



The Next Level



Oklahoma feeders dish out professional results, personable style.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

Dale and Mary Moore took a deep breath and signed papers in December 2000 that, with the help of a few startup investors, made them owners of 200 acres north of Gage, Okla. The place included 15 pens that could be repaired to hold 1,500 calves, a 4020 John Deere, vintage BJM mixer wagon and 680 hungry mouths.

"We actually had cattle here the first day," Dale says. "We had to go buy corn and hay from a neighboring feedyard. Then we bought a pump and tank of molasses. Right off, we were feeding cattle."

That was nothing compared to their plan for Cattleman's Choice Feedyard Inc., whose outside investors were soon repaid. The business would grow in scope to be named Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) 2008 Feedlot Partner of the Year for all yards with less than 15,000-head capacity. He and Mary accepted the award at the CAB Annual Conference Sept. 13 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

It started when the placement office at a small Missouri college "shipped me off to Scott County, Kan.," Dale recalls. "I went out to a 16,000-head feedlot with my fancy

degree and started washing water tanks with it. I moved up in the maintenance department and then to driving the feedtruck, feeding management and bunk reading. I was riding pens on the cowboy crew by the time I left."

After a few years, he moved to the smaller Wiechman Bros. Feedyard in that county, where the hands-on approach to customer service made a big impression. As Dale worked his way up to operations manager for the owner, he recalls, "I learned a lot from Jay Wiechman. He taught me and challenged me to think about details. We didn't just feed cattle; we did pelvic measurements, heifer AI (artificial insemination), whatever the customer wanted. We sorted every pen, and I learned to visually identify the degree of finish."

A yard of their own

In the late 1990s, given the chance to manage a small yard in Missouri, Dale proceeded to make a 500-head unit into a 3,000-head finishing yard in one year. Things were going well, but he had to check



**Feedlot Partner
of the Year
<15,000 Capacity**

it out when he heard about the opportunity in Oklahoma. Weed-infested and run-down it was, but Dale saw the future.

"I really couldn't tell Mary what it looked like, but I could see what it was going to be," he says now.

In little more than a month, the Moores concluded business at the Missouri yard and headed back west.

"We had a contract to store our things in the garage of a house near the feedyard, but really no place to live," Dale recalls. "When we pulled into that driveway, an old rancher who said he was Jack Haines tossed us the keys to the house and said, 'Move in. You can't stay in town. We'll work it out later.'"

► **Above:** When Texas cattleman Bill Woods wanted to sell 100 cows that were too "Americanized" for his Irish linebred program, the Moores jumped at the chance to buy them. Calves from that herd have already proven out with 97.5% premium Choice and Prime on a recent harvest group.

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"We then realized we had found our home in western Oklahoma," he says. The Moores didn't buy the place from its original owner, or they would have met the Haineses sooner. "Jack and his family built the feedyard in the late '80s and have been friends and supporters since that day we pulled in."

It helped to have experienced local advice nearby, especially starting out with no feedmill and just a couple of overhead tanks.

"We dry-rolled corn right into the back of a feedtruck, every load as needed," Dale says. "Then we built our concrete commodity barn and were so automated that we dry-rolled into there. We got rid of the 1969 feedtruck and bought a '92 model. Then we started to build pens."

Within six months, they had added enough for 1,000 more cattle, and kept adding steadily to 6,500-head capacity by 2004, when it was time for two more big steps. That summer the Moores added a steam-flaking mill and licensed their yard as a CAB partner.

"We never expected to grow as fast as our customers allowed us to," Dale says. "We

were blessed with customers who wanted just a little more out of a feedyard, and that's what we gave them."

Mary was the bookkeeper from the start, entering all the feed and making sure the billing got out.

"I got put in a little plywood breakroom on top of the cattle barn, when we first began," Mary says. Setting up a real office is a sign of business taken to the next level. "But Dale is still family-oriented, and that's the way he likes to deal with the customers," she says. "He has been to most all the ranches we feed for, sitting down to supper with them to find out how he can better serve them here."

Japanese tour groups certainly approved, on successive visits this summer.

"They really liked our small, family approach," Dale says. "We had pretty much straight ranch cattle that came off Mom and Pop's ranch somewhere. They took lots of pictures and were very nice people."

Staying personable

The Moores have continued a modest

Sorting is a given when aiming for grid premiums. Though it may not maximize pen space efficiency, it's part of the big picture.



► From 15 pens that could be repaired to hold 1,500 head in December 2000, Dale and Mary Moore have grown Cattleman's Choice Feedyard Inc. to a capacity of more than 7,000 head with a focus that gained them honors as Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) 2008 Feedlot Partner of the Year for all yards with less than 15,000-head capacity.

rate of expansion to 7,500 head today, 90% filled with retained-ownership cattle from Tennessee to Kansas, Texas and New Mexico. That size may be big enough, they say. "We'll never be a big feedyard," Dale says. "We could probably manage with 10,000 head and do everything we do, but we always want to be personable to every customer. We give them loads of attention and teach them to use our data, and labor issues make it harder to keep that going in a large yard."

Right-hand man at Cattleman's Choice is operations manager and data chief Jarred Shepherd, who joined the company in May 2005, after three years with Oklahoma State University's research feedyard. "There are seven of us, counting the mill man, and I try to make sure we all know where we're heading each day," he says. "We have a talented crew that works hard and, most important, they care."

Shepherd keeps track of all the processing and implant programs, and, like Dale, he is a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) age- and source-verification agent. But data management is a favorite task.

"I like working on spreadsheets for people," he says. "It's kind of neat when you work with somebody for years and they recognize you in town. It's nice to have that personal connection."

The Moores rely on Shepherd's ability to help customers. Referring to a customized report, Dale says, "Jarred breaks down the grading and premiums per head, all the way back to the individual cows and bulls, including average daily gain and feed conversion. This graph shows that feeding longer does not always add marbling. It shows the external fat by individual, so you can see that some perform well on feed but will not marble. Customers like stuff like that."

It's "neat information," but also vital to the bottom line. For example, Shepherd created a postharvest report by sire group for one ranch. "They were using nine Angus bulls, but we could not get the cattle to grade over 50% Choice," he recounts. "We showed what each sire was doing."

Progeny from two bulls averaged less than 40% Choice, and they sired one-third of the calves, while another one beat 88% Choice. Gain was another factor. "This bull's progeny gained 3.49 pounds per day, this one 3.18," Dale notes. "Putting it all together, we showed a progeny finished value range of \$90 to \$95 per hundredweight. The customer could see which ones to get rid of and which ones to keep."

Dale credits longtime customer Bill Woods, New Ulm, Texas, with sharpening his attention to data. The Woodstone Ranch herd set records in the National Angus



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Carcass Challenge (NACC) and has always been data-driven. For the first year or two as a CAB partner yard, high-quality cattle invariably traced back to one or two sources. But the quality base is broadening now.

When Woods wanted to sell 100 cows that were too "Americanized" for his Irish linebred program, the Moores jumped at the chance. Another bookkeeper joined the feedlot staff and Mary helped Dale take on the new cow herd and keep up family matters at home. Calves from that herd have already proven out with 97.5% premium Choice and Prime on a recent harvest group.

"We've discovered there are a lot of high-quality cattle out there," Dale says. "If you manage them right, they will reach their full potential. What we've done with the Woodstone cattle from the start, now we're doing with lots of other cattle. Six or eight pens have gone 95% to 100% Choice and average 50% CAB in the first half of this year."

The Moores aim for quality along with efficiency. That's why they steam-flake corn, but have drawn the line to exclude distillers' grains so far.

"There's a fine line between sacrificing grade and profitability, and we keep an eye on it," Dale says. Their use of growth implants is never aggressive. "Unless you don't want any at all, we'll use implants just enough to cut your costs and increase your gains, but not hurt your grade," he says.

Not surprisingly, pens are usually full. Customers tell their neighbors and keep coming back, working cooperatively to chart progress. "Some of them have begun to cull cows based on our program and the data we

provide," Shepherd adds.

Sorting is a given when aiming for grid premiums. Though it may not maximize pen space efficiency, it's part of the big picture. "If we have 20 head standing in a 60-head pen but it made the customer more money to do that, then that's what we do," Dale says. "We also have some 20- and 30-head pens we can move to sometimes and open up our 60-head pen again."

Stepping it up

This winter, it will be time to step up to another new level. A new barn with a computerized ultrasound sorting system promises to improve the yard's already excellent results.

"We've been with MicroBeef Technologies for several years and have been planning this system for the last three years,"

Dale says. "It's similar to the electronic cattle management systems used at big yards, except we don't commingle cattle. We'll individually manage them using three or four marketing groups within the pen."

During times when the Choice-Select spread is narrow, the system should help to adjust.

"If you start out with a high-quality animal, you can sell them as YG 1s and 2s and make just as much money as when the spread is wide and you're allowing some YG 4 discounts," he says.

Within the new barn, a computer will control electronics and hydraulics so that gates open or close depending on scan data and the calf's electronic ID. "It will be slick," Dale says. "A calf will get ultrasounded, processed, hip-height measured and weighed. Within 30 seconds, he will be headed to the sort group with the open gate, which will close after him, while the next calf is already being measured."

Color-coded tags will keep visual ID simple. A second measurement after 90 days or at re-implant will plot individual growth curves.

"We may 'move' a calf to a different marketing group within the system, and whenever we put a group on a show list, we will walk the pen to visually evaluate each calf with that tag color and sort out any outliers. The cowboys will simply pull all those color tags for the load next morning," Dale explains.

Of course, the enhanced data feedback opportunities have Shepherd and the Moores eager with anticipation. "We'll have more data than we know what to do with at first," Dale says. That phase won't last long, of course.



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