

Partnering on Quality

Kentuckian hurries to wean, then preps calves for a Kansas partner by giving them time.

by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC



PHOTOS BY KATIE FISHER

Good partnerships are hard to come by and even more difficult to maintain. They take time, effort from both parties, and sometimes a little bit of magic. That's the paradox. One thing rings true for partnerships that last: The people or businesses are better together than they ever were apart.

Kentucky cattleman Charlie Hunt found the feeding partner he was looking for in McPherson County Feeders Inc., near Marquette, Kan. Recent data indicate both sides, along with beef-loving consumers, are better for it. Nearly twice the average, 53.33% of a pen of cattle harvested in spring 2013 qualified for the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand.

The spring-born calves left Kentucky late last November

weighing 640 pounds (lb.) and kept on their relatively slow-but-steady pace for 170 days on feed. Average daily gain (ADG) was 2.7 lb., but feedlot manager Allan Sents knew Hunt was not interested in maximizing that figure.

An Indiana native, Hunt grew up showing cattle and working on his father's dairy. He showed his first Angus heifer in 1950 and raised five daughters on a beef cattle farm purchased just after college.

With years of experience working in his favor, along with management lessons picked up along the way, Hunt arrived at an ideal position, now managing cattle for a daughter and son-in-law at Par-a-dox Farms near Ewing, Ky. At the spry age of 77, he knows what he wants.

While many cow-calf producers want calves to hit a maximum weaning

► **Above:** "Cattle have always been what I have liked the most," Hunt says. "We've just got grass and cattle. I tell people that come here, I get paid to do what I dearly love."

weight supported by their mothers, Hunt weans early, leaving more grass for the cows. The calves aren't affected though. From the time they are weaned, at 3.5-4 months of age, they never miss a beat.

"I can put those cows back out on just average pasture fields and then add another 10% to 30% cows on the same grass those calves would have eaten," he says.

Hunt follows a strict weaning regimen, one he has managed to get the kinks out of and that works for the calves. The batch fed at McPherson was weaned in mid-July weighing an average of 350 lb. and started right on feed.

"My calves never see a bite of grain until the day they're weaned, but they never have a day after that they don't have grain in front of them," he says.

Supported in that manner from the start, Hunt personally feeds them for the first 10 days. After the hand-feeding, they are turned out to a 19-acre pasture trap where they are backgrounded with feed and hay until they reach a weight of approximately 650 lb.

"They go right from here to the feedlot," he says.



► Indiana native Charlie Hunt (pictured with his wife, Carole) showed his first Angus heifer in 1950.

For Hunt, early weaning means more cows in the herd consuming the grass that wouldn't have been there, all the while growing the calves to their expected weight.

With quality in mind, he wants calves to gain consistently on a rising plane, but without reaching excessive weights. Yield Grade (YG) 4s have no place in his world, affecting the way these cattle have to be fed in the yard. He expects Par-a-dox calves to gain perhaps 2.5 lb. per day, a formula Hunt knows will bring out the marbling and cutability in his calves.

The other half

A partnership means there's a need for give and take, learning from one another and growing all the while. Sents had no problem adapting to Hunt's ideas, adjusting management to suit the customer.

He was accustomed to starting stocker cattle on feed, but the Kentucky cattle arrive a bit lighter and younger. Sents places them on a silage-based grower ration, customized to maintain a steady gain throughout the feeding period.

"The primary purpose was, with the high-priced grain, to let us postpone feeding that corn as long as we could," the feedlot owner-manager says. "We stretch the cattle out and try to keep the overall cost of gain more attractive."

The plan works. Cattle grow at a consistent rate, all the while maintaining their potential for premium quality.

"His cattle always start well," Sents says. "I don't think they've had stress to impact the quality."

They're not likely to encounter too much of it at McPherson County Feeders, where rations are calculated and analyzed with cost and beef quality in mind. Sents and his team work with customers to maximize the value of each calf they send to the lot.

Pen sorting is routine, based on type and genetic potential as they grow. Ranch cattle are kept in their own pen and are never commingled.

"We try to optimize the end point on marketing



► While many cow-calf producers want calves to hit a maximum weaning weight on their mothers, Hunt weans early, leaving the grass for the cows.



► Above: A recent pen of cattle from Par-a-dox Farms qualified as 53.33% CAB. The cattle were fed at McPherson County Feeders Inc., near Marquette, Kan.

► Left: "Angus is still the best breed of cattle. I honestly feel that," Hunt says.

the cattle to get them sold when they have the best opportunity to grade USDA Choice and hopefully *Certified Angus Beef*," Sents says.

Hunt's cattle aren't really big — the group last spring finished at barely more than 1,100 lb. — but going to harvest at near 14 months keeps the cash flowing for the Kentucky farm with both spring- and fall-calving herds.

Sents understands that, like each customer, Hunt's herd, management and goals are unique. That understanding says the relationship will stick.

"He came here in 2011 and looked at that first set of calves, and we've had no problem ever since," Hunt says. "He wants the calves, and I want him to have them."

Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist for CAB, has worked with McPherson County Feeders for many years and knows that staff there bring some unique qualities to the table, too. They feed perhaps 20,000 head each year, treating each customer like a valued part of their team.

They know how to hold the line on cost of gain, yes, but Fike says it's the rapport and ready sharing of feedlot and carcass data with producers that keeps improving herds on customer farms and ranches.

The feedlot earned CAB Feedlot of the Year awards in 2005 and 2010.

"McPherson County has transitioned from being a very commodity-focused yard to a quality-focused yard over the last decade," Fike says. "If you look at the history of their CAB acceptance rates from the mid-2000s, it has more than doubled. Their focus on quality has been stellar."

The finish line

Growing a calf from start to finish is a long process compared to any one segment of the cattle business. If parts of that process are 800 miles from each other, only a great relationship can yield great results.

Modest in his role and impact on the cattle achieving such high marks for quality, Sents is quick to brag on Hunt as proof there's a way to produce high-quality, high-cutability cattle.

"The combination of that low percentage of Yield Grade 4s with high-grading cattle, I think is a great incentive and example for the rest of the industry to see what can be done if you put effort into the breeding program and the selection process," Sents says. "We just put frosting on the cake."

He credits CAB for helping build relationships over the years.

"To know that we are involved in an organization that has that kind of staying power and potential," he says, "I think that relationship is one that gives us hope for the future."



Editor's Note: Laura Conaway is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.