



# 2006 Herdsman of the Year

Dameron takes home top prize at 100th NWSS.

*Story & photos by Meghan Soderstrom*

If management is doing things right and leadership is doing the right things — as business writer Peter Drucker says — then it's easy to see why Jeff Dameron's cattle management and leadership skills earned him the 2006 Herdsman of the Year Award.

Jeff, a native of central Illinois, received the award at the 100th National Western

Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo., after winning the popular vote from his Angus-producing peers. Along with his father, Gary, Jeff operates Dameron Angus Farm in Lexington, Ill.

"There are two basic qualifications for winning this award," says Jerry Cassidy, an American Angus Association regional manager who has known Jeff since he was

a member of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA). You need to prove you can fit, feed and show cattle like a pro. Secondly, you have to maintain genuine relationships with competitors and others in the Angus industry.

"If you're missing one of those elements, you're not going to win," Cassidy

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continues. "Jeff is very well-respected, and he's very skilled."

Business partner and childhood friend Alan Miller of Le Roy, Ill., agrees. "This is a fitting award to pay tribute to what he has done," Miller says.

Colleagues call Jeff an "unparalleled showman," a "dedicated herdsman," a "focused competitor" and a "savvy businessman." Plus, they say, he produces cattle that are nothing but excellent.

### Family tradition

For the Damerons, Angus is a family affair. Jeff officially got his start in the Angus business when he began showing cattle as a junior member along with his two older siblings, Jay and Christy, and his younger sister Julie.

"Showing cattle was one of those events

that we all looked forward to, because it got us away from home and in an environment where we weren't focusing on some of our life challenges," Jeff says. "It was a family event. That's probably one of the reasons that this cattle thing means so much to me.

"My dad is probably responsible for me getting involved with Angus cattle. He's the one that originally started breeding and raising Angus cattle," Jeff continues. "He's always been extremely passionate about Angus cattle, and I guess that kind of wore off on me."

Gary started the family cattle operation in the 1960s and served the industry as president of the Illinois Angus Association and the American Angus Association. Angus leadership became a family tradition when Jeff, Christy and Julie each served on the NJAA Board.

"I really enjoyed the junior association a lot when I was growing up, especially serving on the board," Jeff says. "It gave me valuable experience away from home and a chance to meet people from all over the country."

### In his blood

Those who know Jeff say he has hardly changed since his days as a junior member.

"Jeff has always had that same sense of focus. When he was younger, he enjoyed having a good time, but he always worked before he did that," says James Fisher, Association director of junior activities. Fisher served as the advisor of Jeff's 1991-1993 NJAA Board.

Miller says that Jeff's "drive and persistence — and even a little stubbornness — were traits that were obvious even when he was younger."

After outgrowing the NJAA and graduating from the University of Illinois-Champaign (U of I) with a bachelor's of science in ag business, Jeff worked in farm management for a few years. After dating at U of I, Jeff married Jennifer Sherlock in 1998.

Jeff spent nearly a decade in chemical sales and marketing, but says he "always owned cattle." After living in Indiana for four years, Jeff and Jennifer moved back to Illinois.

"I wanted to get back here to the farm, and it just worked out well for both of our careers," Jeff says. "If you grow up in it, you can't get cattle out of your blood. You have to come back.

"A lot of the people that you meet in the business are the people that I sure enjoy being around. And, that's probably kept me involved with it, in addition to having some success in the showring, which always makes it fun," he continues.

In mid-2003, Jeff came home to work at the family business and help manage its 180 head of seedstock cows.

### Business savvy

To be a good herdsman, you have to do more than win purple ribbons — it all starts at home.

"Jeff has dedicated his whole life to cattle. He works hard on the farm, and that's what makes his cattle look good on the show road," says Brad McCurry of Mount



**Above:** "He is absolutely unparalleled when it comes to showmanship," Alan Miller says.

**►Right:** Jeff Dameron (left) received the Herdsman of the Year Award from James Fisher at the 2006 NWSS. Jeff says, "If you grow up in it, you can't get cattle out of your blood."



Hope, Kan., who judged the 2005-2006 National Angus Show and super-point Roll of Victory (ROV) show at the NWSS.

"Jeff's very good at knowing cattle and knowing what they're supposed to look like. So, when it comes to fitting them and feeding them, that knowledge pays off very well for him," Miller says.

Cassady says Jeff was a good businessman even as a youth. "Even though he was a junior, he treated it as a business with the same seriousness that an adult would."

Working in off-farm businesses for more than a decade taught Jeff management skills that he now uses on the family farm, Cassady explains. "He's hired the right people, and he has a good rapport with his crew."

Miller says most of the Dameron Angus crew comes back year after year. "I think that's a pretty good illustration of how dedicated they are and the kind of person that Jeff is."

### Earning respect

If you ask Jeff why he won the Herdsman Award, he'll point to everyone but himself.

"I was honestly humbled by the award, because I'm not sure I deserve it," he says. "We've had a lot of really good customers over the past years — customers that are good to work with on a lot of different levels.

"Plus, we've had a lot of really good people that have helped us through the years in fitting cattle and marketing cattle and going to the shows. I'd sure like to take all the credit, but I certainly can't," he says.

Dameron Angus believes in a "team approach when it comes to work," Jeff says. "Scott Wall has been a huge asset to our operation. And Brett [Barnard] has helped our family farm for a long time, maybe 10 years."

Fisher says the Herdsman Award is "based on the respect that other showmen across the country have for the winner." He says the high value that Jeff places on relationships surely helped him win the award.

"It's about the relationships

that they build with fellow exhibitors. It's how they interact with the other people in the barn, whether it's a first-time exhibitor or someone who has been showing a lifetime," Fisher says.

"And, it's not just judged at the National Western," he's quick to point out. "It's judged at every show, by every participant across the country."

### In the showing

Jeff's good management skills and relationship with his crew certainly aren't put to waste when he enters the showing. Jeff's talent as a showman earned him

second place at the 1993 National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest. Five years later, his younger sister Julie also vied for the top showman award.

"When she won that showmanship contest, that was probably one of my prouder moments," Jeff says. Cassady speculates that Jeff's coaching helped her win the title.

Though many years have passed since his showmanship competition days, time has only improved his flair and finesse with a showstick.

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**► Left:** Jeff says, "There's probably two dozen good people that I've watched fit cattle and picked things up from them."

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comes to showmanship," Miller says. "Having worked with him for years and helping him fit a lot of cattle, I've seen him show hundreds and hundreds of animals. There's nobody better — without a doubt."

Jeff's adeptness at fitting is also a showing asset. "He's very competitive and wants to fit the cattle so they look the best they can, which gives you a real advantage in the showing," says Wall, Dameron Angus' assistant herdsman.

Though he can't pinpoint one person who taught him how to fit, Jeff says, "There's probably two dozen good people that I've watched fit cattle and picked things up from them."

Friends describe Jeff as a serious and focused competitor. At the 2006 NWSS ROV show, Dameron Angus won reserve grand champion bull and spring heifer calf champion, along with three first-place and three second-place wins. The breeder's best six head award also went to Dameron Angus.

"I'm probably as intense and competitive as anybody else out there on show days," Jeff

admits. However, he says with a laugh, "I'm not as bad as I once was."

### The other side of the ring

Jeff has entered the showing as a judge as well as a competitor. He and his dad judged the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) ROV Angus Show in Louisville, Ky., in 2004.

"He's a young up-and-comer in the industry, not just because of this award, but because of his judging, too," McCurry says. "He's judged quite a few shows, and he's going to continue to be asked to judge quite a few more."

Cassady says Jeff "approaches judging with the same focused demeanor and sense of pride as any other Angus activity he's a part of."

"I think it's fun to go out there and have an opportunity to sort through cattle and share my opinions," Jeff says.

Jeff says his time in the showing, whether he's a competitor or a judge, is time spent well for the family business. "The showing has been a huge marketing tool for us, without a doubt. And, I think

it's an important marketing tool for the entire Angus breed.

"As a marketer of Angus cattle, I think it's great to have people who are interested in the showing, and it's great to have people interested in the carcass side of the industry. But, those cattle don't have to be different," he explains. "I think it's our challenge to help [customers] be able to get the best of both worlds."

### Looking ahead

Jeff hopes future generations will continue the family tradition of Angus. Though son Jack is only 3½, and daughter Anne just turned 1, Jeff says he looks forward to his children growing up showing cattle and being involved in the NJAA.

In addition to his cattle management and leadership skills, this 2006 Herdsman of the Year has a valuable philosophy to pass on: "You win; you lose. You learn to understand that some things are out of your control. You do the best job you can and look forward to the next show." 

