



Great Expectations



Fink Beef Genetics started with nothing but a commitment to develop the best.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

A boy and a girl grew up in the 1960s on eastern Kansas farms that had registered Angus cattle. While he honed judging skills at Northeast (Miami) Oklahoma A&M from 1969 to 1971, she was crashing gender barriers as the first female FFA president at her high school and a National 4-H Beef Award winner in 1971.

Galen Fink and Lori Hagenbuch were destined to meet a couple of years later, when Lori was a freshman at Kansas State University (K-State), where Galen was finishing his degree and working at the beef barn. She was representing the Kansas Junior Angus Association as an officer and showing cattle at the World Angus Forum in Kansas City, Mo., when she caught Galen's eye.

Ostensibly, he was there with the 100 or more Angus steers K-State helped prepare for youth from all over the country. But he had to admit, "It was love at first sight." When they got back to campus, he called her for a Thursday night date at Dairy Queen.

They were married in 1975, opening a new chapter. To start the next year, Galen moved from a stint in graduate school to full-time manager of the K-State purebred

beef unit. Lori finished her degree in animal science that fall and got "halfway through graduate school" in reproductive physiology.

Meanwhile, they were buying a few Angus cows and keeping back heifers. Of course, they had no land of their own, but luckily found a pasture to rent. They couldn't even afford a bull, but that wasn't the main reason they built up with only artificial insemination (AI).

Building a foundation

The Finks have always been students of the Angus breed and business, but not always from formal education. Lori set aside her quest for a master's degree to break another gender barrier, as the first female to lead the Kansas Angus Association in what was known as "secretary-fieldman" in 1979. She would hold the post for 10 years.

For his part, Galen was applying his lessons to herd management.

"I got burned out on judging after two years, but it helped us notice all the tall, narrow, no-gut cattle all around us," he says. At K-State, "We concentrated on the Angus quite a bit more, and used more proven bulls."

Building their Angus herd was a sideshow, but every mating was also based on proven genetics. "We had about 20 cows in the mid-1980s," Galen recalls. But then a key purchase foreshadowed great expectations.

Thirty heifers from Montana's Hyline Angus in 1987 provided the necessary boost to complete a foundation. They spread that base far and wide, pioneering a new concept in networking. Besides renting pasture, the Finks began to rent space in their customers' cows, implanting embryos starting in 1988.

The "Fink type" of cow had been established. "We thought the type was wrong in the 1970s and '80s," Galen says. "We rejected that model and went for more volume and muscling. That set us up for the 1990s."

Total focus

A 15-year era closed and another opened when Lori stepped down from the Kansas Angus job and Galen left K-State to better organize Fink Beef Genetics. Megan was born in 1990 to help mark the era.

"We decided if we were ever going to make it on our own in the seedstock cattle

► **Above:** Galen and Lori Fink started compiling their Angus herd in rented pastures, expanding by renting space in their customers' cows to implant embryos. The ranch they purchased a couple years ago near Randolph, Kan., has given them and daughter Megan (center) a sense of belonging, Lori notes.



Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award

business, that was the time,” Lori says. Though she would soon accept an area position for American Breeders Service (ABS), it was an end to “steady jobs with paychecks and retirement plans. We were going for the entrepreneur way of life.”

They hosted a production sale, a private treaty affair with 25 bulls that fall. It was a modest start, but reflected solid quality and a growing customer network. As a next step after embryo transfer (ET) with customers, the Finks began keeping some of their cows in customer herds. “We owned the cows, made the breeding decisions and bought the calves back,” Galen says.

From their first Angus cow purchase in their first year of marriage, the couple had put every available dollar into their herd, to the exclusion of buying land or fancy equipment.

“It wasn’t so much our master plan as just what you do when you don’t have money,” Galen says. “We had to get our herd built up some way, so we tried to devise ways of growing without buying land. We thought land was too high, for us, at the time.”

They avoided debt and took small steps. “It was poor,” he says. “A lot of nights, we wondered where the money was going to come from.” The cattle were

not poor. The bulls worked for people, who comprised a kind of support network. “If we thought about any changes, we talked with our customers and they kept us on track.”

Partly owing to that network and reputation as the Angus herd that had put everything into its cows, the first female sales were “really good,” Galen says. “They put a little gravy on the potatoes, which we kind of needed to keep us going, since we started with nothing.”

Conception to consumption

That rising star helped the Finks through the challenging cattle-cycle crash of the mid-1990s. In fact, they found a way to diversify into a whole new arena, with real meat, potatoes and gravy.



► The Fink breeding program makes use of only proven genetics, but Galen says those are getting harder to find. “If a bull’s not perfect — based on ultrasound — then the industry moves on,” he laments. “You should just use ultrasound to stay away from the bad ones.” It takes a few years to see if breeding choices are right or wrong, the Finks say. Most bulls are seven or eight years old before they use them.

They opened the Little Apple Brewing Co. restaurant in Manhattan, Kan., in 1994. After some adjustments, Chef Russ Loub joined the company, which has been a licensed *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand restaurant ever since. It’s also won the Kansas Beef Council “Beef Backer of the Year” award several times, and a nomination for the national award.

In the next decade, the Finks and their business partners would add CAB steak houses in Council Grove and Junction City, Kan. “We’ve tried to do our part from conception to consumption, developing supply and opening new markets for CAB in Kansas,” Lori says.

On the cattle side, Galen says they have included carcass traits since 1990,

“without chasing it.” Use of a loaded word like “chasing” points to underlying concerns that too many Angus seedstock breeders are tunnel-visioned on ultrasound scans for intramuscular fat (IMF).

“When a cow brings \$200,000 because she’s 0.95 IMF, and you pass on a \$5,000 cow that’s better in other ways and still shows 0.65 IMF, that’s chasing it,” he clarifies. “Don’t get me wrong, I think you should add all the marbling you can without losing anything else. But you should be sure.

“It’s not a problem with commercial guys — most of them could probably pay more attention to marbling — but on the registered side it has gone ballistic,” Galen maintains. “In the Angus breed, we need to

pay relatively more attention to ribeye in proportion to carcass weight.”

Results in commercial herds prove Fink genetics can produce jaw-dropping levels of marbling without single-trait errors. Longtime customer Namminga Farms, Springfield, S.D., was the first “Aim High” series feature example in the *Angus Journal*, noting 85% CAB acceptance on 173 steers in 2000.

A couple of years later, a neighbor and exclusive bull customer won \$50,000 for hitting the target. Wickstrum Farms, Westmoreland, Kan., placed second in Best of the Breed (BoB) for 2002, but they did it with twice as many cattle (160) as the winning entry, and they did it with 90% CAB.

“We’ve never sold them a set of bulls that were extreme for marbling,” Galen says. “They would be above-average, but still middle of the road. Environment and management will bring out the best in our genetics.”

The Fink breeding program makes use of only proven genetics, but Galen says those are getting harder to find. “Or maybe we’re getting pickier ... there are so many EPDs [expected progeny differences] now that you can always see some holes. But it seems like we are turning the page faster and faster.

“If a bull’s not perfect — based on ultrasound — then the industry moves on,” he laments. “You should just use ultrasound to stay away from the bad ones.” It takes a few years to see if breeding choices are right or wrong, the Finks say. Most bulls are seven or eight years old before they use them.

Relying on customer feedback

“We want to see their daughters work rather than take everybody’s word for it,”

“In the Angus breed, we need to pay relatively more attention to ribeye in proportion to carcass weight.”

— Galen Fink

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Galen says. “We have used bulls as young as 4, but we have also had ghosts come out to haunt us, such as latent disposition or foot problems. It takes time and customer feedback to find the right choices.”

Knowing that a significant share of the market practices crossbreeding, the Finks added Charolais genetics in 1999. In that breed, they made an exception and stressed IMF more because it was a relative breed weakness.

“In a way, this was our answer to all the pressure to produce Angus that grow and grow,” Galen says. “There will come a time when they won’t want cattle so big, but if they want them now, they can terminal-cross.”

Whatever their customers’ strategy, the Finks will help them at sale time. They won’t buy, but their networking expertise will make the right connections. A recent sale book notes a half-dozen alliance options and contact information for nine feedlots, most of them CAB-licensed.

The Fink Influence Calf Sale, the longest-running such event in the country, started in 1995 and has helped more than 14,000 calves sell at the Manhattan Commission Co. since then. Premiums have been \$3 to \$10 per hundredweight (cwt.) on steers and \$8 to \$17 per cwt. on replacement heifers.

A Fink Influence Female Sale started the next year and now draws 1,000 head per year through Superior Auctions video sales. Whether local or national auctions, private treaty or retained ownership, the extended staff offers help. Barrett Broadie is based at Ashland, Kan., and Gene Barrett at



► Galen, Lori and Megan Fink of Fink Beef Genetics, Randolph, Kan., were honored with CAB’s 2008 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

Grantville, Kan. Tommy Mann and Charles Robert Stevens take care of Southern customers from their Florida base.

Industry participants

Regardless of other demands on their time, the Finks have made it a point to “give back to the industry.” Their county, state and national association and service memberships make for a long list, primarily service and leadership.

Galen has been especially active in the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF),

which honored him and the family as 2000 Seedstock Producer of the Year, then for Continuing Service in 2002 after his term as BIF president.

Galen and Lori were also honored with the 2008 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award Sept. 13 at the CAB Annual Conference in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

During the past 18 years, Megan has grown to be an active partner in the ranch, helped along by 4-H, FFA and junior breed association leadership and beef projects. “She loves working with and being around cattle and has a natural talent with them,” Lori observes.

Nothing can match that mutual family affection, but the Finks all love their new home and ranch headquarters. “Until two years ago, we were implanting more than 1,000 embryos and selling 600 bulls a year, all out of a 40-acre rented base,” Galen says.

Unlike the Finks, the place they bought near Randolph, Kan., had been idle for 50 years. It took a lot of work to clean up, but already shows all the signs of becoming a showplace for the functional Fink cows and their owners.

After all those years of “living poor,” Fink Beef Genetics, now among the top 20 volume seedstock producers in the U.S., has arrived. “This place has given us a sense of belonging to a community,” Lori says, “a sense of home.”



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PHOTO BY MIRANDA REIMAN

