

# Natural Herdsman

A Tennessee cattleman is voted the NWSS Herdsman of the Year.

by Crystal Albers

In northeastern Tennessee, black Angus cattle dot the snow-speckled hillsides of fescue and shadows east of the Smoky Mountains.

Just off Highway 61, before the Clinch River snakes its way southwestward toward the small town of Clinton, you'll find Gamble Angus Farm — and Chris Johnson, the country's leading herdsman.

Here, the 35-year-old lives and breathes Angus cattle as the farm's designated fitter.

He and his wife, Jessica, have resided for the last five years in a small farmhouse just a few feet from the show barn. Today, Johnson is grooming the 20-head showstring for the Dixie National Angus Show in Mississippi.

It's another busy afternoon.

Lydell Meier, who manages the 150-head operation with his wife, Holly, joins Johnson. The pair tediously work clippers and combs to make the animals show-ready before they leave for Jackson, Miss.

"[A show] is a competition to start with, so to be competitive you need to do everything you can to make the animal look its best," Johnson says. "The better you are, the tougher the competition."

Those competitors, apparently, agree.

Fellow Angus fitters and showmen named Johnson the 2011 Herdsman of the Year during the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo.

The belt buckle award was more than 25 years in the making, beginning at the age of 9, when Johnson got his first taste of the showing.

## Lifelong love

Johnson grew up on a commercial cattle and tobacco operation in the western tip of Virginia — a short, two-and-a-half-hour drive east from Clinton.

Along with his two younger sisters, he quickly developed an appreciation for the showing through 4-H and FFA events in

Washington County and sharpened his fitting skills on the family's Angus-based herd.

After attending Northeastern Oklahoma A&M, Johnson followed his passion and became a freelance groomer for different cattle operations from Oklahoma to Kentucky.

"Once I realized I could make a living at it, that's what I wanted to do," he says, without hesitation. "After I made enough money to support myself, I didn't look for other career choices."

He traveled the countryside for nearly 10 years, prepping animals for shows and sales, before accepting a full-time position at Davis on the

Highlands. It wasn't long, though, before he began working at Gamble Angus — and building a reputation for quality show cattle.

"Even now, I always think I can do better; there's always something I can improve at," Johnson says. "I really enjoy this."

It shows. He's built a life around the show cattle business.

He met most of his friends while working on the show circuit, including his best man and wife Jessica — a fellow showing sweetheart whom he wed six years ago after first meeting at the Appalachian Fair.

With the Meiers, the Johnsons work, live and enjoy their time together at Gamble Angus, cradled by Hinds Creek.

"My wife helps a lot in the afternoons and weekends, feeding the cattle, washing and blowing," he says.

The extra help is needed during the all-hands-on-deck production sales hosted twice a year.

"All of our sales are mainly show heifer prospects. We'll sell about 70 in the two sales combined," he adds. "All need to be halter-broke, groomed and clipped before the sale."

When he's not preparing animals for shows or sales, though, Johnson checks cows, feeds and does other chores. It's usually dark by the time he calls it a day.



Chris Johnson

He also spends a great deal of time in customer service, traveling throughout the Southeast to junior Angus shows and all regional and national junior Angus shows, assisting current customers of Gamble Angus and building relationships with new ones.

"I really like helping kids get to junior nationals, to get to that point where they're competitive out there," he says.

And while he never had the opportunity to show at the National Junior Angus Show, he says, "every kid should."

## Deserving honors

Johnson takes that generous attitude to every show, including the NWSS, which he's attended every year since 1996.

"Chris is a very behind-the-scenes type of fitter," says Shelia Stannard, American Angus Association director of activities and events. "He's always back in the stalls getting the cattle ready. They always look their best when Chris works on them."

Even then, Johnson was surprised when he was announced as the Herdsman Award winner during the NWSS Bull Show.

"In years past, I've always voted on whoever I thought had done the best job and worked the hardest, whether they won or not," he says. "Certain strings looked better than others, and that was usually the result of the herdsman."

Johnson says he's humbled to win the honor. "Someday maybe I'll have my own herdsman working with an Angus string one day," he says.

Until then, he'll likely continue taking the greatest pleasure in seeing Gamble Angus customers succeed.

"The most rewarding thing is when an animal that we have sold helps a customer win a show and reach their goal," he says. "That's the most satisfying thing."



**Editor's Note:** Crystal Albers is assistant director of communications and web editor for the American Angus Association.