

# More than Meats the Eye

John Stika leads with a can-do attitude.

by *Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

**A** farmer's son, an FFA alumnus, a Wildcat and a father — John Stika is all those and more.

President of the world's largest branded beef program, Stika is accustomed to labels, often typecast as leader, beef advocate and salesman.

In his ninth year at the helm of the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand, it can be a challenge to separate the man from the job. Meet with him for five minutes and you'll see labels barely scratch the surface of what makes the boy from Kansas tick.

Few can pinpoint the pivotal moments when everything clicked and a path to take was nearly impossible to miss, but Stika can. He remembers the day meat judging became more than just a contest, and the time he realized a long-held dream would give way to a new one.

The son of a farmer who grazed Hereford cows "on pasture that wouldn't grow wheat," Stika was raised near Lincolnville, Kan., in the Pilsen community. His mother raised three boys, John in the middle, while working full time at the local bank.

Stika participated in all of the activities at Centre High School.

"There were only 34 in my class, so every kid did everything for the most part," he recalls. Football, basketball, track, musical theatre — responsibility to all pulled back the curtain on what stole the spotlight: agriculture.

A meats judging contest to complete his State FFA Degree served as the first catalyst in a series that would map his destiny.

"I didn't win. I don't really remember what place I took," he says, "but I remember that I found it to be really enjoyable, just like when we processed our own products at home."

Aiming for February's coldest days, the family would hang beef in the barn to age before processing everything by hand, he explains.

It was a lone black-whiteface cow that captured the boy's imagination. "She was always kind of interesting, the only one who would throw a calf that wasn't red and white."

By high school John and his younger brother had purchased a few Simmental



PHOTOS COURTESY CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF LLC

CONTINUED ON PAGE 92

► Stika learned how to lead, when to direct conversations and when to sit back and listen.

## Meet the team ...

### More than Meats the Eye CONTINUED FROM PAGE 91

heifers to show locally and at the state fair. Enter the black-hided ones and it wasn't long before Stika was introduced to the Angus breed by way of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB).

"I remember my high school ag teacher telling me about this program that the American Angus Association had started called Certified Angus Beef and how it was something I'd better keep my eye on," he says with a grin. "That was back sometime between '85 and '89."

Dreams of becoming a veterinarian shifted to the back of his mind as memories of that meat judging contest took their place. The final high school FFA trip to Manhattan, Kan., solidified the change and opened his eyes to a wider world.

"I started to see that there was really a spot in the industry for whatever interests one had," he says. "Whether crops, livestock or agribusiness, walking around on that [Kansas State University] campus really set my mind on fire."

Where to attend college was never in doubt. "I honestly didn't know there was any other option," Stika recalls, noting he was still on the prevet track at enrollment.

Two years later, he enthusiastically changed his major to animal science and industry. Building on his foundation and upbringing, he took advantage of the opportunities college offered — meats judging, livestock judging, meat-animal evaluation and academic quadrathlon.

#### A pull toward passion

Turning points, stepping stones, the times in everyone's life that bring about change — for Stika, those often came in the form of people.

"There's always somebody in your life, at every stage, that is influencing you into who you are and the way you're going to see the world and who you're going to become," he says.

With graduation in his rearview, there was one person in particular with whom he refused to part.

Deanna Nichols grew up in Holcomb, Kan., 250 miles west of Pilsen. Yet, through FFA she and John shared a mutual mentor who told them both, independently, to "look out for one another" when they made it to K-State. At the time, they each rolled their eyes. They were engaged four years later.

Ask Stika if judging still has an impact on his life and he will crack a smile.

"The summer after I graduated from K-State, before I began my masters, I must have judged 25 or 30 county fairs," he says. "Is judging still important to me? It paid for my wife's wedding ring, so yes, it still holds value at work and at home!"

Observing his own academic mentors led Stika to realize the impact he could have on students who shared his passion for agriculture, and that spurred his desire for higher education.

With a master's degree at K-State mostly complete, the couple visited Iowa State in the cold of February, and the University of Kentucky in the spring.

"It made it a little bit easier that I didn't have to change mascots," Stika jokes about exchanging one Wildcat for another.

"While both programs were great options, my bride-to-be said I was more than welcome to go to Iowa State, but that she was headed to Lexington," he explains. "Honestly, if I didn't go to Kentucky, I'd probably not be sitting here in Wooster today."

#### A change of plans

Sitting in Wooster, Ohio, had never crossed the young man's mind when the pull to begin coaching Kentucky's judging team sooner than expected enticed him to leave incomplete master's research at K-State. He returned to wrap that up just before his Ph.D. preliminaries at Kentucky. The pattern would repeat when Stika packed his bags prior to graduation again, this time headed back to Kansas. He completed his doctorate in 2002.

"If you look at my graduate-student path, that is not the career path of a successful university professor," he says, though that's the path he thought he was on those first three years at Kentucky.

Kentucky was full of promise for the young couple living on a small cattle farm with a judging-team stipend of \$10,000. Besides a great education for the aspiring professor, there was real-world experience to be gained.

Stika loved engaging students in the applied science of judging and planned a career as a professor like his mentors before him. Yet another turning point seemed imminent as appreciation for using research met a lack of drive to conduct it. What once seemed such a tangible goal became a false reality.

"Evaluate where your passion is, where your love is, what you're engaged in and what you're disciplined enough to focus on," came the realization that it was not academia. "There was that pull to be a part of the



**"He had a gift from virtually the day he was hired. He could take information, meet with a large group of people and was never intimidated by the audience. He gained immediate respect."**

**— Larry Corah**



► Stika's a teacher still. Though not often in a classroom, his impact on others remains. Through industry events, writing, overall involvement in still-growing ways, he teaches and others learn.

**“I am purely a product of my environment, of the influences I’ve had within CAB, the American Angus Association, the interaction with the team, the licensed partners, with breeders, with the Board; and I just try to improve every day.”**

**— John Stika**



scientific community, but the applied component of it.”

A call from CAB’s Larry Corah couldn’t have come at a better time.

“Larry talked with me about a job and with it the option to move to Wooster or back to Manhattan,” he recalls. “I’m not even sure we heard him mention Wooster.”

Leaving school early, in 1999, he and Deanna made the trip back to Kansas where he became CAB’s newest hire. As assistant director of feeder-packer relations, his task was to engage the feedlot side of the business, soon a booming growth area that revealed new talents.

Within six months, Stika moved up to director of the Supply Development Team. Barely a year later he was appointed director of the Packing Division in Wooster.

“We left a loving community in

Westmoreland, Kan., to come to Wooster,” he says. “You know, we found just as loving of a community here.”

The move brought on more firsts, as he observed what the brand was up to on the consumer side. With the goal to improve CAB acceptance rates, Stika’s new role was to understand and utilize data to gain insight into

carcass utilization, all for the common goal of growing supply to fulfill the mission of adding value to registered-Angus cattle. Next came the post of business development vice president and the chance to learn from the other end of the supply chain.

### **There’s just something about Stika**

Some would say November 2006 came up fast for CAB’s newly appointed 36-year-old chief executive, only the third in its history, but Stika’s rise through the ranks was not surprising to the man who hired him and alludes to the father-son-type relationship they now share.

“He had a gift from virtually the day he was hired,” Corah says. “He could take information, meet with a large group of people and was never intimidated by the audience. He gained immediate respect.”

Observers say Stika has the best of learned

and innate talent. There’s something special about a guy who can laugh at himself and yet silence a room, along with a bit of intrigue that’s hard to put your finger on.

He brings a unique combination of a gregariously extroverted academic, blending a scientific mind-set with a big personality that makes difficult topics easy to understand whether you grew up in the industry or not.

Stika walks into a staff breakfast and people perk up, and he walks out of the office patting someone’s back for a job well done. His office door remains open. Covered with purple K-State Wildcat memorabilia, it’s a warm place — one where ideas are welcome and input is encouraged.

“What I saw in John was a unique blend of intelligence and sincerity,” Brent Eichar says. Perhaps no one can better assess his character than CAB’s senior vice president and veteran staffer who works in the office next door.

Eichar was there shortly after the brand met in founding executive Mick Colvin’s garage, when the torch was passed to Jim Rieman in 1999, and when Stika was appointed to lead. In fact, it was Eichar who made the nomination and served as interim president for a short while.

“It was an easy decision for the Board to make,” Eichar says of the Louisville, Ky., Board meeting. “There was a real spirit of unity; it was unanimous, kind of a no-brainer.”

When conducting interviews, Eichar likes to incorporate a simple fishing analogy. “Could I enjoy being on a boat with this person for eight hours? Are they likable, are they fun to be with?”

Even so, there’s more to Stika than just a good personality.

“He brings a nice blend of being personable, you can connect with him, and yet you’re also dealing with someone who is very competitive, very passionate, wants to do something, wants to make things happen,” Eichar shares.

It seems there’s a certain quality about the Kansas native, an ability to be presidential and yet approachable. When he speaks, he inspires. He’s learned when to lead from the front and when from the back, when to direct conversations and when to sit back and listen.

“He’s a guy with depth,” says founder Mick Colvin, long-retired but still watching from afar. “He’s doing everything that I would want a president to do.”

### **Staying the course**

Whether it was navigating the challenges

CONTINUED ON PAGE 94

## Meet the team ...

### More than Meats the Eye CONTINUED FROM PAGE 93

that came with adjustments to CAB specifications, wading through a declining supply or today's competition from outside sources, Stika holds a steady rudder.

In the face of decisions he sets a tone, Eichar says, adding that Stika faces things head-on and doesn't leave worry for the nearly 120 people on staff.

"He leads with a quiet confidence: 'We're going to do the right thing and we're going to get through it, and if we're wrong, we'll fix it.' That's not unique to our presidents," the senior vice president says, "but I think it's unique in such a young man."

So what about 28-year-old Stika, the one with plans and defining moments? Was there ever an event that foreshadowed the present?

"I would say it was the day I was hired," he says looking back, "because every day was something that challenged me more than the day before. Every day there was a draw to come and learn more, to try to be a part of a solution to any issue."

Those interesting days turned into years.

Today, "aside from the strip steaks," he quips, it's the people who keep him coming back.

Under his first year of shared leadership, the company's partners sold a record 585 million pounds (lb.). They exceeded 600 million lb. the next year. Don't try to credit Stika, though, who will only point to and emphasize the team.

"I am purely a product of my environment, of the influences I've had within CAB, the American Angus Association, the interaction with the team, the licensed partners, with breeders, with the Board; and I just try to improve every day. Fortunately, it's worked out positively, but boy, there was never a plan that by the time I'm 43, I'd be entering my ninth year with Certified Angus Beef as its president."

### Where to go from here

Whether reflecting on a career path while at Kentucky or the latest challenge for the brand, Stika says he's learned from others to never argue with reality. You'll lose every time. Rather, it's how you respond to a situation that sets the course for positive action.

Today's reality is a good one. In a still-struggling economy, CAB moves more than 70 million lb. in an average month and maintains its regard not only as the largest brand of beef, but a symbol of excellence to consumers around the world.

"This brand is not big because it sets its sights on being big," Stika explains. "This



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE STIKA FAMILY



► Stika enjoys constantly improving and transfers that mind-set to his three sons, (from left) Maccoco, Gavin and Tavis.

► John and wife Deanna have been through many moves around the United States, and still enjoy spending quiet time together in the mornings.

"They're a tough bunch. They're a creative bunch. They're resilient and a group that history would say has responded as needed to meet the demands of the consumer," he says. "There's nothing I would put past the beef community here in the U.S. and what they're able to do when given the tools and signals of what consumers want."

It's not always easy holding the reins of a company like CAB. Perhaps it takes a combination of strength and a bit of the same naïveté that led founding cattlemen to reflect, "We didn't know it couldn't be done." Mix that with passion and drive, top it off with respect for people and an industry that supports them, and Stika fits the bill.

Before any early meetings, phone calls or day at the office, John and Deanna spend time being still. Up at five, they relax on the porch each morning before the boys are up and a new day officially begins. Foremost in their thoughts are sons Tavis, Gavin and Maccoco, who are content just calling the man Dad.

So how does one begin to encapsulate a man of so many talents?

Look no further than friend, parent and confidant. It's time spent next to a wrestling mat or a baseball diamond, a bike ride with his bride or conversation at breakfast that makes John Stika who he is.

Sounds like somebody we'd all like to fish with for the day.



**Editor's Note:** Laura Conaway is a public relations and industry information specialist for CAB.