

Grassroots Determination

From commercial roots, American Angus Association President Gordon Stucky built a seedstock herd and a reputation for cattle that perform on the range and on the rail.

Story & photos by **Shauna Rose Hermel**, editor

It's good to come home to the cows, says Gordon Stucky of Stucky Ranch, Kingman, Kan. Not one to seek the limelight himself, the quiet, well-spoken cattleman has served on the American Angus Association Board, most recently as president, through some challenging times. He's quick to point out that a look through the history books would reveal several rough patches. Each time, those

involved found the means to get through, fueling the organization's progression to where it stands today.

This time will be no different, he says. "We just have to work our way through it."

After spending an average of five to six hours a day on Association business since March, Gordon says heading out to the cows is a welcome change of pace — not to mention the way to pay the bills. The

herd stands as a reminder — a reminder of the people who encouraged his entry into the seedstock business; a reminder of the grassroots he represents and the customers he serves; and a reminder that achieving a goal isn't always easy or popular. Rather, it requires determination and a stubborn focus on a long-term vision.

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A warm welcome

Gordon describes himself as a second-generation Angus breeder, but a first-generation registered-Angus seedstock producer. His father, Martin, had gotten into the commercial-Angus business in 1964, he explains. However, it was Gordon's dream to get into the registered business. He started that journey traveling just 30 miles north to the Kansas Angus Futurity in Hutchinson, Kan., in December 1976.

Just 17 at the time, the enthusiastic young cattleman didn't know a soul, but that didn't last long. He was overwhelmed by the warm welcome and the eagerness of the breeders to help him get a start and make him feel special.

"I can remember that just like it was yesterday," Gordon says, recalling

conversations with fellow Kansans Allan Miller, now deceased, of Cheyenne Angus Farms, Ellinwood; George Crenshaw of Shamrock Farms, Manhattan; Eldo Kroeker of Kroeker Angus Farms, Hutchinson; and Phil Ljungdahl, Dodge City, field manager for the Kansas Angus Association from 1970 to 1976. Jess Cooper was the American Angus Association regional manager, and Ray Simms was the auctioneer.

"Remember, that was before EPDs (expected progeny differences). You were buying cattle more on people's reputation and appearance," Gordon points out, adding that Angus weren't the most popular cattle at the time.

"If those people hadn't been open and friendly with me, it would have been a whole

different ballgame," he notes, attributing his early enthusiasm and loyalty to the breed to those producers. "I went to a lot of sales after that, but that first time was just very special."

It was also fruitful. He bought a registered-Angus yearling heifer, Blackcap A127, for \$350 from Ramsey Ranch of El Dorado, Kan. The purchase included two amps of semen and an artificial insemination (AI) certificate for the bull Great Northern. Gordon took the bull calf resulting from that first mating back to the futurity as a coming 2-year-old and sold him for \$1,500.

"I thought, man, this is a great way to make a living," he recalls with an impish grin. "Little did I know."

Conversion of the commercial herd to a registered herd was a gradual process over the next decade, but Gordon was determined to grow the seedstock enterprise. He purchased about 200 females in those early years, doing his research and patronizing producer sales in Kansas and the Midwest, as well as frequenting the Kansas Angus Futurity.

Marketing education

His father and brother David took care of the registered herd along with the commercial cattle as Gordon attended college, finishing his last two years at Kansas State University (K-State) in Manhattan. While earning a bachelor's degree in animal science, he worked for Galen Fink, manager of K-State's beef herd, both at the university and at Fink's own ranching operation.

K-State had just won the triple crown — winning supreme champion at the American Royal, the North American International Livestock Exposition and the National Western Stock Show — with Manhattan Gal, and the university herd had an exceptional reputation. Gordon gained experience in marketing, getting in on the ground floor of K-State's livestock marketing class, which coordinates the Special "K" Edition sale.

A true mentor, Fink fostered Gordon's interest in the seedstock business, giving him experience in seedstock management, artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET), as well as a foundation in marketing and a vision for the future.

Growing a registered operation

Those early years were tough years to start into the seedstock business, especially with Angus. The breed was taking a backseat to Exotics in popularity, and it would take 10 years to develop a volume of bulls to sell.

"We tried to think of any way we could to

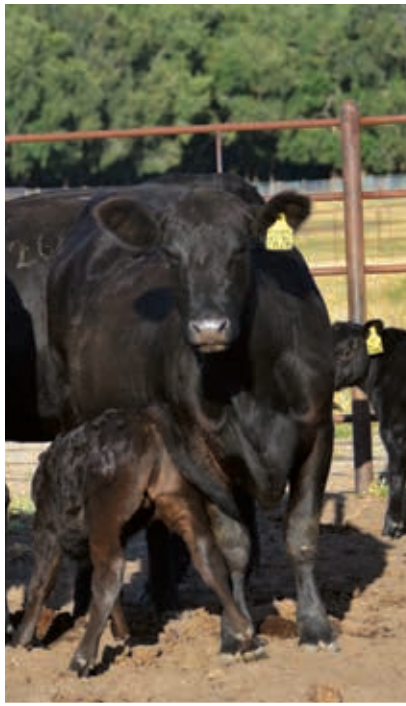


►**Above:** After weaning, bull calves are developed in contemporary groups, with a first culling after the yearling data is evaluated and the bulls are visually inspected for type and kind. Bulls will be handled on foot, with four-wheelers and on horseback to make sure they are accustomed to all three means of handling.

►**Right:** Gordon emphasizes collection of any information he can get to back the 170 bulls he sells in his March production sale and the 50 he sells at home private treaty. Standard weights and measures, as well as carcass, ultrasound and now genomic data are all collected to use in national cattle evaluation, and all the information is shared with customers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF STUCKY RANCH



►**Left:** Since buying his first registered cow in 1976, Gordon has increased his herd to now raise 450 calves a year.

►**Above:** DNA-typing his bulls prior to sale provides customers higher-accuracy EPDs and parent verification.

find a new home for them and start a reputation by selling what we thought were good bulls,” Gordon says. Without EPDs, birth weights and growth in the form of weaning and yearling weights were the only data he could provide as proof of performance.

As the 1980s trended to larger-framed cattle, Gordon realized the type popular in the showring wouldn’t fit the forage resources in south-central Kansas.

“That’s one fad I just planted my feet and didn’t follow,” he says. “I was always more maternally focused and wanted to build a cow herd. I don’t know that we ever raised cattle that were bigger than 6-frame.”

Bucking the trends and dealing with the economy of the 1980s provided some discouraging times. It took sheer determination — and a couple part-time jobs — to get through the 1980s, Gordon recalls, noting it was never an option to sell out. “It was just always my dream. I never questioned that it shouldn’t be Angus, and I never questioned to sell out.”

Hardship spurs innovation, and the 1980s also ushered in the performance movement and his opportunity to manage the seedstock operation independently.

Finding a solid base

As the program became available in the early 1980s, Gordon started submitting data to Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®). He embraced structured sire evaluation and, when it became available, studied the *Sire Evaluation Report*, looking for bulls with calving ease and better growth,

then milk. Committed to raising performance ranch-type cattle, he used AI bulls like AAR New Trend, Emulation N-Bar 5522 and QAS Traveler 23-4.

“I knew fairly early on that we needed to base marketing on real-world data,” says Gordon, adding that to have marketable seedstock, you have to offer cattle that either add value to the cattle your customer sells or have value in the day-to-day things — disposition and longevity.

“I started breeding cattle I thought had more market value, then evaluating on disposition, type and kind, and calving ease — all the things we thought were very important with our own cattle,” he explains, adding that there’s no better testimony for selling cattle than to show they work in your own environment.

“We didn’t go out and buy ‘the high-dollar cows’ that came with a reputation. We

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►A cow that’s 5- to 5½-frame weighing 1,300-1,350 lb., structurally correct with exceptional udder quality and disposition is ideal for his country, says Gordon. “We like a lot of capacity, and you can get that doability and performance in a 5½-frame package that works well in this country. A lot of our bull customers will be in even harsher environments, so I try to keep that in mind as well.”

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bought solid, hard-working cows from reputable breeders,” Gordon says. He evaluated the cow herd and selected ranch-raised replacements using performance data available through the Association and additional records collected on his own. For 30 years now, he’s collected an udder score on every cow calved on the ranch using a system he learned at K-State.

“It was the slow way to do it, but also very beneficial,” he says of the 20-year process by which he built his genetic base. “Luckily, I started when I was young. Our cow herd is much sounder because of it, and they were selected and adapted to work here for us.”

With growing confidence in his genetic base, Gordon began using ET in the mid-1990s to propagate some of his favorite bloodlines. A third-generation female born on the ranch, Circle S Eisa Erica 6073 became the ranch icon donor cow. She later sold to

Doug Sherman of Laconia, Ind., and Thomas Angus Ranch of Baker City, Ore., and has 198 recorded progeny.

Early marketing savvy

Stucky was grateful to have the Kansas Angus Futurity to sell cattle through while he was developing his seedstock business. He says he made a deliberate decision to sell females there rather than haltered bulls so as not to confuse buyers by giving the appearance he raised show bulls.

“We can laugh about that, but I had to make foundation decisions as to what Stucky Ranch would turn out to be and how people perceived it,” he emphasizes. “I wanted to build a reputation for raising data-driven performance bulls.”

He chose instead to take elite females that could be shown off the halter and with a calf at side. He had some success, selling several cows through the years for \$7,500-\$16,000.

“I would not have had the confidence to ask \$10,000 for a cow at home,” he smiles, adding that the futurity helped establish the value of his cow herd.

He marketed bulls off the ranch private treaty until 1993, when he hosted his first bull sale. The bulls averaged \$2,200 — \$500 more than they had been averaging private treaty, Gordon recalls. “I thought we hit it out of

the park. After that first sale, I knew we were going to be OK.”

Gordon attributes the jump in value to two things: (1) the competitive nature of people and (2) the seller’s tendency to not ask what the cattle are truly worth.

“I’ve always been a big believer in public auctions,” he says. “You’ll never price your good ones where they ought to be private treaty. If you put them in the auction, and if all your homework is done, you’ll get the right people there and they will bring more money.”

Doing your homework to get the right buyers in the stands encompasses several aspects, says Gordon. Increasing your visibility by advertising through every means possible — print, digital, radio, etc. — is part of it, but the homework starts long before building an ad concept.

“I’m still a big believer you have to pay your dues; it takes time to build that groundwork to have a successful event,” he says. “You can throw a lot of money at something with a lot of advertising, but if you’re not grounded and you haven’t built your reputation, it will only go so far.

“It seemed like it took a tremendously long period of time, but we were building our foundation through those tough years by every bull that we sold and keeping up with how they did, making a reputation that if something went wrong, we’d take care of it.”

Now selling about 225 bulls a year, Gordon has reached a point where he sells about 175 bulls in his annual March production sale and retains 50 or so to sell at home by private treaty.

“Some people just don’t like a sale,”



►**Above:** Gordon says the best part of his tenure serving on the American Angus Association Board of Directors has been the people he and Caroline have had a chance to meet.

►**Right:** “He is a good listener. He takes the time to really hear what folks are saying and really give it consideration. He doesn’t get that tunnel vision that ‘My way is the only way,’ ” says Gordon Stucky’s oldest son Jesse, who has joined him in the Angus operation. “He actually takes time to listen to what folks say because he understands that there are lots of brilliant minds out there, and if you are open and willing to listen, you can help bring in ways to think outside the box and maybe find some creative solutions that you weren’t able to think of yourself.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF STUCKY RANCH

Welcome to the ranch

Gordon Stucky and his son Jesse enjoy hosting guests to the ranch, whether they be cattlemen or chefs from New York City. Here they welcome a group of North American chefs for a ComNor-Cargill Customer Event hosted with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). They've hosted several events for CAB the last couple years, including an International Beef Industry Tour featuring influential chefs and a Master of Brand Advantages (MBA) event. Most recently they hosted 50 chefs for the *Certified Angus Beef*® Chef Tour and about 400 cattlemen for the 2013 National Angus Conference & Tour.



PHOTO COURTESY OF STUCKY RANCH

Gordon says, explaining that the ranch is finally producing enough bulls to serve both niches — those who like a public auction and those who prefer private treaty.

The program today

As the century turned, demand presented opportunity for the ranch to expand. However, with land to buy or lease in short supply, expansion depended on networking with cooperator herds to raise additional calves.

Cooperator herds assist in labor management, as Gordon and his oldest son, Jesse, provide the only full-time manpower for the ranch. They hire day-help as needed when processing cattle or for their annual production sale.

For the last three years, Gordon has utilized gender-sorted semen in the ET program to get a higher percentage of bull calves raised by cooperators, preferring to raise his replacement heifers on the ranch where he can monitor and evaluate them from Day 1.

Today, Stucky Ranch produces about 450 calves a year, with 250 primarily fall-born calves raised at home and another 200 calves raised by cooperators.

The bulk of the cows calved on the ranch calve on native pasture in September and October. As the grass starts to fade, pairs are moved closer to ranch headquarters. Still on native grass, they are supplemented with hay and a 20% protein pellet to prepare for breeding and embryo transfer. After the breeding season is completed, pairs are turned out on wheat pasture to graze through May, when the calves are weaned.

“Our goal is to only have to feed cows for 90 days,” says Gordon.

After weaning, calves are gathered at the

ranch and backgrounded. Bulls are sent to Sam Hands’ Triangle H yard at Garden City, Kan., to be developed. All bull calves are kept intact to provide a complete contemporary group through collection of yearling data. The first round of culling is done after yearling data have been analyzed and bulls have been visually inspected for type and kind.

Culls are banded and fed out at the yard, providing a means to gather actual carcass data. Sold on a U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid, they’ve been reaching about 60% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance, Gordon reports, glad to have the actual carcass data to add to the ultrasound

data he’s been collecting since 1996. More recently he’s added genomic evaluation to his analytical tool box, aiming to give customers as accurate a description on the bulls he offers for sale as he can.

Bulls that make the cut are brought home to the ranch in November for display and preparation for the March production sale.

Devoted to using higher-accuracy bulls in his own program, he’s committed to providing as much information as he can to potential buyers. Increasing the accuracy of the genetic predictions on those young unproven bulls is worth the expense of DNA-testing, he says. Last year he provided genomic-enhanced EPDs (GE-EPDs) along with percentile rankings and parent verification on every bull offered for sale.

That steady focus on fulfilling his customers’ needs and meeting their expectations has earned Stucky Ranch a loyal customer base, with most of those customers ranching within a 100-mile radius of the ranch.

“Hands down this is one of the best places in the world to sell registered-Angus bulls to commercial cattlemen,” Gordon says, noting the area has one of the highest percentages of cow-calf operations in the country.

Selling 171 bulls for an average of \$5,675 in his sale this past March, it would appear Gordon has fulfilled, or even surpassed, his dream of becoming a registered-Angus seedstock producer. As one dream is made reality, seeds for the future are sown, and Gordon and Jesse are planning the next phase for Stucky Ranch.

As his tenure on the American Angus Association Board comes to a close, Gordon Stucky is eager to head back out to the cows.



▶“Stock with a good disposition will always be a great asset in building customer satisfaction,” Gordon says.

