

# Hopp To It —



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## Top Quality, That Is

Kendall Hopp is named 2012 CAB Quality Assurance Officer of the Year.

Story & photos by **Lyndee Stabel**

Managing the 7,500-head Shaw Feedyard near Ashland, Kan., is right where Kendall Hopp feels at home. He may not see the world as most folks do, but feeding premium Angus cattle with individual attention isn't for everybody. It takes focus and commitment, which Hopp exemplifies well enough to earn the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand's 2012 Quality Assurance Officer of the Year Award.

Most people build on a career to keep moving on to bigger and supposedly better things, but you could say Hopp took a different route in the cattle-feeding world. After graduating from Kansas State University in 1983, he started at McPherson County Feeders before moving on to manage Ashland Feeders and Hays Feeders.

Onward and upward, so it seemed. But Hopp kept thinking about a standing offer for a job back in the Ashland community, and in 2007 he called his friend Bill Shaw to accept.

### More hands-on

“I’ve had the opportunity to work for some of the most successful and innovative companies in the state of Kansas,” he says,

### Quality: Onward and upward

#### Fiscal Year 2011

355 head enrolled and harvested  
51% CAB

#### Fiscal Year 2012 (to date)

440 head enrolled and harvested  
60% CAB

“but I decided I’d be happier managing a smaller yard where I can be more involved in the day-to-day activities. We have all the tools we need to be successful, but it’s just a smaller scale, so we can be more hands-on.”

No question, the move has made others happy as well. Shaw says Hopp was the key to being able to reorient the feedlot.

“I felt that by bringing him in we could move to a new level and really focus on higher-quality cattle,” the longtime area cattleman says. “I knew he had the talent and understanding to make that work.”

Ashland, about 50 miles south of Dodge City and 75 miles north of the Texas Panhandle, would not make the top of most places-to-live lists, but it was exactly where

Hopp wanted to be. Not only does he enjoy the climate, but he is excited about the feedlot’s ability to fill a niche. Local grazing opportunities allow Shaw Feedyard to handle lighter, higher-quality cattle, for example.

Those who do put Ashland at the top make up another big reason Hopp was happy to move back.

“People out here think differently; they think bigger,” he says. “They have a ‘can-do’ attitude and believe anyone can accomplish anything if they’ll just work hard enough for it.”

After so many years in the same industry, many people may believe they know all there is to know about their job, but Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist for CAB, says Hopp would never claim that in the cattle feeding business.

“He’s not one to rest on his laurels and say, ‘I’ve got this all figured out.’”

“I’ve been doing this for 25 years,” Hopp says, “and I’m still learning, because this industry is constantly changing.”

Take cattle genetics, where producers are realizing more and more that black cattle bring a premium when backed by superior genetics. The best Angus cattle have improved

in every way, so managers have had to adjust the way they determine the finish date.

Hopp admits it has been a challenge to pick the right marketing point for cattle with high-powered Angus genetics. At their optimal finish, they don't look the same as other traditionally finished cattle.

"They are still gaining more than 4 pounds (lb.) a day, and at 1,400 pounds they're averaging yield grades (YG) of 1 or 2, but still making USDA Choice," he says. "It has been a definite learning curve to keep these cattle from getting too big."

He scaled that curve but keeps an eye on all the other moving parts and trends each day.

### Helping customers

Some people are driven by a desire for recognition, but Hopp wants no share of the limelight unless it helps customers. Working hard and achieving goals provide satisfaction enough.

"When he takes on a job, he'll do it and do it right," Fike says.

That means helping customers get the most value for their cattle, which come to the yard representing a "vast investment" and commitment.

"With a single load, they are trusting me with at least \$50,000 of their money," Hopp says. He takes that trust very seriously, determined to help them get the best return.

Premiums are one route available to those with high-quality Angus cattle, and Hopp works to make the most out of every customer's herd genetics. First, he suggests those with at least somewhat-known genetics retain ownership through the feedlot so they can see the performance on individual animals.

"Take that data and cull the bottom 10% of your cows that aren't producing," he advises, "ones with light birth weights or quality grades less than Choice." Next, he tells them to develop their herds to fit branded targets.

"Producers with quality Angus cattle that are enrolled in the source- and age-verified programs and marketed through the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid are earning an extra \$100 to \$150 per head," Hopp says. "That's huge, and people are crazy if they aren't taking advantage of it."

To help cattle reach those premium levels, he sorts them upon arrival. With a uniform pen, he can more easily maximize each animal's ability to reach an optimal finish weight.

"He really takes it to heart and takes it personally when he's sorting those cattle for customers," Shaw says.

Hopp also works to make sure every employee understands the value of each animal. He wants every worker to realize

that a high level of attention to detail and consistency can make thousands of dollars' difference.

### Sharing the credit

That's just one more way Hopp makes a difference, but he deflects any pat on the back to compliment the area and its people.

"We're lucky to be neighbors with one of the premier breeders in the world, Gardiner

Angus, and we've developed a good working relationship with them," he says. For example, Gardiner finishes some cattle that don't make the cut as seedstock. Many local producers use Gardiner bulls, and some of those cattle also make their way to the yard.

Shaw says success is more than proximity to this base of Angus producers, however. He credits much of it to Hopp's ability to pull in new customers through his past experience and relationships, and his skill at feeding and marketing cattle.

Two years ago, the yard joined the CAB Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP), which brought renewed contact with Fike, who worked with Hopp at other yards.

"He has brought additional focus to this yard and really made progress to move it forward," Fike says. "He truly sees the value of really good cattle."

Since moving back to Ashland, Hopp has been an asset in other ways, Shaw says. Besides his dedication to the feedyard, the knowledgeable manager has been a good



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mentor for his son, teaching him the different aspects of the yard.

"He's also great for the community," Shaw says. "In these small towns, we frequently struggle to get qualified, educated people who want to be here. But he's happy to be here, and he cares about the town."

Even with an unfailing commitment to excellence, recent market volatility and industry conditions have made cattle feeding a tough business.

"Anymore, we don't look to hit a home run," Hopp says. "If you start swinging for the fences, you're going to get your head handed to you, so we just look to hit singles and stay in the game."

With the dedication and care Hopp puts into Shaw Feedyard and its customers, it looks like extra innings and a pretty good lifetime earned run average.

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**Editor's Note:** Lyndee Stabel is a freelance writer for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



► Hopp says he understands that with a single load of cattle, owners are entrusting him with \$50,000 of their money. That's a trust he takes seriously.