

You Can Go Home

Experience helps young producers return to family farm.

by Barb Baylor Anderson, field editor

Perfect timing brought Andrew Stewart back to the family farm near Greensburg, Ind. After graduating in 2006 from Purdue University with a degree in ag economics, Stewart went to work for Farm Credit Mid-America in Louisville, Ky. While he enjoyed his job, the retirement of a long-time employee at Stewart Select Angus provided an opening for him to return home.

“At the time I made the decision to return, corn was \$8 per bushel and soybeans were \$15. Land prices were high, and I could see a growing world population that needed to be fed,” says Stewart. “I knew there would be some risk, but I also saw great potential. Working off the farm for several years provided me with a good knowledge base to return to the farm.”

Stewart is now manager for Stewart Select Angus, handling all of the breeding decisions and daily activity with the 200-cow herd. Stewart Select Angus first began in 1954 when Andrew’s great uncle and grandpa bought a herd. Their herdsman for 38 years, Dave Smith, retired in 2011. In assuming the management role, Andrew keeps records using Angus Information Management Software (AIMS), and maintains data on performance categories, expected progeny differences (EPDs) and dollar value indexes (\$Values) for weaning, feedlot, grid and total beef value.

“We place a priority on performance and calving ease,” he says.

Merchandising focuses on purebred and commercial bull production, with 70 bulls sold annually with the “Sun SS” brand. Bulls

► Andrew Stewart says the experience he gleaned spending five years working in an agricultural business provided insight to make better decisions on the farm.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDREW STEWART



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN DAWSON

► **Left:** After graduation, John Dawson (left) went into financial advising before coming back to farm with his father, Rick (right). He credits his father for the success of the business, saying, “Dad offers the brainpower and serves as the nuts and bolts for every facet of the business.”

also are sold at the Midland Bull Test Station in Montana and the Indiana Beef Evaluation Program (IBEP) Bull Test Sale.

“The cattle operation is its own entity. We have 3,800 acres of crops, pasture and hay,” says Stewart, who helps his uncle Steve Gunn, cousin Josh Gunn, and father Jim’s cousin Tom Stewart with the grain side of the business. “We sold the sales side of our seed business, but still grow, condition and package seed corn and seed beans for the

Stewart brand under Monsanto. We feed some of the waste shucks and also sell them locally as another source of income.”

Dawson Angus

Similar to Stewart, John Dawson, Dawson Angus, Morocco, Ind., majored in economics at Purdue. In addition to returning home to manage the 50-head Angus cow herd with the assistance of herdsman Jeremy Goodwin, Dawson works off the farm as a financial advisor. John’s father, Rick, who started the

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cattle herd, manages the grain side of their operation.

John credits his father for the success of the business.

“Dad offers the brainpower and serves as the nuts and bolts for every facet of the business,” he says. “After graduation, I wanted to learn new skills and meet people, so I went into financial advising.”

The family markets cattle through the Dawson-Miller Featured Attraction on Cattle in Motion. The online sale over Labor Day weekend coincides with a three-day open house for people to view the cattle.

“This offers a great opportunity to meet other producers. We also sell bulls in the spring, and we recently started a freezer-beef program to generate extra income,” he says.

Using off-farm experience

Both young men credit the experience they gained off the farm in helping them master skills and expand opportunities in managing their respective Angus herds.

“As a financial advisor, I work with a lot of people in agriculture, both industry and farmers. I see the challenges other family farms face, whether it is in not doing any estate planning or keeping the lines of communication open,” says Dawson. “I have learned that you need to set clear expectations about each person’s role and have a transition or succession plan. Making a return to the farm successful is mostly about communication, not education or knowledge.”

Dawson’s role as Indiana Angus Association president also has opened his eyes to what is required to be successful in business.

“I showed cattle growing up, and I took for granted the amount of time that volunteers put into everything and the work that goes into running an organization and promoting cattle,” he says. “Now I know what it takes, and I am applying my financial advisor skills in taking a business-oriented approach for sustaining the organization.”

Stewart agrees that the experience he got spending five years working in an agricultural business provided some expanded insight for him to make better decisions on the farm.

“I got a lot of experience from another point of view working as a loan underwriter,” he says. “I often had to think outside the box and be creative in helping to make deals work for farmers that also met Farm Credit’s needs.”

Even armed with outside experience, both producers have faced challenges.

“You have to be open-minded and willing to listen to other approaches,” says

Dawson. “I struggle with not being immediately open to new technology like HD 50K, and getting the most bang for our buck. I have to be willing to educate myself on technology and determine what is cost-effective.”

Adverse weather in 2011 and 2012 challenged Stewart to learn to make decisions.

“With drought both years, I had to determine if and when to feed hay sooner and mix in corn gluten feed and straw. Our breeding percentage was down, and I had to reallocate and sell fewer replacements,” he says. “My dad and uncle taught me to work hard and let my work ethic speak for my decisions, even if performance is not up to par with others’ expectations. You have to never be afraid to ask questions and double-check that everyone is on the same page.”



► Merchandising at Stewart Select Angus focuses on purebred and commercial bull production.

Dawson plans to use these early years of experience as a basis for being the “big picture” person for the operation in the future.

“You have to plan for what you want to accomplish. Do we want to sell show cattle or carcass traits? I want to see where we are going,” he says. “It can be challenging working in a family business with someone who has always done things the same way, but you have to learn from their experiences and offer your own ideas, too.”

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Editor’s Note: A former National Junior Angus Board Member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelance writer located in Edwardsville, Ill.

Tips for the return

Returning to the family farm or seeking other farming opportunities where no family operation exists can be tough. Dave Baker, farm transition specialist with the Iowa State University (ISU) Extension Beginning Farmer Center, has some suggestions for young producers:

- **Discuss a return to the farm.** Communicate with all generations involved about what each other’s goals are, and draw up those goals in writing.
- **Engage in proper succession planning.** Make sure all generations are aware of what the future may look like, including transition plans, retirement plans and income needs.
- **If necessary, explore options** like farm expansion or adding enterprises or land, or agreeing to maintain an operation with less to go around. Determine a business structure.
- **Work off the farm first,** and let someone else pay you to gain experience and a different perspective so you can bring new ideas back to the farm.
- **Network in your current circles and in other circles previously not explored.** Seek the advice of experts, including resources like the Beginning Farmer Center, www.extension.iastate.edu/bfc/, so you understand the realities of modern agriculture, and can explore training possibilities or degrees. Lenders also are on the front line, and can help farming operations grow successfully.
- **Look into programs that specifically address the needs of young farmers.** Ag Link, www.extension.iastate.edu/bfc/farm, is a service to help preserve the family farm business by matching beginning farmers who do not own land with retiring farmers who do not have heirs to continue the family farm. The International Farm Transition Network, farmtransition.org, supports programs that foster the next generation.
- **Finally, accept if Mom and Dad aren’t really ready for your return yet.** Ultimately, young people who return to the farm must be treated as partners, not just as children.