

# Making A Difference

Three beef enthusiasts share their passion and purpose to make a positive impact in the industry.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

**W**ondering what the future of agriculture holds? Who will emerge as leaders in the industry? Well, three young men who are passionate about their industry careers offer a shining example that the future is in good hands.

Those individuals are Dale Woerner, an assistant professor with the Colorado State University (CSU) Center for Meat Safety and Quality; Jake Geis, an associate veterinarian at the Tyndall (S.D.) Veterinary Clinic, and Matt Gunderson, who has a dual role as executive vice president with the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben Foundation and executive director of Ak-Sar-Ben's River City Rodeo & Stock Show.

Following, they each share their pursuits in the industry, along with thoughts on beef's future.

## Teaching and inspiring

Dale Woerner's zeal for a career in meat science was spurred from his involvement in 4-H and FFA at a young age and his continuing involvement with judging teams at the college level.

Recognizing that support for 4-H, FFA and collegiate judging programs has faltered in many states today, Woerner describes himself as lucky to have had those

experiences. Additionally, Woerner credits his mom for fostering his involvement in the 4-H foods and nutrition project area. Because much of the competition requires knowledge of nutrition, Woerner became well-versed in the nutrients offered by red meat.

Once he arrived at Texas Tech and combined his 4-H and FFA upbringing with collegiate meat judging, Woerner quickly became a standout in the industry. Today, as a meat scientist on the faculty at CSU, he is striving to pass his passion on to the next generation.

He says, "My number one priority in teaching students is to generate or rejuvenate an interest in production agriculture and make beef production fun." Woerner ranks teaching — be it a group of 4-H and FFA youth, college students or producers — among the most enjoyable parts of his job.

Additionally, he advises graduate students, mentors the CSU Meat Judging Team, and keeps his connection with 4-H and FFA by chairing their state meats contests. Woerner also chairs the National 4-H Judging Advisory Committee, which hosts an annual contest at the CSU facility in conjunction with the National Western Stock Show each January.

Preparing students with technical information so they can work effectively in their chosen field is important to Woerner. He notes that the need for the next generation to understand science along with production, supply, efficiency and safety is paramount. Woerner says, "We are challenged to teach more and more, and students have to keep up with that."

An added challenge, Woerner has noticed, is that many students with ag backgrounds are going into other professions, and there are particularly fewer male students studying agriculture.

"We need to address getting young adults to come and stay in the industry," says Woerner. Reflecting on the strong influence 4-H and FFA had in his own life, Woerner suggests, "It is time to reinvest in 4-H and FFA at the county level. That's the foundation and often the starting point for bringing students into agricultural careers."

Woerner is also working to make a positive difference in the beef industry via research. His work has encompassed beef, veal and lamb nutrient profiling; understanding beef flavor; beef tenderness surveillance; cookery methods and meat palatability; and understanding carcass composition and yield.

He has had an integral role with the Nutrient Database Improvement (NDI) project in conjunction with Texas A&M, Texas Tech and USDA. The effort updated the standard reference of nutrients for individual beef cuts. Woerner explains that the 2012 USDA mandate for nutrient labeling on meat products made it important for the beef industry to have current nutrient profile information.

The updated research identified that today's beef is leaner — a positive for the industry. Woerner says, "We hope this has a major impact on beef consumption going forward and helping people choose beef as a center-of-the-plate item."

New nutrient profile data for veal and for the Beef Alternative Merchandising (BAM) cuts is being updated in USDA's standard reference database, as well.

Looking ahead at challenges facing the beef industry, Woerner underscores that supply is the issue.



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“Rebuilding beef supply doesn’t happen quickly, and, in turn, limited supply drives beef prices higher, which creates another challenge for consumers,” he says.

Going forward, he says, “Flavor, tenderness and nutrition are the things we need to focus on to maintain domestic beef demand. People will pay for beef if it delivers those three things.”

### Focused on youth

From his own positive experiences showing cattle during his youth, Matt Gunderson is now committed to creating high-quality competitions and scholarship opportunities for the next generation. As an executive with the prestigious nonprofit Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben Foundation, which hosts the River City Rodeo and Stock Show,



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hosted annually in Omaha each September, Gunderson has the opportunity to work with youth and their families from across the Midwest — while also educating and entertaining the urban public. The four-day event draws 100,000

people and is considered the nation’s largest 4-H stock show and one of the largest indoor rodeos in the world — with a \$21.3 million economic impact for the region.

In the eight years since joining the Ak-Sar-Ben staff, Gunderson has been dedicated to making the event one of the best in country. Much of that strategy includes offering a premier educational and competition experience to the 1,200 4-H exhibitors and their families. He notes that many 4-H’ers are looking for contests that allow them to compete beyond the state level, and Ak-Sar-Ben has strived to offer a variety of competitive opportunities.

In addition to the livestock shows, contests for premier exhibitor, cattle fitting and carcass are also offered. Additional contests include public speaking, livestock judging, livestock quiz bowl and robotics. Their livestock judging contest — which is offered for students ages 14 through college age — draws nearly 400 competitors from 20 states.

The pinnacle of the Ak-Sar-Ben experience

is the more than \$120,000 in scholarships that are awarded annually to youth.

Gunderson has also had a key role in revamping the organization’s financial efficiency — helping it reach a breakeven status for the first time in 2013.

As Ak-Sar-Ben moves into the future, Gunderson says their top two priorities will be education and agriculture. He is excited about several new initiatives being set forth, including plans to expand their scholarship offering and plans to work with commodity groups to develop an online database of ag speakers and volunteers within the state.

Additionally, Gunderson and Ak-Sar-Ben are developing a refrigerated semi-trailer retrofit to become a mobile meat lab through grant funding from the Nebraska Beef Council. It will include display cases to hang carcasses to provide an educational component for exhibitors and the public.

### More than a veterinarian

Despite his busy schedule as a veterinarian, Jake Geis has taken on another role he considers important — being an advocate for agriculture via social media. Geis and his wife, Carolyn, who will graduate with her veterinary medicine degree from Iowa State University in May 2015, have created their own blog titled *The Cow Docs* ([thecowdocs.wordpress.com](http://thecowdocs.wordpress.com)).

Geis grew up on a cattle operation in Nebraska, and says that from his university experiences with others who were not familiar with agriculture, he felt a strong need to reach out and share positive stories about agriculture with those who have questions about the industry.

He says, “I wanted to reach beyond those people who already agree with you.”

While at the University of Nebraska, Geis wrote a column for the campus newspaper. In vet school he became involved in the Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program, a national online training created through the beef checkoff to develop a network of advocates engaging in discussions about beef with consumers.

Last spring, the MBA program selected five individuals seeking specialized training to serve as resources for national media outlets, journalists and consumers looking for more information about beef production — being selected for the program was the catalyst that prompted Geis to pursue his blog.

Today, he and Carolyn both contribute to it and share insight on everything from ranch life to caring for animals to offering perspective on current ag headlines in the news. Carolyn also shares beef recipes and cooking tips.

Geis is also using Twitter (@thecowdocs) and Facebook ([www.facebook.com/](http://www.facebook.com/)



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*thecowdocs*) in an effort to engage with a larger audience. He explains, “Our blog is the nucleus. It allows you to develop a thought and share a deeper perspective. But we live in a sound-bite culture, so taking 140 characters and putting it out on Twitter is a means to direct people to that deeper thought on the blog.” He uses Facebook in much the same way to drive traffic to the blog, but says it is also a great tool for posting photos.

The result? Geis says he has been surprised by how many people can be reached by being active with social media. In less than a year, the couple has amassed more than 500 followers on Facebook, with some blog posts averaging 200 to 400 views.

Geis is also working to connect with foodies and others on Twitter who may make controversial remarks about beef, so that he can share perspective from someone in the industry.

Ultimately, Geis says his goal is to be a resource for consumers — and the media — when they have questions about something related to the ag industry. He says, “I am trying to have conversations with people and give them a glimpse of my life. I hope when they see a headline or hear something about agriculture that they want more information about they think: ‘I should ask Jake about that.’”

Geis admits that the entire process of reaching out to a non-ag audience is outside of his comfort zone, but he says, “If you don’t go outside your comfort zone, you don’t have the chance to make a difference.”



**Editor’s Note:** Kindra Gordon is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Whitewood, S.D.