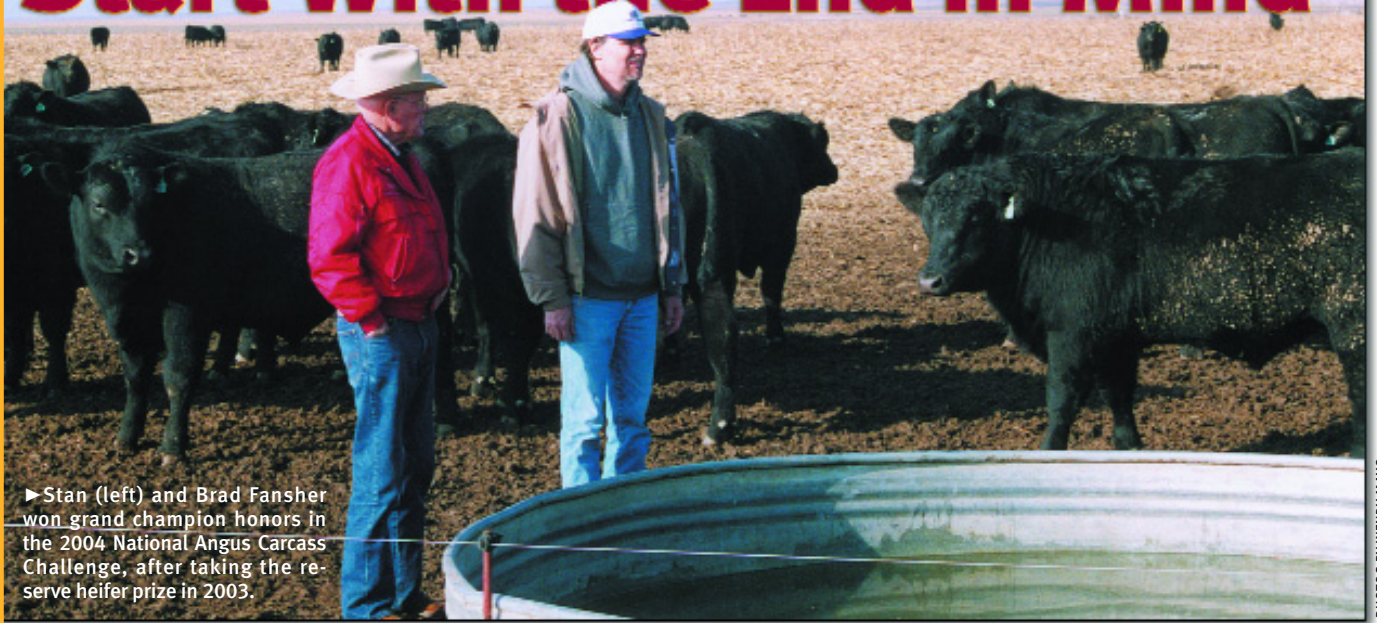


# Start With the End in Mind



► Stan (left) and Brad Fansher won grand champion honors in the 2004 National Angus Carcass Challenge, after taking the reserve heifer prize in 2003.

PHOTOS BY WENDY MAYO

## Fansher Farms built the top NACC herd with 36 years of feedlot experience.

by *Steve Suther & Wendy Mayo*

**F**ifty years ago, Stan Fansher was managing Brookover Feedyard, Garden City, Kan. The 1,200-head pioneer enterprise catered to the Herefords common at the time. The yard avoided Angus because, Fansher says, “the kind we got from sale barns, you couldn’t put much weight on their short frames.”

By the time he left the feedlot in 1988, it was a 40,000-head giant that had seen Angus win their way in, first by crossbreeding with the Herefords, then with the parade of Continental breeds. A decade later, the feeding industry saw Angus win their way into the pens as purebreds.

Stan saw it all. He fed Gardiner Angus

Ranch (Ashland, Kan.) cattle and saw a new, performance-oriented type of Angus. He fed Sitz Angus (Harrison, Mont.) cattle and saw generations of ranch performance that never indulged in the short frame trend.

When his son, Brad, came home with a veterinary medicine degree and no desire to “hang up a shingle,” the father-son duo decided to buy a few Gardiner and Sitz cows. They aimed to produce Angus seedstock well-adapted to the High Plains, with its short-grass pastures, feedlots and packing plants. You could say they won their way in.

### Taking the lead

Winning grand champion honors in the 2004 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) was a measure of their success, after taking the reserve heifer prize in 2003. “We always enjoyed competition at the feedlot,” Stan recalls. “We liked to have customers send a gate-cut to our yard and to others. We almost always won.”

The Fanshers are quick to admit winning the NACC doesn’t mean they have the elite genetics of the breed. “We’re in the shadow of some mighty good outfits,” Stan says. But, winning says they are on the right track, he allows.

Good cattle find their true value in the market. “Buyers tried to discount the first Angus-Hereford crosses, but with better

performance, it wasn’t too long before they had to give a premium. You can’t fool people very long,” Stan says.

“About the time I left the feedyard, as expected progeny differences (EPDs) were coming out, Angus people discovered they could add the growth and frame of Continentals, yet keep the carcass,” he notes. “They kept their eyes on the carcass all the time, and Certified Angus Beef (CAB) led the troops.”

Packers created growing demand for Angus, Stan says. “They always liked Angus cattle, but back in my feedyard days, packers preferred to sort them in the plant. Now that we have the grids, we get a more direct premium for quality.”

### Expanding the program

The Fanshers added Jorgensen Land & Cattle (Ideal, S.D.) genetics as they steadily expanded the herd and started a commercial herd with stock from Ross Mosier of Spalding, Neb.

With Brad’s veterinary skills, artificial insemination (AI) was central to the program, and the proven cows spread their influence by embryo transfer (ET) through commercial cows. Today, the Fanshers run 800 cows, half of them registered Angus. Most are fall-calving.

They have finished their calves at neighbor Sam Hands’ Triangle H Grain & Cattle Co., Garden City, Kan., since 1990, but have also developed a relationship with



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custom backgrounding and farming neighbor Doug McGraw, Garden City.

"We are short-handed for all that we try to do," Brad says. "This has evolved to a low-labor operation because that is where we find ourselves." The Fanshers hire students from Garden City Community College for occasional help, and McGraw's family rotates cows through irrigated pastures and opportune feeds to fit their needs through the year. Brad took care of all the AI for 12 years, but began to hire custom help from the area's growing number of dairies a few years ago.

A broad, balanced approach to genetic selection built the herd. "Any breeder has a tough time deciding what bulls to use," Stan says. "A lot of those that are publicized the most kind of fail the test out here, but others are pretty good, consistently." Brad, who has made all final breeding decisions, says bulls have to be able to do it all.

"We look at carcass pretty closely," he says. "We also want low to moderate birth weight and growth — the curve-bender type — as we always keep heifers out of heifers."

Their environment adds a challenge that sets this operation apart from most Angus producers. Finney County is historically one of the top cattle-feeding counties in the U.S., with much more cropland than pasture, so providing for 800 cows is more difficult than simply turning them out on grass.

"Working with Doug, we use a lot of cornstalks, volunteer wheat, crabgrass, Sudan and oat pasture — whatever we can make on irrigated farmland," Stan explains.

"Most of our customers are within a couple hundred miles, in similar or tougher conditions, so the cattle have to thrive in less-than-ideal environments," Brad says. "We don't want too big a cow or too much milk, but easy fleshing and moderate. Some bulls push the milk, but we monitor their daughters' body conditions. It's the same with frame."

### Focusing on balance

Customers appreciate the focus on balance. Most of them sell at weaning, but those who retain ownership get the full benefits. Roland May, Oberlin, Kan., knew Brad from Kansas State University classes and bought his first bulls from the Fanshers at their first bull sale in 1995.

"We have 400 cows and finish all [of the calves] except the replacement heifers on the farm," May says. "We raise the corn, and it's a good use of labor."

A small farmer-feeder could not attract cash packer buyers, so May started grid

marketing. "We found out our cattle graded pretty well and joined U.S. Premium Beef when it came along."

The grid rewards high quality, and that has been May's target. "The last four bulls we got from Fanshers were their highest %IMF (intramuscular fat) bulls," he notes. "We have had a \$142-per-head premium for one load, and averaged \$70 per head last year for our 92% Choice or better cattle. *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) and Primes will run 45% to over 50%. We'd like to get another third of a notch up the Choice scale, so we would really hit the CABs, but we're still working on that," May says.

He figures the calves gain about 3.5 pounds (lb.) per day, based on weaning, yearling and carcass weights. After weaning, calves start on roughage and work up to the concentrate ration for harvest at 14 to 16 months of age. "Once in a while we'll have a Yield Grade (YG) 4, but our ribeyes are pretty good size, so that helps keep it under control, always below plant average," May notes.

May's production goals dovetail with his seedstock supplier: moderation, balance and high-value carcasses. "If we sold at weaning, we might choose different bulls, but we look for the ones that can do it all. We find them at Fanshers."

Another customer, Larry Jones, JO Cattle Co., Holcomb, Kan., buys from both Gardiner and Fansher. "Mainly, I look at the EPD and \$B (Beef Value Index) numbers," he says. "That's the way we select our bulls. The Fanshers' bloodlines provide what we want, including moderate size. We run 800 cows in New Mexico, so we don't want a big old cow."

Like May, Jones develops replacement heifers and finishes all calves on the ranch. "We look for an animal that will be high in marbling score, but we are not real concerned about weaning weight, as we retain ownership through the system. We do want performance in the feedlot.

"Since the Angus Association has come out with the beef values, I look at those a lot, and the new Calving Ease Direct (CED) and Maternal (CEM) indexes," Jones says. "We see those in the Fansher genetics."

Jones' calves are born the first of March and harvested at 14-16 months. "We run the replacements on wheat," he says. "The steers are on a grower ration for a while, but they go right on feed after the first of the year. We track performance all the way, and the trends are headed in the right direction." These trends include daily gains of greater than 4 lb.



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Jones is not satisfied with a Choice percentage in the low 70s, and he has taken steps to ramp that up significantly. "The last three years we have used ultrasound to screen females, raising the requirement score every year. That should help us bring our Choice percentage into the 90s and CAB acceptance along with it as we grow to 1,000 cows," he says.

### Competing at the top

To provide more 18-month-old bulls for range pastures, the Fanshers have built up their fall-calving herd throughout the last several years. They have also finished more cattle at Triangle H since the grid premiums for quality increased. Besides quality, they found performance.

"The first bunch of heifers we fed in 2000 came off wheat, gained 4.19 pounds for 127 days and graded 85% Choice," Stan recalls. "I don't know what most cattle do, but I know that's good. We have done a little more finishing since then." That includes participation in the NACC since 2003.

The family offers up to 100 AI-sired, gain-tested and locally adapted bulls each spring in what Brad calls an informal, "open house" sale. "We have a local, not a national, market for our breeding stock," he says. "At our open house, the auction is by pen. After each bid-off, if nobody wants another at that price, we start it over again at the base," Brad continues.

They don't usually sell out. "If the weather doesn't cooperate or farmers are busy, they may call later and need bulls," Stan says. "We've got ammo when they need it."

The Fanshers will continue to enter the NACC, and they encourage customers to do likewise. "Competition is a good thing," Stan says. "Our cattle speak for themselves when it comes to the end product. That's all we can ask."

