Association through some of its darkest hours, then into its most productive and influential years to date.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SPADER FAMILY



► Dick Spader surveys his Angus herd near Rosendale, Mo.

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By the same token, no one was prepared for his untimely death 32 years later. A massive heart attack cut short a career that would have made him the longest-serving Angus Association executive officer. Still, he was executive vice president for 20 years, three and a half months, which is second only to the 21-year tenure of W.H. Tomhave from 1925 to 1946.

A people person

Born Richard L. Spader on Jan. 31, 1945, he grew up the

youngest of six children on the family farm near Howard, S.D. Hard work and accepting responsibility were early facts of life then. They stood him in good stead throughout his career. Maybe because of this background he was never one for formality.

During his career he met the Queen Mother of Great Britain, and socialized and worked with Angus and livestock leaders in many parts of the world. But he wanted to be known only as "Dick." He signed all his letters with the familiar nickname,

written above the formally typed signature line.

Spader paid his early Angus dues as an assistant in the public relations department. He wrote routine news releases, took photographs at cattle shows, developed the film and printed the pictures, then saw that they were mailed to the appropriate media. He was a good writer, and wrote and photographed Angus feature stories that appeared in a variety of publications.

"Early on Dick exhibited an uncanny sense of what needed to be done and in his own quiet way went about getting it done," said Robert "Bob" Snyder who was director of public relations when Spader was hired. In one way or another, this was one of the strong points that many people recalled about Spader's life.

Part of Spader's paying his dues in the early 1970s involved driving his boss (Snyder) and Jess Cooper, regional manager in Kansas and Oklahoma, on their inspection

and planning trips for the last of the Challenge of the Future Angus Tours.

"It was quite an introduction into the Angus business to hear them argue about the best way to conduct an educational tour. Sometimes I wondered what I had gotten into," Spader observed once. But he filed it all away and later, as executive vice president, used his knowledge and experience to help plan outstanding national Angus tours and national conferences. It was one of the many things he enjoyed about his job.

assistant director of public relations in 1970, Spader was still the low man on the totem pole in the three-member public relations department. Both senior public relations department staff members were relatively young. But at that time Spader could still pack all his belongings in his car and drive away to a new adventure.

A year later Spader met someone who would make him think more seriously about settling down. Her name was Sheri Coulter, a college student at the University of Illinois. Her parents were Angus breeders from Congerville, Ill.

Sheri was an Angus enthusiast who had shown numerous Angus steer and heifer champions. At the 1971 Illinois State Fair, however, she was wearing a dress, not jeans, and was keeping the books for the Angus show while serving as an Illinois Angus Ebonette. Ebonettes represented the Illinois Angus Association at Angus functions. This meant Sheri handed out the show ribbons and appeared in the championship pictures.

Spader was attending his first Illinois State Fair for the Angus Association, taking photographs of champions and gathering information for the news releases that he would write later. Accompanying Spader to the show was Jay Penick, manager of junior activities. The two had started with the Association just days apart in 1969 and often traveled together to Angus shows. "Dick," Penick said, "was quiet, but confident, and made a great first impression."

It worked for him that day.

Spader soon became intrigued with the attractive girl who was passing out the ribbons. Before the morning was out Spader told Penick, "I want to meet that girl with the legs." Penick, who knew the Coulter family and had worked with the children in



Richard L. Spader

Putting down roots

Despite being promoted to

junior activities, arranged an introduction. Dick and Sheri went to lunch and out on a date that night. That evening, after Dick brought Sheri to the girl's dorm where she was staying, she told a friend, "I've met the man I'm going to marry."

They dated at cattle shows through most of the following year. Dick covered every Angus event in Illinois for the next several months, yet still, according to him, wore out a set of tires driving back and forth on weekends.

They were married July 29, 1972, and moved to a farm north of Savannah, Mo., where they earned the rent by looking after a farm and a small herd of Angus cattle for a Saint Joseph businessman. Sheri taught school in Saint Joseph. A year and a half later they bought 40 acres near Rosendale, Mo., where they built a home, raised their family, and grew deep roots in the community.

Move to performance

In 1973 Spader made a career move and accepted a job as part-time assistant in the Association's breed improvement department while continuing his duties in public relations. It broadened his experience and allowed him to put his animal science training to work. He helped set up the first test herd for the new sire evaluation program, and helped publish the first *Angus Sire Evaluation Report*.

Four years later, in 1977, the Board approved a major staff reorganization, and Spader was named director of breed improvement. That fall Henry Gardiner, Ashland, Kan., was elected to the Association Board of Directors, and was named to the Association's breed improvement committee. Dick, according to Gardiner, was a good leader and always had his information together. Committee members Dale

Davis and Dave Pingrey, men who were firm in their convictions, would have some heated discussions, even arguments, with Spader about how to handle different aspects of the program.

"Dick could always hold his ground," Gardiner said. "He never wanted to publish trait leaders or indicate that one bull was better than another. He was always firm that the Association should supply as much information as possible but never dictate to members how to breed cattle."

During his years in the breed improvement department, the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) twice named the Association "Association of the Year" based upon its work in performance records. Spader presided over a number of firsts, including the introduction of field data sire evaluation.

In retrospect it appears as if nearly everything Spader did before the spring of 1981 was preparation for the work that came after. At the March 1981 Board of Directors meeting, the executive vice president resigned his post, leaving the Association without an executive officer. Almost immediately the Board, at the urging of president Myron Woolever, unanimously agreed to hire a new executive officer from within the Association, and to do it before they adjourned.

Staff members were asked to apply and interviews were set for the next day. Several people stated their interest,

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but Spader was not one of them, which disappointed Board members. That afternoon Gardiner told Spader, "If you have aspirations of ever having this job, now is the time to apply." Dick thought a while, Gardiner recalled, then said, "I have to go home and talk this over with Sheri."

Their decision was yes. He interviewed for the job and was hired almost on the spot.

"It was an easy choice," said William Conley, one of the Board members, and later president of the Association.

At the helm

Probably no one was more qualified to lead the Association through the next 20 years. Spader had broad experience in public relations and advertising, and in the performance records program. He had proven his ability to work with the Board and staff and to build consensus. He led the Association through continued declines in registrations that reached an unbelievable low of just more than 133,000 in 1986, before finally turning around and reaching more than 271,000 at the end of the century.

One of the first tests of Spader's leadership came in June 1981, at his first Board meeting as executive vice president. The cost of keeping Association regional managers on the road was growing as income and registrations declined. At the same time the *Angus Journal* advertising sales staff was too small to effectively cover the United States. But the Board of Directors and the regional managers had both resisted a program to combine the two staffs, making regional managers representatives of both the Association and the *Journal*.

Spader went into the Board meeting fully prepared. He had the financial figures that showed how difficult it would be to continue with two separate staffs. He also presented a plan to

combine the two staffs gradually, not forcing an unwelcome job on anyone. Three regional managers were ready to make the switch immediately. The Board members reluctantly approved his recommendation even though one member thought it was one of the worst things the Association could do at the time.

By 1983 most of the states were served by dual-role regional managers; the complete switch was completed in early 1985. Charles Cannon, a Board member and a friend of Spader's had opposed the change. In an interview last year Cannon said, "Looking back, it was the thing to do."

Spader encouraged, even promoted, the full utilization of field data to generate EPDs on virtually all cattle registered by the Association. He then made sure it was available to everyone. When most people and most associations wanted to charge for the *Angus Sire Evaluation Report*, he convinced the Board and staff to give it away. Commercial cattle producers appreciated the generosity and responded by using the report to select more Angus bulls for their herds.

The Board of Directors trusted and respected Spader. They welcomed his insight and advice. Howard Hillman who worked with Spader for eight years as a director and officer said that Board members appreciated his carefully thought-out comments and judgment as they worked their way to decisions on issues.

"Dick would analyze an issue and present his ideas in a calm and professional manner without making Board members feel like they needed to see it his way," Hillman said. "He was well-organized and brought issues to the Board in a timely manner."

Spader worked just as effectively with his staff. He never gave orders or ultimatums, yet he always got



► Executive Vice President of the American Angus Association since March 1981, Richard L. Spader, died Oct. 13, 2001.

his point across. His ability to recognize a potential problem before it occurred was one of his trademarks. For example, in 1983, while still a relatively new executive officer, Spader concluded that the Association's advertising program needed new consultants. The change would mean the breaking of long-term ties. But the change was made and resulted in the highly successful elephant-ad campaign and subsequent advertising campaigns that helped redefine the industry's approach to cattle breeding.

Regional manager Jim Shirley says he regarded Spader as more of a team player than a boss. "When he was with you he made you feel that you were the most important member of the Angus team," Shirley said. "We worked together to accomplish whatever task was at hand."

Chuck Grove, regional manager, and manager of the National Western Angus Sale, may have put it best. "He made us all feel like we worked with him, not for him."

All with a sense of humor

His sense of humor endeared him to many and helped smooth over some of the rough or emotional bumps at the Association.

Susan Shoup, associate director of public relations in the 1990s, had just announced her engagement to an Illinois farm boy and her resignation from her job. Spader walked into her office to inquire if she knew the secret of a long and lasting marriage.

"No," Susan said, "what is it?" With a grin, Spader answered, "A good set of working corrals."

Spader's ability to meet and influence people of all walks of life was described this way by one of his employees:

"He could visit the White House, and when he left, George W. would turn to Laura and say, 'Isn't that the nicest man you ever met?' A day later he could be on the plains of South Dakota, visiting a struggling ranch family. Standing on the front porch of their clapboard house as Spader walked away, the old rancher would turn to his wife and say, 'Isn't that the nicest man you ever met?'"

Despite his outgoing personality and his true love for people, Dick Spader was a private man. Most of us, even his closest friends, knew only a part of him — that part which involved each of us. One thing that all of us will cherish is that through it all he was the nicest man we ever met.