

# Competing with Quality



## Vermilion Ranch wins CAB honors.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**F**rom the bright lights and shining hardwood of a basketball court to the cedar shavings of an auction ring, if there's one ideal Pat Goggins believes in, it's competition.

Growing up the youngest of six boys born to sharecroppers can do that. It could come from his love of athletics or his early start as one of the most sought-after purebred auctioneers in the country, but whatever gave him that drive to win, the result is somewhat of an empire around a Billings, Mont., base.

At the center is the Vermilion Ranch, where adding value to customers' cattle helped earn the 2013 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award, which was to be presented at the *Certified Angus*

**2013 Seedstock  
Commitment to  
Excellence Award**

*Beef*® (CAB®) brand annual conference in Palm Desert, Calif.

Many in the cattle business know the Goggins family story well. Pat went to college on a basketball scholarship, graduated with an animal science degree and married Florence "Babe" Becker 62 years ago. They scraped by for many years while he worked as a fieldman and ad salesman and later as a self-taught auctioneer. That was all before purchasing the *Western Livestock Reporter*, three Montana auction markets and then the Vermilion Ranch.

"Through the years it was always a breeding establishment," Pat says. "They bred Clydesdale horses. They bred Holstein cows, and they had a registered-Hereford herd here when we bought the place."

Just east of Billings on the northwest side

of the Yellowstone River, the storied property was one of the first settlements in those parts. Vermilion is Crow for "red man," and they were the first to enjoy its milder winters, but the flat river bottoms just 70 miles from Custer's Last Stand were the backdrop for another key battle in that era. White settlers then built a hotel there, near the last stagecoach stop before town.

### No cheating

Back to modern days, the Goggins patriarch was always linked to Angus cattle by employment, but his first real foray into the breed that he would influence starts at this place.

He chose Angus cattle because he was a student of the auction market.

"They were discriminated against for a lot of years," Pat says, even though that former Vermilion Ranch owner with Herefords used



► **Below:** Pat Goggins' portrait was added to the Saddle & Sirloin Portrait Collection on Nov. 13, 2011. Angus breeders and others gathered to honor Pat Goggins, pictured with his wife, Babe, during the portrait presentation and banquet at the NAILE.

PHOTO BY JENA THOMPSON, AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION



“Performance testing and EPDs (expected progeny differences) are meaningful, and people are paying attention,”

to buy all the black cattle coming through the Public Auction Yards (PAYS).

“The black-hided cattle just outgained and outperformed, whether you had them for breeders or for feeders,” he says.

Today they command a premium, but Pat says it's about reputation, more than just being black.

he says. “And they should, because there is a difference within the breed of Angus cattle.”

Traveling the country to sell at purebred sales and sitting in his own salering bleachers gave Pat a solid idea for “the look” he wanted when starting his own herd: clean and long, with good muscle expression.

“He saw lots of cattle. He knew cattle, and

he knew what he wanted, and that's never changed,” says Bob Cook, who married Coreen, the eldest Goggins daughter, and manages PAYS and many activities at the ranch.

Today, Pat's twin sons, Joe and John, have the opportunity to evaluate a large number of cattle and specific bloodlines through their work: Joe as a popular cattle auctioneer and John as publisher of the family's paper, the *Western Ag Reporter*.

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They add to their expertise as they continue to hone the herd that started with 200 pairs purchased from the Ross Ranch near Jordan, Mont., in 1968. Pat was already a seasoned negotiator by then.

“He doesn’t like to fish. He doesn’t like to hunt. He doesn’t like to golf,” Joe says. “But he likes to make a deal and that’s his hobby.”

Pat put that experience to work the day he sent his help to collect his purchases. He instructed them to gather the best 200 cows with bull calves by their sides.

“They had some words when they started sorting out the ones with bull calves,” Joe says. “I don’t know how it all ended up, but we got

200 cows with bull calves, and the following spring we had our first bull sale.”

They’ve since built it to market nearly 7,000 registered- and commercial-Angus cattle in the annual spring and fall production sales.

“Dad’s always beat it into our heads, on the seedstock side of things, that you can’t upgrade,” says Joe. “You’ve got to start with the very best ones and you don’t cheat on the bulls.”

“He always said you might buy a used pickup, buy a used tractor — cheat where you can — but don’t cheat on your bull and your cow herd,” he says.

The breeding has followed that plan all along, from Oscar to Right Time and VRD to name a few.

“If we’re going to use an outside bull, we want to breed at least 100 cows to him,” Cook says. “There are some people who will buy 10 straws of semen here and 10 there to see what they can get, but if we’ve got enough confidence to select a bull, we’re going to breed him to at least 100 cows.”

That’s in response to customer demand.

“We think it’s important to be able to offer a large amount of related cattle in the sale,” he says. “There are a lot of breeders that will buy into that for uniformity.”

## Growing up Goggins

“You never wonder where you stand with him,” Joe Goggins says of his father, Pat.

Through an estimated 5,000 weekly newspaper columns, especially “As I see it,” readers got to know the icon. Others made the acquaintance from his auctioneering work or involvement in associations or as their seedstock supplier, but six Montana residents know what it’s like to grow up with Pat Goggins as their dad.

First came the girls — Coreen, Laurie and Sandy — followed by the boys, twins John and Joe and then Mike.

During the early years, Pat traveled extensively across the country, mainly throughout the Northwest.

“He put on a lot of miles, but he got home almost every time in between,” says John, remembering his dad’s auctioneering career.

The one rule to his travel schedule: Pat has never sold on Sunday. That day is reserved for church and looking over the ranch.

“He worked all week, but he’d have a list for you,” John says.

“Every Sunday he’d get on his 4-wheeler and then he’d have another list.”

Pat tried to take as few overnight trips as possible, especially if one of his children had a ball game that night.

“He’s a huge sports fanatic,” John says. Lucky for him, the children were all athletes. From basketball to football to baseball, there was never a shortage of events to “coach” from the stands. Many of the 16 grandchildren followed in that tradition.

Although he’s “mellowed out” now, back in the day “he got a lot of technicals,” John laughs.

Regardless of how passionate Pat was about sports, nothing came before getting the work done.

From the time they were 8 years old until they went to college, John and Joe milked a cow at about the same time every single night ... except one.

“You definitely got your chores done before you went to practice,” Joe says, recalling the day they thought they’d just milk after the evening basketball session. Pat found out. “It’s the only time I remember my dad coming to practice. He walked in and said, ‘Coach, could you excuse the Goggins boys, because they’ve forgotten to do their chores?’”

After they finished, and probably got a lecture, Pat brought them back to practice. They can still remember the burning sensation in their legs and lungs from the running they had to do.

Pat is big on discipline, a strong work ethic and competition. The latter he has come to value even more as all family members and their spouses joined the businesses.

“Your key people around you in your organization, they have to be competitive,” Pat says. “You’ve got to put that responsibility right on them.”



► John (left) and Joe Goggins remember growing up with just the right mix of hard work, love and discipline.



Quality is always a key, and that's reinforced by noting an example. Cook worked for the American Angus Association when Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) was just coming in.

"There's been hundreds of brand programs for the last 35, 40 years, but there's only one that has kept quality its No. 1 criteria. That's the one reason CAB has prevailed, and that's why we maintain a high-quality standard."

The Angus breed has changed over time, and the cattle at Vermilion are not excluded from that, but customers still come expecting some of the same things.

"They come here for 40-plus years of grading and performance cattle," Cook says. "You've got to have repeat customers. If you don't, you aren't doing what you're supposed to."

## Pleasing customers

Spencer Cooney, of Harlowton, Mont., is a third-generation Vermilion customer. His family's Cooney Bros. Ranch has built up the predictability in their herd through half-sibling bulls.

"We always strived to have as high-quality, functional cattle as we could," Cooney says. "My grandfather always wanted quality and bought quality bulls, so when my dad started buying, it was the same deal."

Now Cooney and his brother Cavan have begun to source the genetics for the large straightbred-Angus herd, and they're sticking with tradition. That's partly because they're able to get both the kind of females and steermates they want.

"It's been a closed herd — we raise all our own replacement heifers — and it's been that way for a long, long time," he says.

There are a lot of available Angus seedstock suppliers nearby, so another reason they continue to come to the Vermilion sale includes the marketing opportunities. For the past couple of decades, they've sold all their steers and heifers not retained in their own herd to Goggins.

"They're the kind of people who understand what kind of situation a producer is in, and they're not going to hang you out to dry," Cooney says, noting calves are weaned on the truck and then sent to a Goggins ranch for backgrounding. Then they're sold



► Spencer Cooney and his family's Cooney Bros. Ranch near Harlowton, Mont., have built up the predictability in their herd through half-sibling bulls.

in special feeder-calf and replacement-heifer sales.

"A lot of people in the business offer marketing opportunities," Cook says. "But we're a little more unique because we'll buy a lot of cattle from our customers. We own them."

That enterprise became a key part of the business plan as properties were added in the 1990s, starting with the Diamond Ring Ranch near Miles City, Mont. The 50,000-acre spread is used for backgrounding calves purchased mainly from their bull customers. Those cattle are typically resold as part of January's Diamond Ring Sale, which has become a huge event.

"The original one was right at the ranch lot," Cook says. "We sold them from the back of a hay wagon, going up and down the aisles."

That year there were 6,000 head of Vermilion-sired calves on the sale bill.

"That really put Angus cattle on the map up here," Joe says.

Fast-forward to 2013, and they sold 40,000 Angus-influenced steers, a large majority of them purchased from bull customers and sold using Northern Video Livestock Auction, which they started in the early 1990s.

At their Pryor Creek Ranch, the family also develops 2,300 commercial and 500 registered heifers, many of which sell at a special sale on the video auction.

"We really get a good handle on how our cattle are doing for our customers and how they feed and finish," Pat says. "It gives us some good knowledge on where we are at on certain lines of bulls."

It's a symbiotic relationship: the family gets a snapshot of how bulls work out in the country and commercial ranchers have an outlet for their calves. Those services help build long-lasting relationships, too.

"They're not just buying bulls and genetics, but they buy into people," Joe says. "Trust and credibility."

Cook agrees that all facets of their businesses are connected by that thread.

"Because we're in the auction business and we're in the video business and we're in the newspaper business, it's all part of being in the people business," he says.

The family's successes in the cattle industry have come in many forms. They all credit it to Pat's vision and that core philosophy.

"Breeding cattle is a lot like playing a ball game," Joe says. "There's a competitiveness to it. The businesses that we've really thrived in all have to do with competition."



**Editor's Note:** Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for CAB.

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