

Ahead of the Carcass Curve

2003 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence honoree aims for the top rung.

Story & photos by **Kim Kanzler Holt**

Jimmy Thomas is not a commodity beef producer. The Idaho producer's goal, from the very beginning, has been to shoot for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand target. In pursuing that goal, Thomas has built up a network of success with his bull supplier and feeding partner (see "Excelling in the Black," page 157, February 2002 *Angus Journal*).

For building his own alliance with a progressive mind-set, superior selection and management, Thomas earned the 2003 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award. He and his wife, Sarah, accepted the award at the CAB annual conference in Cleveland, Ohio, Aug. 23.

Cooperation and commitment to improvement are the basis for this award, says Rod Schoenbine, coordinator of CAB producer programs and data services. Originally awarded for cooperation with CAB in structured sire evaluation, the award now goes to a nominee chosen from candidates submitted by CAB-licensed feedlots.

"Jimmy was selected based on the feedlot's comments and his involvement in CAB-sponsored programs," Schoenbine explains.

Tracking success

The nominating feeding partner is Boise Valley Feeders LLC (BVF), an Agri Beef feedlot located near Parma, Idaho, where Thomas has fed for four years. He retained 100% ownership in the cattle this year, and three groups are enrolled in the 2003

National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC).

Thomas cattle consistently perform far ahead of national averages, with 80%-90% USDA Choice or better and double the CAB acceptance rate. Yet the Thomas cattle are lean, with many Yield Grade (YG) 1 and 2 carcasses; they rarely have a YG 4. The cattle usually make the list for CAB's Thirty-Aught (30-0) program, where at least 30% of sale groups qualify for CAB or Prime, with no discount carcasses (see inset on page 70).

Twenty years ago, Thomas started building his 200-head herd from a few cows that included 30 purebreds.

Originally, he sold local 4-H steers and found their carcass data encouraging. But his sights were set on producing the CAB product.

He already had an established relationship with BVF through selling the grain he and Sarah grow near Homedale, Idaho. Focus on feeding for the brand blossomed when BVF became a licensed CAB partner in 1999.

Driven to succeed

Whether feeding cattle or selecting bulls, Thomas constantly tries to improve his commercial program's genetics and end product. He keeps studying the data and asking questions. What's his motive?

"I just want to produce the best we can and keep trying to get them better," Thomas says.

For the past nine years, his only bull source has been the Medeiros family's Rancho Casino, Denair, Calif. David and Carol Medeiros are impressed by Thomas' studious approach, as is BVF manager Nate Gilliam.

"He's not a commodity beef producer, that's for sure," Gilliam says. He and Thomas have worked together since 1999.

"Most people want to know, 'How much money did I make?' That's it," Gilliam says. Thomas wants to know that, too. But he also wants to know how he can improve.

"And it's not just from a carcass characteristic standpoint. Performance is a major issue," Gilliam says.

"In a feedlot," he explains, "performance can mean a lot more



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than carcass characteristics to a bottom line. So, you've got to have them both."

Depending on end weights, he says, "conversion is a bigger number to me than daily gain. I don't care if they gain 2, 3 or 4 pounds; if they don't convert, it doesn't matter. And Jimmy's cattle do convert well."

Thomas also knows what's under the hide of his cattle — literally. He has been at the packing plant virtually every time a group of his cattle were harvested, he says. "I am curious about how it works."

He admits that it was hard to grasp all that was going on in his first few plant visits. But the more he's gone, the better acquainted he's become with plant employees. They have helped him better understand the ins and the outs of the USDA grading system and the CAB-qualifying process.

"It's been very interesting to me," he says. "I think it would probably be good for every producer to watch them grade cattle and see the end product, because there's no guessing then. When you pull the hide off, it's all right out in the open."

New generation steps up

While Thomas has been honing his sights on the CAB target, his son, Kenny, has joined in the quest for discovery. Now the 2002 University of Idaho (UI) graduate has



► While Thomas has been honing his sights on the CAB target, his son, Kenny (left), has joined in the quest for discovery. The 2002 University of Idaho graduate has returned to farm.

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returned to farm. Although father and son share equipment and labor, they keep separate books. Kenny has owned cows since he was 10 years old, and has claim to 25% of the Thomas herd. The men also purchase 500 additional steer calves in the fall and 300 grass heifers in the spring.

The younger Thomas has the same fire to build a superior beef product, and he's

learning the ropes — like the importance of research, balanced-trait selection and herd uniformity — from his dad.

“Experience is probably the best teacher in this,” Thomas senior admits, noting one must not simply consider carcass traits, but all selection factors. “Carcass would probably be down the list a little ways,” he says. “It’s a high priority, but it’s not the first

thing we look at when we go to buy bulls.” They look for superior average daily gain (ADG) on test from weaning to yearling, and uniformity in pedigree and type. About half of their herd sires are related.

Selection aside, additional contributors to success are backgrounding management and coordination with BVF.

A four-month backgrounding phase on the farm gets the Thomas calves off to healthy postweaning gains. Their friends and partners at BVF help with a smooth transition to the finishing yard. Gilliam has sorted market-ready Thomas cattle for four

years, and Tanya Hartung, CAB quality assurance officer, handles all of the producers’ CAB-related recordkeeping.

Thomas has complete confidence in Gilliam’s sorting ability. “There might be somebody as good as Nate, but there isn’t anybody any better,” he says.

Once their end product is harvested and information collected, Thomas passes the data back to Rancho Casino, where feedback helps supply an ever-better bull product.

As the head of his own alliance, Thomas likes the way their cattle grade and yield, and confidence grows each time he feeds. Father and son share pride in producing for the brand. Kenny feels it most when he orders a steak from a restaurant that serves only CAB.

“When I see we’ve made that, it shows me we’re in the upper percentage of people who produce a good product,” Kenny says. “That could be our product people are consuming and enjoying right there in that restaurant, and it makes me proud. It gives you confidence and a feeling that you’re doing something right.”



► One contributor to the success Thomas (left) has had with the CAB brand is his relationship with the staff at Boise Valley Feeders. Nate Gilliam (right), general manager, has sorted Thomas’ market-ready cattle from Day 1. Of Gilliam’s sorting, Thomas says, “There might be somebody as good as Nate, but there isn’t anybody any better.”

Heifers that Jimmy Thomas fed in 2002 made the CAB Thirty-Aught (30-0) program at Boise Valley Feeders. Their data exemplifies the kind of cattle he consistently turns out:

- 36 heifers
- 62% dressing percentage
- 11% Prime
- 38.5% CAB
- 92% Choice or better
- 75% YG 1s and 2s
- 25% YG 3s
- No YG 4s
- 30-0 program qualifier



► Tanya Hartung (right), CAB quality assurance officer, handles all CAB Program recordkeeping for Thomas at Boise Valley Feeders.