

# Just Across the Table

11 years after CAB award, cattlemen team up and bring beef to new heights.

by *Nicole Lane, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

It was in a small restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio, where fate met two cattlemen. A Midwestern feedlot owner sat across from one of the friendliest commercial producers west of the Rockies. They happened to be two of the best.

The men shook hands and began a conversation, one that would change both of their lives and their businesses.

You may have heard of these two: Terry Beller of Lindsay, Neb., was recognized by the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand as the 2003 Small Feedlot of the Year at the same time Jimmy Thomas, Homedale, Idaho, won the Commitment to Excellence Award at the CAB annual convention in Cleveland, Ohio.

“We both have a special passion for feeding the very best Angus that’s out there,” Beller says.

Back then Thomas was earning about 50% CAB acceptance, and Beller was building a name for himself as a feeder of high-quality Angus cattle.

Their chance meeting sparked a partnership that would lead to loads of cattle shipped from Homedale to Lindsay, with quality reaching 97% CAB and more than 50% Prime. Plus, there is an added bonus of lifelong friendship.

## Unusual beginnings

Jimmy Thomas started out as a dairyman, but in 1984 he made the switch to beef. He converted his milking facility into a home for a backgrounding program that began with



► When selecting bulls, Jimmy (right) and Kenny Thomas, Homedale, Idaho, look for those that gain more than 4 pounds (lb.) per day with high intramuscular fat (IMF), a low to moderate birth weight and ribeye that scans at least an inch per 100 lb. of live weight.

Herefords and transitioned to Angus when a neighbor who had used top carcass bulls was selling a group of black cows.

With the change in color came a change in goals. He set sights on the CAB premium.

“CAB interested me right off the bat because it’s the branded program that everything is measured against, and that is something I wanted to be a part of,” he recalls.

Today, Jimmy and son Kenny farm 850 acres of corn, alfalfa, wheat and dry edible beans to produce the feed for their

375 mother cows, weaned calves and any other cattle that enter their backgrounding program.

To build the herd they have now, they knew they needed a solid genetic foundation. Firmly disciplined in working toward goals, the Thomases found a genetic base that worked when they began buying bulls from Rancho Casino/Dal Porto Livestock in northern California.

“They have excellent cattle, great people and we’ve grown to become wonderful



friends,” Jimmy says. “To me, their genetics are second-to-none and they take really good care of their customers.”

When selecting bulls, father and son look for those that gain more than 4 pounds (lb.) per day with high intramuscular fat (IMF), a low to moderate birth weight and ribeye that scans at least an inch per 100 lb. of live weight.

That’s not all, of course, because they also keep replacement heifers.

“We haven’t bought a cow to put in our herd for 20 to 25 years,” Jimmy says. “All our cows have come from our own genetics.”

## Herd goals

When it comes to selecting females to keep, the Thomases always consider end product.

“I take the carcass data from the year before, match it with ranch calves and cross-reference it with our heifers in the feedlot,” Kenny says. “I kept about 20 heifers last year and eight decisions were based on the data.”

Through consistency in selection and management practices, the Thomases work to create an environment where their cattle can reach optimal condition before being shipped to the Nebraska feedlot.

“You can have the best feeder in the world (and he says Beller is exactly that), but you’ve got to start with something,” Jimmy says. “They don’t just fall out of the sky into his feedyard.”

They no longer retain ownership because the cattle are “just worth too much money,” but enjoy working with someone who values what has gone into producing those cattle.

“It’s nice to sell your cattle where you can receive premiums for the work you’ve done to make them the way they are,” Jimmy says.

Working in the semi-arid deserts of eastern Oregon and western Idaho, the Thomases expect their cattle to perform in what can be a rough environment. That’s why they target smaller-framed cattle that don’t need as much feed to maintain body condition. The trait has allowed them to create carcasses that are rarely above a Yield Grade (YG) 3 in addition to hitting the CAB and Prime marks.

“You have to set goals and be disciplined in your genetics,” Jimmy says. “You need to know the traits you are selecting for and stay on that same line toward them.”

Consistency is their key to meeting goals and creating carcasses that yield the consistent beef-eating experience consumers are looking for.

“It’s all about discipline,” Kenny agrees. “Our methods haven’t changed as far as feeding, backgrounding and calving. It’s just constantly trying to make the next crop better than the previous one.”

## Beyond the pasture

They aren’t just selecting and feeding to reach the premiums. After attending conferences where he met beef retailers, Jimmy decided he wanted to go one step further and pursue the plate.

He continues to select for what fits his ranch environment, along with what he has learned the consumer demands. He avoids large-ribeye bulls because retailers say they want a ribeye that makes the optimal steak on a plate.

Jimmy has also visited packing plants and seen the grading process. Before he began shipping cattle to Nebraska, his cattle were finished locally and harvested at a facility in Boise, Idaho, where he would watch every one through grading.

“It really opened my eyes to what people were talking about with ribeye and marbling,” he says. “If every producer had the opportunity to see that, it would be well worth their time.”

These experiences off the farm helped envision the target beyond the grade or grid, all the way to the eating experience when the beef reaches the plate.

“That is what we have been targeting for a very long time,” says Jimmy. “Anyone can say they have high-grading cattle, but when they pull the hides off there is no more guessing.”

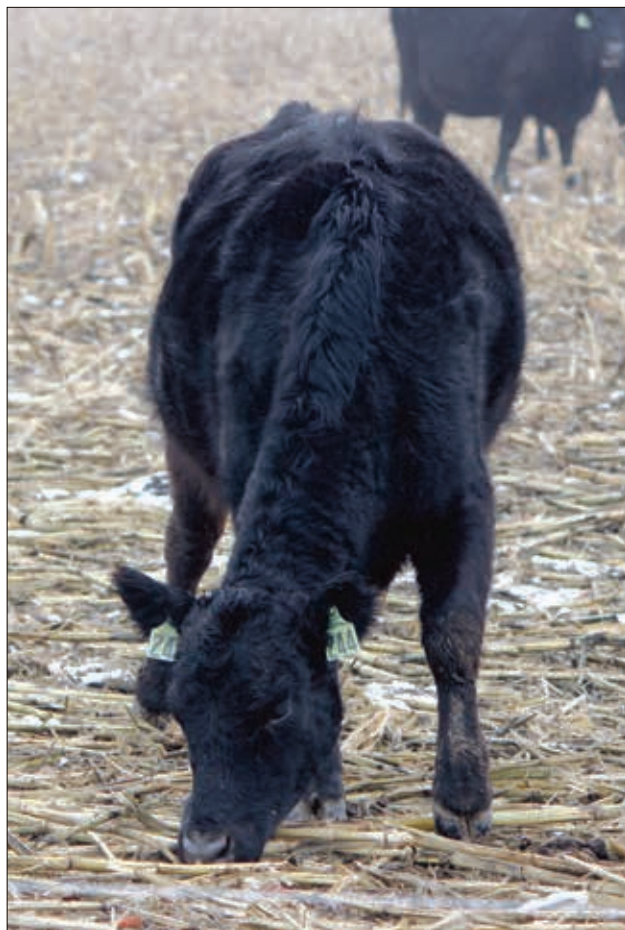
Whether a Prime cut or the CAB brand, the Thomases like being on the other side of the table as consumers, too.

“I enjoy the fact that if I go to a steak house I know I could be eating our product,” says Kenny. “That is what we are supplying.”

## Perfect partnership

When trying to supply the best eating experience, it helps to have the best people on your team. The Thomases and Beller are happy with the progress they’ve seen in their cattle in the years since they became business partners, but both have their eyes set on a prize of 100% CAB and Prime. They are constantly working toward helping each other make each load better than the last.

“We are so proud of what we’ve been able



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to do,” Beller says. “There hasn’t been a year since 2004 that we have gone backward in CAB acceptance.”

Though his cattle have won many carcass contests, Jimmy always has his eye on the prize.

“We just want to keep trying to make those calves better. Until we get a group that is 100% CAB and Prime, we haven’t made it yet,” he says.

Though still more than 1,200 miles apart, the friends are thankful that, by chance, they sat across the table from one another at the right time, in the right place.

“If it wasn’t for meeting Jimmy in Cleveland at the conference I don’t know that I would be where I am today. What started out as a feeding relationship has blossomed into much more than that, friendships and additional feeding partners,” Beller says. “Because of that, we’ve gotten to feed some of the best cattle in the world.”



**Editor’s Note:** Nicole Lane is industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.