



Full Circle

Missouri Angus ranch wins Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

There is a reason for just about everything at Circle A Angus Ranch. From the type of fencing to the genetic lines of Angus cattle, from identification (ID) systems to the prevailing work ethic and philosophy — even the symbolism in the name and brand — it's a very full circle.

In just 15 years, this giant of the Angus breed has amassed 8,500 productive cows on more than 30,000 acres in four locations in Missouri and Iowa. Based near Iberia, Mo., at the northern edge of the Ozark Plateau, Circle A is owned by the Dave Gust family of Orland Park, Ill.

Whether referencing cows or people in the organization, at least one common thread sorts them into “the good and the gone,” Gust says. “We have high standards.

You won't find a place with better people, cattle, facilities, ability and the will to do things right.”

The people include General Manager Mark Akin, Purebred Manager Jeff Gooden and Commercial Marketing Manager Jeff Windett. Among the things they do right are balanced-trait cattle that consistently hit the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand target, proven by 2,500 finished progeny last year at 95% USDA Choice or better.

Most of those are fed at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Irsik & Doll Feedyard (IDFY), Garden City, Kan., which turned in the nomination that easily won the 2006 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award. Gust accepted the honor Aug. 19 at the CAB annual conference in Seattle, Wash.

Circle A made headlines earlier this year with the champion value pen of heifers in the National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). Fed at IDFY, they went 75% CAB and Prime with a 4.39-pound (lb.) average daily gain (ADG) and a feed-to-gain ratio (F:G) of 5.54:1.



Circle A Angus Ranch
Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award

Starting with the best

Gust says he started with the Angus breed “because they're the best. We figured, all cows eat the same grass, so we might as well have the best.” Growing up around dairy cows in Wisconsin, he made his way in the business world before coming back to agriculture with the 1990 purchase of 638 Missouri acres for hunting.

“It was too big just to hunt,” he says, but not big enough for the cattle operation that started the following year with a few registered cows. “This ranch could have still been 638 acres and 200 cattle, but we like to buy underdeveloped businesses, raise the bar to world class and then help them grow. We're just now getting to the level we envisioned 15 years ago.”

Gust did not set out to dominate the seedstock industry. “We are more in the beef business than in the registered business. We are using the latter to develop genetics for the beef business, but when you look at the numbers, we are in the beef business,” he says. “We are out to produce good, quality beef.”

The management team is part of that vision. “It's a collaborative effort,” says Akin, who joined the operation within its first couple years. Looking back on his roots in Florida and Texas, he says, “I have made the transition from a purebred show guy to a cattleman focused on the beef product.

“The registered world was never big enough for what Dave wanted to build,” he adds. “The commercial industry is so much bigger, and there is more room for growth in the whole pond of the beef industry.”



► **Above:** “We are more in the beef business than in the registered business,” Dave Gust, Circle A owner, says. “We are using the latter to develop genetics for the beef business, but when you look at the numbers, we are in the beef business.”



► **Right:** Color-coded tags pay their way. Cool blue or hot pink goat buttons (for those carrying bulls or heifers) are attached to the white or yellow tags on heifers (sired by AI or clean-up bulls) after ultrasound sexing.

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Fishing and business

A lot of collaborating goes on around the fishing pond, a seven-acre lake on the headquarters ranch. “We have our best talks fishing; it’s just a vehicle for brainstorming, and you don’t have people walking in on you,” Akin says.

Witness the Angus Sire Alliance idea from conception to industry-leading reference tool. “We had run our first group of steers through a feedlot, and were not very pleased with them,” Akin says. In trying to make genetic corrections, he and Gust saw “some numbers go up and other numbers go down.”

Sitting by the lake fishing one day, Akin recalls the dialog.

“Seems like if we build up this trait, then we sacrifice another,” he said.

Gust cast his line. “Isn’t there some index we can use, like in the dairy business?”

“Nope.”

“Why not? There should be ... Hey, I think I’ve got something!”

“Idea or fish?”

“Both.”

Now, Akin says, “Nobody admits to single-trait selection, but if you emphasize one trait too much, something else could slip. The Angus Association had 14 EPDs (expected progeny differences) when we started talking about the need for profitability indexing after our sale in 1995.”

Circle A drew upon scientific advice in setting up the program. Geneticist William Herring and economist Vern Pierce of the University of Missouri, and Larry Benyshek, University of Georgia geneticist, helped set up the model to gather and analyze progeny data. Herring still maintains the Alliance program and all other Circle A data, which amounts to more than 80,000 records.

The ability and will to get it done was evident. “We don’t go to some board and debate it endlessly,” Gust says. “We do it.”

The feed-test station, with its 96 individual gates to track feed efficiency and profitability, went up on Circle A’s Huntsville, Mo., ranch in 30 days in 1996. Actual sire testing takes two years from conception to progeny carcass evaluations.

Extensive herd records also permit tracking other economic traits such as percent breed-back and stayability.

“At first, people thought it was just another gimmick,” Akin says. “But it soon proved itself in the industry, starting with our alliance cooperators in 36 states and our partner ABS Global, which tests 10 to 12 young sires here every year.” The concept proved itself in the level of feed efficiency built into Circle A cattle, he adds.

“With data from Irsik & Doll and the test station, we know our cattle’s feed efficiency last year was 5.1 pounds of feed per pound of gain, compared to the 6.32-pound average,” Akin notes.

IDFY manager Mark Sebranek consults with Akin to help market finished cattle from the Huntsville station. “We get the mates to some of them out here in western Kansas, too,” he says. “The feed conversion and gain are phenomenal, with a cost of gain \$10 per hundredweight (cwt.) under the average. If you can turn conversions down 1 pound, that’s a lot of money.”

At least \$20 per head, he and Akin estimate. “That’s \$20,000 on 1,000 head,” Akin says. “And although nobody has done the cellulose equivalency work, some of that has to translate to a more efficient cow.”



► **Above:** The ability to preview commercial progeny from the constant influx of new ABS bulls in the Angus Sire Alliance helps in keeping the edge, Jeff Gooden, purebred manager says.

► **Right:** Among the things done right at Circle A Ranch of Iberia, Mo., are balanced-trait cattle that consistently hit the CAB® brand target, proven by 2,500 finished progeny that last year graded 95% USDA Choice or better.





“There are things we find out by working together on a balanced approach,” Sebranek adds. “Too many people look only at carcass merit or growth or birth weight.”

The leading edge

Artificial insemination (AI), ultrasound data and rapid generation turnover in the seedstock herd keep Circle A Ranch on the leading edge of the breed. Registered cows typically sell as 4-year-olds, Gooden says. The ability to preview commercial progeny from the constant influx of new ABS bulls in the Angus Sire Alliance helps in keeping the edge, he adds.

“We are not scared to use bulls that nobody else has tried, after seeing their numbers and our commercial managers see the calves,” Gooden says. “We get an early indication. We are not stuck using the same bulls everyone else uses, and have been ahead on some of those.”

Through ongoing customer feedback, he comes to a point every year when there is a need to create 300 breeding bulls with certain qualities. “I look at the records and find the bulls we need to accomplish those goals,” Gooden says. The bulls may be available internally or through AI; rarely, Circle A buys a bull to fill a need.

“Being in Missouri, we have to put more emphasis on birth weight EPD, so we try to keep that under 2,” Gooden explains. “Moderate weaning weight and positive marbling and ribeye are basic. We have been focused on carcass traits for about 10 years now, so we have that built into our cow herd. If some bull has a little less in some area, the cows will carry it.”

Customers demand above-average structural integrity in bulls. “To get the bigger foot and bone, you may worry about giving up muscle or fertility, but we bring that in,” Gooden says. “If something doesn’t breed, they are out of here in a year.”

Gust wants to keep the business growing, but that is defined more as getting better each year rather than simply bigger. That’s one more reason the management team pays close attention to progeny carcass data. While marbling scores were moving up toward average Choice in the first few data years, Yield Grade (YG) was climbing faster. Strategic course corrections moved averages from near YG 3.6 to a lean YG 3.0 last year. Simultaneously, marbling scores barely hesitated before moving on to 6.86, where 6.0 meets the CAB marbling requirement.

A step ahead

Of course, animal ID is crucial to a data-driven company. All Circle A ranches have a premises ID, while the cattle carry radio frequency identification (RFID) and Missouri Quality System Assessment (QSA) program tags.

“We tag them postweaning,” Akin says. “It’s a three-tag system because they still have their calf tags.” The numbered tags are still the key to bringing back carcass data because packers are often not set up to transfer information from RFID tags, he laments.

“We need to be more proactive with ID and source verification so we won’t get beat up when we have problems,” Akin says. He and Windett went to Japan last spring. “[We] got there a day after they closed it up again, but the importers were very hospitable, and want U.S. beef. They just need us to do due diligence. The technology is out there.” Japanese and Taiwanese beef industry officials toured the Circle A Ranch in June and found a system in readiness.

Cow tags are not as high-tech, although the ranch experimented with electronic ID implants for cows a few years without finding enough applications to justify the cost.

Color-coded tags pay their way. Cool blue or hot pink goat buttons (for those carrying bulls or heifers) are attached to the white or yellow tags on heifers (sired by AI or clean-up bulls) after ultrasound sexing. The five-digit tags start with year of birth and the next correlates to ranch of origin. Serial metal clips and Bang’s tags add two more levels of ID.

“With the colors and numbers, we can sort them at a glance in a corral,” Akin says.

It’s even easier to move them through computer gates and alleys. “With our database, no matter where they come from or where they may go, our office staff will enter them and Dr. Herring will build pens for them so we can track them in the computer,” he explains.

The commercial herd has grown steadily, and continues to grow at about 10% annually. “If I wanted to be less critical, [I] could move the numbers pretty quickly,” Akin says. “But I have said from the start, what we don’t do right now in management



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we’re going to pay for later. That’s why we cull at every step.”

Gust appreciates good cows and people who know their cow families for several generations — especially if they are based on Circle A genetics. But most of all, he appreciates the business side and instills that in everyone he meets.

“We started this as a business first,” Gust says. “We make no exceptions for open cows; if 3784 isn’t making the grade, then 3784 will be hamburger somewhere — she can’t stay here.”

Never claiming to be the hub, Gust says he is “just a small cog in the wheel with a pretty simple job — I’m a cheerleader.” But the team also knows him as a coach committed to excellence.

“If there is an animal out there that is going to help our herd, we are going to buy it, put it into this herd and make it better,” Gust says.

The average registered herd only lasts seven years, but Circle A has already rolled on for more than twice that long. If you hear of a Missouri ranch for sale, or of a new feedlot being built near some ethanol plant, don’t be surprised if the cogs and wheels are opening up another chapter for Circle A.

“We’re here. We don’t have all this land and cattle built up so that we can sell it next year,” Gust says. “We are here to stay. We’re going to be here for the long run.”

