

President's Perspective

Phil Trowbridge shares his perspective on serving on the American Angus Association Board of Directors.

Story & photos by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor



What best prepared you for being a member of the American Angus Association Board of Directors?

Four brothers and four sisters. We were from a pretty regimented background. My dad was one who instilled in you a decision-making factor. When you needed to make a decision, you were going to make a decision. My mom was like that, too, but she was always a little softer. You have to be able to set your goals when you are on the board and don't lose focus of what you're doing.

That team effort that we had as nine kids

went a long ways. When we did stuff, it was as a family, and I feel pretty strongly that the board is pretty much a family. It's nice to have somebody you can bounce some ideas off of. You know, you always have your differences, but it always works out. Growing up with all those brothers and sisters and having the support of the rest of the family always made you do what you thought was best.

I also had been on a lot of boards previous to this one.

What were your main goals going on the board in 2004?

►Above: "Today was one of my really good days," Phil commented upon passing policy for how the Association would handle developmental duplication. "I think we really did something that the membership is going to be able to profit from. They will do very good with it. That's pretty important to me."

My big goal getting on the board was to increase communication with the members, and I think we've made some huge strides there, but so has communication. I hate the word transparent, because I never felt the Association had a transparency issue. We just had a lack of communication. I don't think anybody ever intentionally didn't tell members what was going on.

Rob Thomas and I were pretty serious about Angus TV when we were at the June board meeting in Colorado in 2008. That would have been five years ago. Most people would have thought we were a little loopy. It was a real far-out theory, but I think it all came together.

Part of that is evolution of the board (to agree to broaden the communications vehicles we use), but part of that is evolution of communication itself. You didn't have an opportunity to have television at a reasonable rate, or radio, back then. You just didn't have that opportunity.

You know, every once in a while I think we need to do a personal letter, which is what we did to communicate this new policy (on developmental duplication). There aren't very many folks who don't have Internet, but there are still a lot of folks who don't use the Internet. I know it's a big number when you start talking about postage, letter, envelope, the whole 9 yards, but I wanted people to know exactly what happened and how it happened, and we sent a letter to every member.

That's part of me — wanting to make sure when we communicate with people that they get it, they understand it and that we communicate with everybody.

What type of information do people need?

I talk to people who want to know how we calculate the \$B (dollar beef) values. It's on the website, but most of them don't know where to find it. I think we still need to try to communicate to them better where and how to access the information.

The real basic information is what most people need. It's something that we actually give them, but they don't seem to be able to find it. That's why I work so hard at communication, because once you talk to people, it's amazing.

You've been both a farm manager and an owner. How does that affect your perspective on the board?

I understand what it takes to manage

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owners, which is probably one of the very toughest jobs in the industry. The cattle part we can handle, but with an owner, you have to have communication.

One of the big advantages I had coming onto the board was that over that 20 years I was with Mr. Brody at Gallaghers, I developed some good communications skills. That's the key to most everything we do.

He hired me as a manager. My job — and he taught me this over the years — was not to kiss his ass. I was supposed to tell him what I thought was the best for his operation. That's what I would do.

Mr. Brody and I could get into some pretty heated discussions — about fertilizer, breeding techniques, farming. When we got all done, we also had an understanding that if he would say, "Thank you. I still want to do it this way," I would say, "Thank you. I understand."

What does it take to have good communication?

For example, one thing I started was a Friday fact sheet. We just gave him the basics of what we did. I didn't say, "Hey, I changed the oil in the tractor," but I gave him a view from 30,000 feet. I found that to be one of the best things we ever started doing, and that was back in the day when we thought faxing them was cool.

Those are the kinds of things I was able to learn and bring to the board. You can ask any board member who has ever been on the board with me, I keep saying

communication, communication, because we still to this day can improve it, especially with the technology we have today. How else could you have a board meeting at 2:30 p.m. my time and have a letter on the web with a policy by 5 o'clock my time? Two and a half hours later everything is there for everybody to see, and within 12 hours of that I have people telling me the pros and cons of it, which is pretty amazing.

Do you think that helps prevent rumors?

It's helped immensely. Even with this situation, I had people we couldn't communicate with fast enough. Some of it was we didn't know, but the rumor mill was still getting ahead of us.

I had a talk with a guy the other day who you could tell was madder than a wet hen when we started. Within a few minutes into the conversation he was like, "I understand. Thank you." That's the part of communication that I can't express the importance of enough. I will hardly ever turn down a phone call if I can take it without being rude. You address the questions and you go on. You can calm the waters with proper communication, and that is a big thing.

Back to what it takes to have good communication ...

I have to be careful because of my size, and I have a voice that can be the outside voice. I try not to use that. Body language is something I started learning with livestock

30 years ago. Understanding and using body language is another communication skill that's been a plus.

Since I've been on the board, I've learned you can affect the room by your action. It doesn't have to be any more than body language. Leaning forward, sitting up straight, giving somebody the tough eye vs. a soft eye. Your hand gestures. That has been a big asset for me on the board.

Most of my friends know I'm pretty direct. Some people think it's a negative, but I think once people get to know me, it's an asset. We don't dance; we just get to the point and go on. Most people like that. Once everybody realizes where they're at, then we can have a more serious conversation.

What are the big issues in agriculture that we as an association need to be watching?

It looks like our animal ID issue is going to come up again. It has become mandatory, so it's something that I would like to see us study a little more and see if there's something we can do to help our membership. We have the tag store, so you can get 840 tags.

The biggest issue is still animal activists. We need to do a better job of explaining to people what we do. Most of it is just a bad rap. There's always a bad apple, but I compare it to humans. If we talked about abused children as much as they talk about abused animals, you'd think all people were horrible. It's really a very, very small percentage.

That's my biggest concern. We haven't done a very good job telling our story. We have to let people know that this is a pretty good life for cattle. That's our No. 1 criteria.

Besides genetic conditions, what are the most important topics you've discussed on the board?

Genomics is a big deal, and Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). The Association board talks about all that stuff.

A big discussion we constantly have — and many boards in years to come will have — is how to enhance our registration paper to make it more valuable. We've continuously improved upon that. Now we can share why it's a good thing for people to register all their cattle and, getting all that data, how much more you can add to your customer's arsenal. Once you register them, you get all the EPDs and all the other data that goes with it. You have generations of pedigrees, and it's a big deal. It is something we work on constantly, and I think that will be a discussion point for years to come.



►The Trowbridges welcome guests ranging from bull buyers to chefs at exclusive restaurants to their home near Ghent, N.Y. The fence, first painted by Phil and the kids more than 20 years ago, got a fresh coat last year prior to P.J. and Miranda's wedding.



►When dealing with difficult situations, Phil Trowbridge puts things in perspective with a piece of philosophy shared by one of his commercial customers and close friends: If money can fix it, it's really not a problem.

With your emphasis on youth, do you think we're doing what we need to do with the junior program to keep young people coming back to agriculture?

I think our junior program is awesome. We've done a great job with that. We just have to stay on it. I look at what they've done with LEAD; I think that's a big plus. The new Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) is a great program. Anyone who has talked to me about it has said it was just tremendous.

How do you want to be remembered as president of the American Angus Association?

You know, I have really enjoyed it. Being president has been good. I don't mind being under the radar as president; I'm not looking for any kudos or any accolades. I just think I did what I was supposed to do. I hope we did the right thing in the right spots all the way across.

I told Bryce the Monday morning developmental duplication (DD) broke, I'm glad I'm here. I don't mind making tough decisions. ... I think it's important. The business has been good to me; the Angus association has been good to me; and I truly believe if you just do the right thing, everything comes around.

Honestly, if you ran a picture of a cow on the front of the magazine, it wouldn't bother me. This had nothing to do with my ego. The biggest reason I did this, the absolute biggest reason I went on the board, was because our kids wanted to stay in the Angus business, and I thought the best way for me to ensure that was to get busy and help them.

Not his first boat ride

Elected to the American Angus Association Board of Directors in November 2004, as a board member Phil Trowbridge has experienced the discovery of all five modern-day genetic conditions and the licensing of a DNA test for another. However, the 57-year-old Angus breeder from Ghent, N.Y., says this wasn't his first exposure to genetic defects.

In 1975, Trowbridge judged on the national livestock judging team for Alfred State College at Alfred, N.Y. While competing at a contest hosted by Blackhawk East, Galva, Ill., Trowbridge saw Black Marshall 482.

"I fell in love with him," he remembers of the bull nicknamed Sport. "I liked that bull so much I came home and I bred all my cows, all my dad's cows, all my neighbor's cows to him."

About a year later, Sport was found to be a carrier of syndactyly, or mulefoot.

The approach to genetic conditions and defects has changed considerably, Trowbridge notes. "The big advantage we have today is we can test for it. We know what we've got; whereas then it just pretty much wiped us out. Now we have enough science that it makes a huge difference."

Without the availability of DNA testing, several sire lines were lost to syndactyly, heterochromia iridis (white eye) and osteopetrosis (marble bone) in the mid-1970s. At the time, the only way to prove a sire clean of a defect was to breed him back to 35 of his daughters with no defects found in the resulting progeny.

Trowbridge says he helped Sir William Angus of Craryville, N.Y., prove a Sport son free of the defect.

"We took daughters, flushed them to him, put the embryos into recipients and then, to expedite things, we actually took all the embryos C-section so we could cut six months out," Trowbridge says. "Everybody went through all that testing only to find out that nobody cared. He was by Sport; he was done. ... Thank goodness today we don't have that same philosophy. Most people now are starting to trust the science."

A new era

That science and the familiarity with DNA testing allowed the board to handle developmental duplication (DD) differently than it has genetic conditions in the past, Trowbridge says, explaining what had transpired since American Angus Association CEO Bryce Schumann called him Thursday, Aug. 8, to let him know that Jonathan Beever at the University of Illinois had identified a genetic condition among the Angus population.

The board met by conference call Monday morning, Aug. 12, to consider the implications of DD. At the conclusion of the meeting Trowbridge assigned a task force to evaluate and propose how the Association should respond. The task force was asked to consider the best interests of the breed and the membership, the evolving scientific advances, the members' ability to manage genetic conditions and the likelihood genetic conditions would continue to be found in all breeds in the future.

Wednesday afternoon, Aug. 14, the board met again to consider the task force's recommendations, adopting a policy that was posted on the Association's website by the end of the day with a letter from Trowbridge explaining to the membership what had transpired.

"The whole board really worked together well; the task force went together well; and the policy, honestly, for me was kind of a dream come true," says Trowbridge. "Basically, we are going to mark pedigrees."

The policy on DD recognizes the familiarity of breeders with testing and their ability to manage recessive conditions, explains Trowbridge, who says the policy provides members more options for managing the condition and avoids the unnecessary elimination of bloodlines that prevailed in the mid-1970s.

"We put the membership integrity in front of ours, and I think the membership can figure out how to do it," says Trowbridge, adding that it is the Association's role to help by educating members and providing tools to help manage the condition.

"It's one of my philosophies that people have to start taking some responsibility, and our membership is more than glad to do it. They will take responsibility," Trowbridge emphasizes. "We gave them some guidelines and a little ruddering. We have to let them steer it just a little bit."

Table 1: Genetic conditions considered by the American Angus Association Board during the last decade

- PRKG2 gene mutation for dwarfism (D2)
- arthrogryposis multiplex (AM)
- neuropathic hydrocephalus (NH)
- contractural arachnodactyly (CA)
- myostatin nt821 gene deletion (M1)
- developmental duplication (DD)