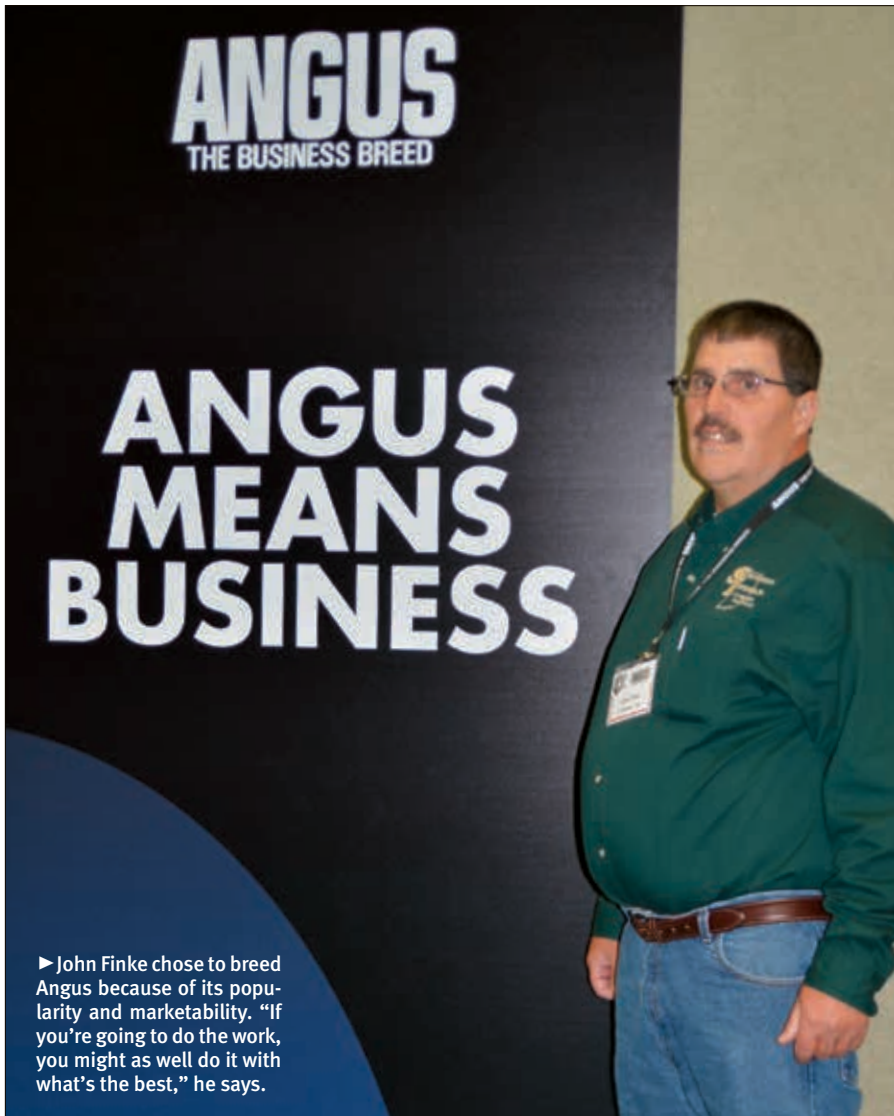


Weathering the Storm

Angus cattle and family help Indiana man survive the storm of cancer.

by Kasey Brown, associate editor



Health issues

However, metaphorical winter moved in and sent a blizzard in the early 2000s. Nothing is more frustrating than feeling under the weather and not knowing why. Finke's health had declined for a few years, and the dairy suffered in parallel. Finally, he admitted the cows were too much and they were sold, with only a few heifers retained to graze pastures.

In 2003, after being diagnosed as “allergic to the water,” he took a more assertive approach. Finke called some of his friends in the health profession and asked for three recommendations for doctors in Indianapolis. He called all three on a Sunday, he says, and one called back that night. The doctor wanted to see him Monday at 1 p.m., and Finke was in surgery that afternoon at 5 p.m. with a diagnosis of cancer and an aggressive treatment plan.

“I was lucky to have good, aggressive doctors and a faithful family,” he says. During the next three years he underwent 10 surgeries, more than 70 chemotherapy treatments, and was put on life support three times. He notes that in those three years he was in street clothes only five times because he was either in the hospital or in bed the rest of the time.

As he struggled with his health, his mom passed away and his dad remarried.

Silver linings

His stepsister, Deena Stoner; her husband, Jon; and their two children, Nick and Katie, turned out to be a focus point in Finke's treatment and consequent remission. Finke concentrated on living so he could see Nick and Katie walk, talk and enjoy life, he says.

Meanwhile, his dad, Stoner and her husband purchased a few commercial beef heifers to join the Holsteins in the pastures. As Finke felt better, he says he and Stoner joined forces to start a purebred herd. She was highly influenced by Gelbvieh, so they went to a sale in Illinois during a snow storm to buy seven bred heifers. After the Gelbvieh females calved, Finke was convinced Angus was the way to go, and he persuaded his stepsister to get Angus embryos after they calved.

“Holsteins are a dominant breed. Holsteins promote. Holsteins have genetics. Holsteins have what the majority of people

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John Finke, of NicKatie Farms, Columbus, Ind., weathered two snow storms to get his start in the Angus business. Those cows — and the family he tends them with — help him battle his own personal storm as he fights to keep cancer in remission.

Like many beef producers, Finke was a dairyman first — a fourth-generation dairyman, in fact. He and his dad were partners in Finke Farms. His dad handled the 1,400 acres of crops and Finke managed their herd of Holsteins. He graduated from Purdue University with a degree in animal science with an emphasis in genetics, a passion for cattle and eagerness to use technology.

When he went back to the farm, they were early adopters of embryo transfer, a feat since

it was in the late 1970s. The farm hit its stride, and it sold cattle and embryos all over the world — to Russia, Japan and South America.

Finke was also involved in the dairy industry at many levels. In addition to involvement on the local and district levels, he served as the president of the Indiana State Dairy Association a few times, and served two terms as president of the Dairy Records Processing Center — the world's largest — in Raleigh, N.C.

“I was also lucky enough to judge at Louisville and was a member of Indiana's first Ag Leadership class. Life was pretty fantastic, and family support for each other was essential. Dad, Mom and I were farming partners,” Finke recalls.

PHOTOS BY KASEY BROWN

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want. It's the same thing with Angus. There are positives about other breeds, but the majority of the positives are in the Angus breed," he explains. "If you're going to do the work, then you might as well do it with what's the best. Do it with what has the most salability, the most attractiveness to buyers. People want Angus. The other breeds cross with Angus. I've gone back to find old bull books in other breeds, and those other breeds weren't black then and now they are. Obviously, Angus is doing something right."

Getting into Angus

Finke got into the beef business in a snow storm; he got into the Angus business in a blizzard. He says he had read about the Sitz ranch while he was sick and he wanted to start there.

"I wanted to go to Montana. I wanted to see Pathfinder cows, I wanted to see good old cows. I wanted to see genetics that you read about," he explains.

Stoner worried that Finke wasn't strong enough yet, so she went with him to Montana. Upon landing at the airport, the hotel called asking whether they wanted to cancel the room since the October blizzard had many roads closed. Finke called Jim Sitz, who said the roads would be cleared soon, so he decided to forge ahead in blizzard conditions.

Coincidentally, the Monday of the sale was the Monday of the stock market crash. Many investors had buyers at the sale, but the money dried up that day. Finke noted one of these buyers was from Indiana, though they had not met before. This buyer was friends with the Sitzes, and had a list of the top cows to buy. Since the buyer didn't have the backing of his investor anymore, he gave the list to Finke.

With guidance from the list, Finke and Stoner bought a trailer load. They were in the Angus business.

Since then they have developed a seedstock operation that markets bulls. They keep bulls from only the top 50% of the cows, and the bulls have to meet additional criteria. Those that don't meet the criteria are castrated and fed as steers by Stoner's husband.

Finke says they test all of their bulls at the Indiana Bull Evaluation Program (IBEP). Most of their bulls sell through the bull test's sale, though some are sold private treaty. Some of their former Holstein customers still



► **Left:** Finke stays active in regional and state Angus associations. He is able to do association work and rest when his body needs it.

► **Below:** Ultimately, his goals for the Angus cattle and the farm are for Nick and Katie to be able to use it for their future, whether they choose to go into agriculture or not.

buy from them now, and many travel from Ohio, Kentucky and Texas.

Genetics and management

Finke's love of genetics has not dimmed since college, and he says he uses genomics to learn more. He keeps records on all of their animals, and though they don't yet test every animal on the operation, he says they learn from the test results they currently have.

"It seems like many Angus breeders and/or commercial breeders could care less about

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for a reason. I
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but I try to do as
much as I can."**

— **John Finke**

genomics, but I think they are missing out. It's a tool," he asserts.

NicKatie Farms use 100% artificial insemination (AI), and Finke says he uses 75% proven bulls, and 25% new bulls. He likes playing with genetics, though he grants that he is not a gambler, just curious. This explains why he uses some older bulls, like RR Rito 707. He has bought stocked semen tanks from breeders going out of business, and this gives him access to some of the older bulls.

He says genetic testing and understanding help him manage away from genetic conditions. With Holsteins, he just learned to manage around conditions. He says breeders are used to hearing about them, so they just make sound breeding decisions — it is never in panic mode. He tests his breeding stock and refuses to sell any carriers or potential carriers. He keeps carriers as embryo recipients or sends them to market.

With his health still variable, he spends much of his time reading. About three years ago, he found a blog from an Australian researcher, Laurie Denholm, who did the initial research on developmental duplication (DD). In the blog, Denholm suggested pedigree lines to avoid as a new breeder. Finke says that those lines turned out to be correct.

He gives 100% to his cattle, but he listens to his body. This means he also has to give



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FINKE

100% to resting when his body needs it. He has issues with his legs because of the intense amounts of chemotherapy, so he stays careful. However, when he is resting, he is still able to be active in the beef industry. He first got involved with the Southern Indiana Angus Association after he got a state directory at his first Indiana Angus sale. The Southern Indiana Angus Association met shortly after the sale.

"Of all the organizations I've ever been in, none have ever been more welcoming, fun, educational, challenging or rewarding than [the] Southern Indiana Angus Association. They let me be a director to the state. Then I've tried to do my due diligence through the state as state secretary," he explains. "These are things I can do while I'm resting."

He certainly stays involved. He participates in lunch buddies at school for fatherless boys, he babysits his niece and nephew, and he volunteers at church and with the extension board. He still judges dairy shows and is an auctioneer. He says life is a blessing and he doesn't want to waste it.

Ultimately, his goals for the Angus cattle and the farm are for Nick and Katie to be able to use it for their future, whether they choose to go into agriculture or not.

"I want them to know that I did it for them, and in the process, I did it for me," he says. "God let me live for a reason. I don't know what the reason was, but I try to do as much as I can."

