

Consolidating an Angus Advantage

Rice Consolidated High School FFA students continue their winning tradition.

by Rebecca Thomas

I've flown to Houston and driven an hour to get to the south Texas town of Altair. As I roll through this rural community I recall a conversation I had with vocational agriculture instructor Monte Williams.

"We have a real legacy at Rice Consolidated High School," he said. "When it comes to the commercial steer contests at

the Houston Livestock Show and the San Antonio Livestock Exposition, the winning tradition is at Rice."

Other FFA and 4-H youth from 30, 50, even 130 miles away drive to Altair to prepare and study with Rice Consolidated FFA team members.

Williams didn't start the program, but

with the help of a continuing crop of motivated young people, he builds on that foundation. "Papa" Troy Krenek started the tradition back in the 1960s, Williams told me, when he led the students of Rice Consolidated to 17 wins out of 18 attempts at Houston. His dedication, commitment and practical application of feeding tactics can still be felt in these halls.

After introductions to the 12 team members, Williams tells me to "grill these kids; they aren't prepared for the interviews like they should be." From my meeting with Rice juniors Jess Little and Chad Mahalitc, I can't tell what they dread more — the speech they will have to give in San Antonio or the interviews in Houston.

"We are scored on systems that incorporate a quiz, a speech or interview, record book, steer grade, cost per pound of gain, average daily gain, and feed conversion," Mahalitc explains. He passes me a copy of his speech for San Antonio, which neatly ties in all the current buzzwords of the industry.

High stakes

High-dollar prizes and bragging rights keep the competition stiff. In Houston, the first-place winner will receive a Ford F-150 pickup. The second-place competitor takes home a 20-foot (ft.) fifth-wheel stock trailer, and third place receives a set of electronic scales. San Antonio offers thousands in scholarship dollars.

The Houston Junior Commercial Steer Feeding and Management Contest is focused on records and live evaluation for the overall winners, but it also has a retail meats identification (ID) competition and what Williams calls "mega-intense interviews."

In San Antonio's Junior Commercial Steer and "Pasture to Packer" contests, carcass data follows live evaluation, which follows ultrasound and the speech contest. Both competitions have a written test.

Sourcing the right steers is a critical point in this long process. Most Rice students begin preparing for their commercial steer experience in the seventh or eighth grade. "A student won't win the contest the first or second year," Williams says. "It takes that long to learn enough to compete well."

Angus acclimation

Williams says 35 steers will go to San Antonio, and 24 steers will show in Houston. "We've tried the gamut of breeds for these



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RICE CONSOLIDATED HIGH SCHOOL FFA

► Prior to competing at the Houston Stock Show, the Rice Consolidated High School team prepares for game time by checking on the computer for the latest industry information. "When it comes to the commercial steer contests at the Houston Livestock Show and the San Antonio Livestock Exposition, the winning tradition is at Rice," says Monte Williams, vocational agriculture instructor.

► In 2002, Rice team members won grand and reserve grand steer pens at the San Antonio Commercial Steer Show but finished a little further back in the Pasture to Packer carcass side of the contest. This year, it was the other way around. Pictured are (front row, from left) Dane Krenek, Tiffany Varley, Jacob Engstrom, (middle row, from left) Jamie Till, Kaylyn Boenisch, Camille Staff, Jess Little, (back row, from left) Chad Mahalitc, Andrew Varley and Dustin Krenek.



two contests," he says. "Colorado County [Texas] has been Charolais and Limousin country," often with a touch of Brahman. Producers were convinced that "a touch of exotic is needed here," Williams says. "We're talking swamps and palmetto thickets, you know."

A shift toward Angus began when Williams took the reins at Rice Consolidated five years ago. "We were thinking 'industry,' but we made some mistakes." This year, all the cattle used were purebred Angus or Angus crosses. What's the difference between now and then?

"We're selecting genetics that are more suited for this region, and more producers are using Angus cattle in south Texas. That means they are becoming more acclimated. They are doing well." Williams and the students look farther north to source cattle, too. "We're not afraid to make calls to Colorado or even Montana these days," he says. Best of the Breed (BoB) Angus carcass results have him canvassing some Kansas herds as well.

Prominent area rancher Joe Mike Spanihel, Eagle Lake, Texas, shows me his pens of steers ready to be shipped to the feedyard, and they include Angus crosses. He's not convinced all Angus cattle will fit this environment, but scanning the pens and the pastures, you see lots of black-hided Angus cattle. Spanihel says, "They tend to seek shade for one or two generations, then start to acclimate a bit."

Fast-forward

It will take years to see how successive generations of Angus cattle adapt to southern Texas, but we can fast-forward to results for the younger generation of producers at the two 2003 contests.

Williams and the students at Rice Consolidated defended the school's tradition with another excellent showing. They didn't win the truck or trailer, but 4-H'er Christian Schroeder, Georgetown, Texas, who studies with the Rice team, repeated his 2002 third-place finish in the Houston contest.

Eight places are listed on the Houston Livestock Show results Web page for the contest, and four of them studied with the Rice team. Andrew Varley and Jess Little won fifth and sixth, respectively. Roxanne Herbrich, of nearby Weimar FFA, placed eighth in the main contest and second in retail beef cut ID, where Little and Varley were third and fourth. Camille Staff won the best Record Book award.

Williams says Jacob Engstrom, who won Rookie of the Year at the 2003 San Antonio Junior Commercial Steer Show as an eighth grader in Junior FFA, has an excellent shot at winning Senior Rookie of the Year at



► Eight places are listed on the Houston Livestock Show results Web page for this contest, and four of them studied with the Rice team. Roxanne Herbrich (left), of nearby Weimar FFA, placed eighth in the main contest and second in retail beef cut identification. Camille Staff won the best Record Book award.



► Rice and Weimar FFA teams train together to compete in the contests, which score the youth on systems that incorporate a quiz, a speech or interview, record book, steer grade, cost per pound of gain, average daily gain, and feed conversion. Pictured are (front row, from left) Kaylyn Boenisch, Dane Krenek, Jamie Till, Jacob Engstrom, (middle row, from left) Kyle Poppe of Weimar FFA, Tiffany Varley, Jess Little, Roxanne Herbrich of Weimar FFA, Andrew Varley, (back row, from left) Tyler Treptov of Weimar FFA, Dustin Krenek, Camille Staff and Chad Mahalitic.

Houston next year, though he'll be a freshman. "Jacob could win the truck his sophomore year," Williams says, applying measures of praise and pressure.

San Antonio and beyond

In 2002, Rice team members won grand and reserve grand steer pens at San Antonio, but they finished a little further back in the Pasture to Packer carcass side of the contest. This year, it was the other way around.

Staff, who won reserve in the combination ultrasound/live show last year as a sophomore, placed third this year with a couple of steers that went on to win reserve champion in Pasture to Packer. When the carcass data were tallied, one of her Angus steers that tipped the scales at 1,249 pounds (lb.) live weight, dressed at 66.1% with 0.40 inch (in.) external fat, a 15.1-square-inch (sq. in.) ribeye and a 2.21 Yield Grade (YG). The carcass graded mid-Choice, which would

qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

Little, whose Charolais-Angus steers ranked 14th in the live show, claimed championship honors in the Pasture to Packer pen with the second-place and 17th-place steers. Teammate Tiffany Varley's steers were fourth, and although Mahalitic's pen finished well back at 33rd, his family sold the steers to Staff, Varley and other Rice team members. More than \$2,000 in scholarship money went to Rice Consolidated students.

"Looks like Angus-influence cattle will work anywhere," Williams says with his characteristic grin. The proof is in what happens on the ranch, he says. That's why he finished the spring semester by drilling students in a 12-station pasture and in a beef management program that includes finances. "Kids have to quit being afraid to talk to bankers," he says.

