

A Rare Commodity

Passion for the Angus seedstock business and commitment to his customers are hallmarks of 2006 American Angus Association President Ben Eggers.

Story & photos by Shauna Rose Hermel



Ben Eggers has approached his role as a director and officer of the American Angus Association much the same as he approaches his role in directing the genetic future of Sydenstricker Genetics — with deliberate action based on thorough understanding fueled by a deep-rooted passion for the industry.

“Ben’s in-depth knowledge of performance programs, his understanding of the commercial cattle industry, and his skill in breeding some of the breed’s top genetics make him a rare commodity,” says fellow Board Member Richard Tokach, Saint Anthony, N.D. Angus breeders are the true

CONTINUED ON PAGE 98

► “It’s my life,” Ben Eggers says of the Angus business. Ben is manager of Sydenstricker Genetics, a 750-cow Angus herd located near Mexico, Mo.

A Rare Commodity CONTINUED FROM PAGE 97

winners when they are represented by a Board member with the intelligence, integrity, foresight and passion for the breed that Ben exhibits, he adds.

Quiet, studious and methodical, Ben is known among his peers for his listening skills and effort to include everyone in discussion, as well as his ability to analyze a situation and build consensus for decision-making.

“His strongest asset as a leader is his ability to listen,” says Bob Norton, chairman of the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Board of Directors. “I’ve watched Ben participate in

many discussions, some on extremely challenging topics. Although he had his own thoughts relative to the topic, he always listened to the opinions expressed by others.”

Sometimes he changed his mind; sometimes he didn’t, Norton adds. “Ben always listens with an open mind, and that is an absolute requisite of a leader.”

Former Association President Minnie Lou Bradley of Memphis, Texas, agrees. “Ben had the ability to see all sides of an issue,” she explains. “No matter his personal thoughts or beliefs, he still could weigh the issues with an open mind.”

“When Ben gets in deep thought, his face looks like a ’possum passing a persimmon pit,” says

former Board President and “Southern sage” Joe Elliot of Adams, Tenn. “When he gets that look off of his face, he speaks with a voice of reason.”

While there’s a time for listening and gathering details, the 54-year-old cowhand from Mexico, Mo., also knows there’s a time for making decisions and taking action.

“As Board Members, we all want to do what is best for the Angus breed and our membership,” Tokach says. “How we best achieve that sometimes leads to some lively discussions. With his choice of words and calming demeanor, Ben has gotten us back on track and closer to our goals numerous times.”

Ben’s intelligence, experience and patience are his strongest assets as a leader, says former Board Member Mark Gardiner of Ashland,

► “We actually breed our spring herd drastically different than our fall herd,” Ben says, explaining the spring herd is mated to produce calving-ease sires with birth weight EPDs of +2 or less. The fall herd is bred to produce big-framed, stout, growthy performance bulls.



► **Above:** Ben transfers notes from his palm pilot (a.k.a., the back of a can of Copenhagen®) to his job board (a.k.a., Post-it® notes on the cabinets in his office.)

► **Left:** Research shows a cow will naturally try to have a calf that is 7% of her body weight, so if the cow weighs 1,500 lb., that translates to a 105-lb. calf, Ben explains. “You can tweak it a little bit genetically, but if the cow supplies half of the genetics and all of the environment, there’s a limit to how much you’re going to move those cows.”

Kan. “He is extremely capable of taking the information and helping everyone understand the issues to arrive at the best decision, while simultaneously not rushing others to a decision before they are comfortable with it.”

“Ben handled challenging situations with a calm demeanor, but with a toughness that allowed the Board to make a decision and move forward,” adds Association Vice President Jot Hartley, Vinita, Okla. “He was a fantastic diplomat this year when it was sorely needed.”

He has proved himself to be patient, decisive, persistent, maybe a little stubborn, and definitely not afraid to go his own way. He got an early start.

Finding his own path

“I don’t know how anybody can expect to make money off a cow without milking her,” Ben’s dad said of his son’s 4-H project early on. A dairyman, Bill Eggers, now deceased, never believed in the beef business, but he tolerated it, Ben says. And he and his wife, Edith, helped their son begin a 4-H project that would have a lasting impact on the Angus industry — both from a genetics standpoint and a leadership standpoint.

It was at 4-H fairs that Ben was first exposed to and fell in love with Angus cattle. After considerable pestering, his dad and grandpa bought him his first commercial Angus cow in 1962. In 1964 they “finally” bought him his first registered Angus cow.

“Her name was Queen Betty 30, 3-7-4-0-3-8-4,” Ben rolls off the top of his head, “and she would have calved on June 27 of 1964.” He remembers, he says, because it was the day after his birthday. But in addition to his first registered calf’s birthday, he can spout off her birth weight, extended pedigree, how much she weighed at weaning, who else was in the class she won at the fair, progeny and grandprogeny details, and the full registered name of a bull your editor showed back in her junior days.

When asked how he can remember so many details, Ben says quietly, “It’s my life.”

That’s an understatement. The footnotes in any Sydenstricker Genetics sale book will attest to the fact Ben knows more about his calf crop than most parents know about their children. He studies the pedigrees. He studies their numbers. He studies who’s buying the cattle, what their needs are and how the cattle worked in a given environment. He studies the breed. And he looks for what the breed and what his customers need to plot a course for the future.

While that kind of drive and dedication must come from within, it also needs opportunity to reach its potential.

A quarter century at Sydenstricker

Ben still recalls seeing the “Star of Your Future” film distributed by the American Angus Association at a 4-H meeting some time before he bought his first registered cow. A young man from Paris, Mo., starred in that film. Then president of the first state junior Angus association, Eddie Sydenstricker demonstrated how to prep, fit and show a junior heifer project.

The next time Ben recalls hearing the Sydenstricker name was when Eddie’s father, Ralph, was named contending bidder on his champion heifer at the Missouri state sale in 1976. Sylvester Wieberg bought the Ankonian Dynamo heifer for \$4,000 and hired Ben to be herdsman of Macon Angus Ranch, Macon, Mo.

“I paid \$290 for her grandmother,” Ben comments, always paying attention to the financial details.

A good coat of hair — and not the long, blond locks Ben sported back in the day — brought Eddie and Ben together again at a Missouri state sale a few years later.

“I had this nice little heifer of Wieberg’s

that wasn’t as good but had a lot of good hair,” Ben recalls with a wry grin. “Bill Bowman helped me get her ready, and we beat Eddie’s good heifer. He still sold his for \$10,000 and Wieberg’s sold for \$2,000, but it got Eddie’s attention.”

Bill had accepted but hadn’t yet started a position at Sydenstricker Angus Farms at the time, and Eddie, who would be elected a director of the Association Board that November, asked Ben to join the team, too. Macon Angus Ranch dispersed 1,150 head in December 1981, and Ben took Eddie’s offer in November 1982.

As the two young men began their roles at Sydenstricker Angus Farms, the performance movement was gaining steam at the American Angus Association. In 1981, the field data and structured sire evaluation reports were combined into the *Sire Evaluation Report* we know today, and the first performance registration certificates (PRCs) were introduced.

The first fee for processing AHIRSM (Angus Herd Improvement Records) weaning weights was assessed in 1982, and the first AHIR birth weights were recorded as the Association celebrated its Centennial and the first profitable month of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 100

A dynamic duo for the beef industry

American Angus Association President Ben Eggers shares a passion for Angus cattle and the beef industry with his wife, Darla. The daughter of Jim and Judy K. Sprake of Faucett, Mo., Darla grew up in the Angus business within the ranks of the Missouri Junior



Angus Association. She now serves as executive director of Missouri’s Cattlemen Foundation, Columbia, Mo.

Ben and Darla’s contribution to the Missouri Angus Association and Missouri beef industry is irreplaceable, says Josh Worthington, general manager of the Missouri Angus Association.

“Producers continue to tell me about the great help that Ben has been to them in their breeding programs,” Worthington says. “Unsolicited comments like that are why so many people, including myself, have great admiration and respect for Ben.”

“Darla works tirelessly for the Missouri’s Cattlemen Foundation, which has benefited more kids than I can count,” he continues. “Her dedication to the juniors in the beef industry is unparalleled and will continue to benefit our industry for years to come.”

A Rare Commodity CONTINUED FROM PAGE 99

Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program in 1983.

Bearing witness to the contrast in genetic improvement possible with performance information made both Ben and Bill staunch supporters of performance evaluation. And while their careers would take them down different paths, they seemed destined to work together once again to help see the Association through another leap in performance evaluation.

Eggers will celebrate his 24th year at Sydenstricker Genetics this month.

At first glance, it would seem Ben Eggers and Eddie Sydenstricker have little in common — Ben being quiet and analytical; Eddie, more energetic and gregarious. But their mutual respect for each other is obvious as the two reflect on their leadership roles

and the Angus operation. They have common ground in their fervor for the Angus industry and commitment to customers, and each appreciates what the other adds to the operation.

“Do you know how hard-headed this guy is?” Eddie, the consummate marketer, chides. “He won’t clip his yearling heifers off when we have visitors. He wants to see how much hair they’ll shed so he’ll know which ones will be the most efficient.”

Blazing trails

Eddie’s confidence in Ben’s analytical skills was evident when they purchased VDAR New Trend 315. Eddie sent Ben, who had never spent more than \$4,000 on an animal, to Manhattan, Mont., to the Van Dyke Angus

Ranch sale. After analyzing the bull and listening to discussion of the number of syndicates that were being put together to try to purchase him, Ben decided he was the bull they needed to buy and at whatever cost. With Eddie’s go-ahead, Ben bought 315 for \$73,000.

“Everything at that point was Lone Stars and Pine Drives. We wanted an outcross bloodline that was especially good on maternal value and udders,” Ben recalls. With the amount of interest shown in the bull, he predicted semen sales would be good.

“He was the first good bull we wouldn’t lease to a bull stud,” Ben says, noting a change in the semen sales strategy at Sydenstricker. By having the bull custom-collected and marketing the semen himself, Ben says they could retain a much higher percentage of the semen revenue.

“I didn’t have to sell as much. Therefore, the bull didn’t have to stay in the stud, which means I could use him naturally,” Ben explains. As a result, the bull stayed in better condition and better health. He was still breeding cows when he was 11 years old.

“That first month, Eddie would call me every night to see how much semen I had sold on the bull,” Ben says. It now adds up to about \$1.6 million. “From that point on, semen sales became a big part of our marketing program, a part that is continued even stronger today through our involvement in ORiGen Inc.”

They also continue to search for the right outcross bloodlines. “There’s nothing I like better than creating some pedigrees that are unique and off the beaten path, because otherwise, we’re all playing with the same genetics,” Ben says. “Our large genetic base allows us that opportunity.”

Ben has always been progressive in utilizing new technologies that hold promise for advancing herd genetics. And he’s not afraid to use them in his own manner or create a new strategy to fit his program.

“I’ll never forget the first three cows we put into embryo transfer,” Ben says. “We sent them to the ET center and left them there a whole year and ended up with four pregnancies. We beat Mother Nature by one. We totally screwed up the cows, and we spent a lot of money.”

They don’t do that any more, he says, adding that the purpose of an ET program is to make money. Now they spread the influence of those top cows by basically “stealing flushes,” never taking the cow out of production.

“In most cases we just pull the cow out while she’s actually on shots and do the



► **Above:** At the 2005 Annual Meeting, Ben was escorted to the podium by (from left) his mentor and employer, Eddie Sydenstricker; his brother, Rick Eggers; and longtime friend Sheri Spader. Rick continues the Angus operation on their home farm near Jackson, Mo.

► **Right:** Using flex cows — registered Angus cows chosen to be embryo recipients — offers several advantages: (1) the ability to establish EPDs on the embryo calf, (2) efficiency in production by getting a registerable calf on the next cycle if the cow does not conceive to embryo transfer, (3) the opportunity to find valuable genetics not at first obvious and (4) increased value for registered females.



Peer Review

During their time together as directors of the American Angus Association, Board members get to know each other on a different level than most producers. Here's what Ben Eggers' fellow Board members had to say about him and his role as a leader of the Association.

breeding, and she goes right back into her contemporary group," Ben describes. "We try to pull a quick flush early and get her bred back. If the cow doesn't cooperate, we generally pass her."

Rather than using commercial cows that have little use to his program if they don't accept the embryo transfer, Ben uses registered Angus females considered to be on the lower end of his herd. If these "flex cows" don't accept the embryo transfer, they're bred on their next heat for a registered Angus calf. While more efficient from a production standpoint, the management technique also allows him to find genetically superior Angus females that may have been overlooked.

Ben was instrumental in fostering the research and Board action to approve a three-parent model for calculating EPDs on ET calves out of registered recipients, an action he says adds value to registered females used as flex cows and provides a more accurate prediction of the EPD value of ET calves earlier.

Both Ben and Eddie emphasize that the success of Sydenstricker Genetics hinges on the success of their customers. They have been resolute in their attempts to help their customers turn a profit by meeting their needs with predictable genetics, educating them about performance evaluation and assisting them in marketing. The SydGen-influence commercial heifer sales are now in their ninth year, and the first spring SydGen-influence sale targeted toward assisting their seedstock customers premiered last spring.

That forward-thinking mentality earned the operation the 1997 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award and the 2001 Beef Improvement Federation Seedstock Producer of the Year award.

Ben has carried that customer focus — on a breed level — through to his role as a director and officer of the American Angus Association, as evident in "President's Perspective" (see page 102).

Fellow officer Jot Hartley says Ben's continual focus on programs that benefit commercial customers and foster genetic improvement have been his most valuable contributions to the breed during his tenure as an officer and a director.

"Ben has participated in establishing policy for operation of the Association during one of the most successful periods in its history," Hartley says. "He has promoted and supported actions by the American Angus Association that have moved the Angus breed into greater dominance of and relevance to the cattle industry in the United States and the world."

- ▶ **Richard Tokach:** While Ben does an excellent job out in front and in the spotlight, it isn't the limelight that drives him. He understands that being a leader is a team effort and it is immaterial who gets the credit as long as the work gets done. A lot of the things that we as a Board and as an Association have accomplished over the past number of years can be attributed to Ben's gentle push and his diligent work behind the scenes.
- ▶ **Jot Hartley:** Ben had the uncanny ability to obtain a consensus on any issue that was brought before the Association Board this year. He encourages discussion and participation from the entire Board and attempts to arrive at "group" decisions. He has been very effective at keeping the Board and staff focused on issues and obtaining a decision or directive in formulating policy for Association operations.
- ▶ **Paul Hill:** As a leader he does not get shaken, even on the most challenging issues. He works to lead the members to not make hasty decisions. He has helped the members to make a solid, lasting impact on these challenging issues.
- ▶ **Joe Elliott:** Ben is steady and thorough. He knows all angles of the beef industry, and he knows where he is going before he takes a step. His knowledge, quest for more knowledge, vision, work ethic, deep-thinking and voice of reason have kept the Association on solid ground.
- ▶ **Abbie Nelson:** Ben always considered the whole picture as we made decisions concerning the Association. He truly thought outside the box and placed the membership as top priority. He would ask tough questions and usually took a while to make his decision, understanding the importance of the task at hand. He has been a universal ambassador, representing our membership with class and dignity.
- ▶ **Bob Schlutz:** Ben is a leader who listens to all points of view and then makes a decision. He has brought stability to the Angus Board.
- ▶ **Mark Gardiner:** Ben has been an excellent leader for the Association. He has a unique intelligence that allows him to take very complex issues and analyze them in order to make very good decisions.
- ▶ **Dave Smith:** Ben is a very committed, dedicated, forward-thinking leader who is an excellent ambassador for our industry. He is a man of integrity and definitely a professional Angus breeder. Ben Eggers is a true gentleman.
- ▶ **Jay King:** I admire Ben and his excellent listening skills and note-taking discipline. He has the ability to listen, take notes and analyze the situation to such a degree, that you definitely need to hear his comments. He has a great mind, and has moved the staff and Board of Directors to new heights.
- ▶ **Bill Davis:** Ben has done one hell of a job. There have been some pretty challenging issues that have come before us here in the past year, and he has taken them extremely seriously. He's done a lot of deliberating in his thought process. And I think he has led in a manner that has been very professional. His positive outlook and deliberate manner have been great assets.
- ▶ **Norman Garton:** During this past year, Ben demonstrated that he could handle challenging situations very well. Showing strong leadership, Ben successfully handled the ultrasound lab changes, and *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) yield grade alternatives. Ben always considers what is best for the Angus breed and then leads the Board toward those goals.
- ▶ **Bob Norton:** Often we meet people who are either great leaders or great visionaries, occasionally we meet someone who is both, and that is Ben Eggers. Ben's visions for our Association and our industry are the platform of many of the initiatives guiding us today. He possesses an innate sense of direction.

