



Just One of the Guys

**Osborn Farms wins CAB Quality Focus Award
for feedlots with less than 15,000-head capacity.**

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

If a load of cattle doesn't make at least 70% Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand with several going CAB Prime, John Osborn will know where they fell short. After all, they're hurting the average at Osborn Farms, Savannah, Mo., which just won the 2010 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Quality Focus Award for feedlots up to 15,000-head capacity.

He can feed just 600 at a time in the farm feedlot, but they are the right ones. In the contest year from June 1 to May 31, Osborn enrolled 546 head through the Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP), and 77% of them were CAB, including 14.3% CAB Prime.

That's not bad, compared to the current 23% U.S. average, but it's about a point back of the first 250 head he enrolled with CAB (after licensing in March 2009). It's well back of the amazing 86% CAB and Prime on 265 head in the first seven months of calendar year 2010. In the running to repeat as national champion in the AngusSource® Carcass Challenge (ASCC), one May-harvested Osborn load will be hard to beat, at 100% CAB and Prime.

So if a "slacker load" goes to National Beef on the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid, that mild dip in brand acceptance won't really surprise Osborn, but he'll review their source. These are not registered cattle, but they are backed by up to 12 years of breeding and selection records, cross-referenced with progeny and sibling carcass data.

"We know these cattle," he says. "We know their mamas and their sires, when they were born and weaned, their health record and

what they gain. We know how they should grade."

"We" takes in Pete Mitts, longtime unofficial partner and current official feedlot consultant, whom Osborn credits for the intense dedication to data. Both men operate straightbred Angus cow herds near Savannah, Mo., each with 300-350 head, and network with a dozen other smaller producers with another 500 related cows.

"Pete and I have done almost everything in cattle together or in consultation since 1998," Osborn says.

That was the year Osborn bought and fed the Mitts steers along with his own, and marketed them on a value-based grid. Their 60% Choice barely beat industry average, but served as a benchmark to see how much the herds could be improved. That was the year they vowed to work cooperatively to aim for the brass ring — CAB Prime.

The results can speak for themselves, but results this good get noticed. That's why Osborn will pack something more formal than his typical overalls and T-shirt as he and wife Toni travel to San Juan, Puerto Rico, to accept the honor at the CAB annual conference there Sept. 30-Oct. 2.

Osborn represented his farm and cattle at the CAB conference, but he also represents a new reality in Angus genetics. Past contests like Best of the Breed and the National Angus Carcass Challenge helped showcase genetics that could hit the target. A 2007 summary noted, "The top value pens for each of the four years charted a steady advance from

30% to 60% [CAB and Prime] for the top 20 pens [3,200 cattle in all]."

The top pen in Best of the Breed in 2002 was 94% CAB and Prime in 80 ultrasound-selected steers at the Kansas State University Ag Research Station at Hays, Kan. It featured mostly Green Garden Angus genetics from Lorraine, Kan. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Osborn and Mitts use the same genetic source for bulls, but these are not hand-picked progeny.

What was a "gee whizz" demonstration a few years ago is now routine in northwest Missouri, where up to one-third of the Green Garden bulls go each fall.

"They are a great group of guys up there," says Richard Janssen, owner-manager of Green Garden. "They're buying the kind of balanced genetics that deliver not only marbling but replacement females with lower maintenance cost. And of course, John does a great job. He knows the genetics and how to feed and market them."

There was a learning curve, and as they built up better genetics, the lessons continued.

Relying on the data

"The biggest thing I learned was that we can't go out and look at the calves and tell how they're going to do," Osborn says. "The first few times we sent a load to the packer, Pete and I would each try to pick the top five, but we never got one right."

Fortunately, the data served as a better guide.

"We had the carcass data on all the steer mates to the heifers we were saving," Mitts points out. "The first couple of generations made really big strides." Although he and Osborn had increasingly better cows, they



► From left, John Osborn, Jay Arn, Roger Scott and Pete Mitts cooperate to raise cattle with a quality focus in Northwest Missouri.



kept seeing the data and identifying both a top and bottom quartile, so they kept turning generations, finding a ready market for second-best heifers or prime-age cows in the old friends from whom Osborn had bought calves.

There's always a top and bottom quartile, but the Savannah duo keeps buying bulls and selling older ones to their friends and associates to use on unrelated cows.

"You can go right down the line on carcass data and see who bought the last cows, because their calves will be a little better than the other guy who has an earlier generation," Osborn says. "But they all keep getting better."

Jay Arn, who learned to appreciate honest, hard work growing up on a small farm south

of the Osborns' place, found those same values when he started to work there 14 years ago as way to farm full-time.

"It doesn't surprise me that John won this award, because we always shoot for the top," Arn says. "He has a lot of friends and a way of tapping into all the knowledge around him, too."

"Winning an award like that, or the way these cattle perform every day, John wouldn't make a big deal about it," Arn says. "He's got a lot to be proud of, but he's not a proud man, just one of the guys."

Another one of those guys is Roger Scott, King City, Mo. The 140-cow herd he operates with son Brian as part of a diversified farm is one of the largest cooperators in the informal neighborhood alliance.

He has been buying rebred second-calf heifers from Osborn since 2003, and may expand soon with another 100 head.

"John had bought some of my calves earlier, so he knew what we started with," Scott says. "He and Pete worked their way up to these better cows, but I bought my way in and it upgraded my herd considerably. We haven't had to pull a calf in five years."

Scott also bought into Mitts' and Osborn's view on consumer focus.

"It looked like you were going to have to go for that quality niche, cows selected with the end-product in mind," he says. "We also like the fact that the cows are so tame and easy to lead with my red pickup or the ATV. It's a lot easier to pull a chain than push a chain."

The same vaccinations and weaning protocols are common to all herds in the network, and many of them share the same autogenous pinkeye vaccine developed for their common genetics and environment of fescue-based pastures.

Whether family, friends, cattle or relationships among them, the quality focus permeates to ensure they all keep getting better.



Editor's Note: Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

An early start with family, friends

John Randall Osborn, Savannah, Mo., took on a lot of responsibility at a young age. His father, John Richard, passed away when his son was 6 years old, but mom JoAnn continued to run the large commercial farm with hired help. The boy grew up watching hired men operate the John Deere 4010 his father had bought new, imagining himself in that seat, and then getting his chance as JoAnn's management kept opportunities open.

There were crops, 80 cows and 80 sows, but the hogs seemed to drive everything until the Osborns had their fill of market crashes in the late 1980s.

Through the work and worry, his mom always allowed her son time for fun. Over the years, Osborn would start testing the 4010 in tractor pulls in the late summer before weaning and harvest. More recently, his limited pro-stock John Deere 4255 has become well-known at pulling contests across hundreds of miles.

That hobby continues, shared with a new generation. His wife, Toni, originally from Saint Joseph, likes to "scrapbook" with their 18-year-old daughter, Jessica, who also enjoys swimming when she's not working with the cows or at the local veterinary clinic. Their son, Joel, 12, is focused on sports and, not surprisingly, tractor pulling. This year he took the wheel of his grandpa's original 4010 for his first tractor pull. JoAnn has retired from active management but still advises her son regularly.

"We did a 180-degree turn in the '80s," Osborn recalls. "We

decided to get out of hogs and build up the cattle side." That meant buying calves to background and sell as heavy feeders. Naturally, Osborn developed relationships with local cow-calf operators who sold calves, and he compared quality. Early on, he and neighbor Pete Mitts sent a load to the Missouri Steer Feedout.

"We were supposed to pick representative calves, but we sure saw some surprises," Osborn says. "We learned a little and kept slowly growing, saving more heifers, thinking about finishing steers."

In 1998, neither grass nor feeder-cattle markets looked good, so that was the year to feed. Selling on a grid was the first college-level lesson, and after seeing the score, Osborn cleaned house. He cut back to his best 35 cows, rebuilding with artificial insemination (AI) and the best registered Angus bulls. Building the best herd would take focus, faith and dependable help.

Longtime employee Jay Arn, already a two-year veteran when that rebuilding decision was made, would be a big part of the success to come. In later years, the Osborns helped him develop even more of a personal interest through a small herd-sharing option.

All of the relationships seem like extended family to the Osborns, from Mitts and Arn to the network of cooperating cow-calf producers that buy young bred cows and supply calves for the feedlot. A hundred heifers are heat-synchronized and AI'd each year because Osborn trades favors with a friend for everything but the genetics.

That's the Osborn way: family style.