

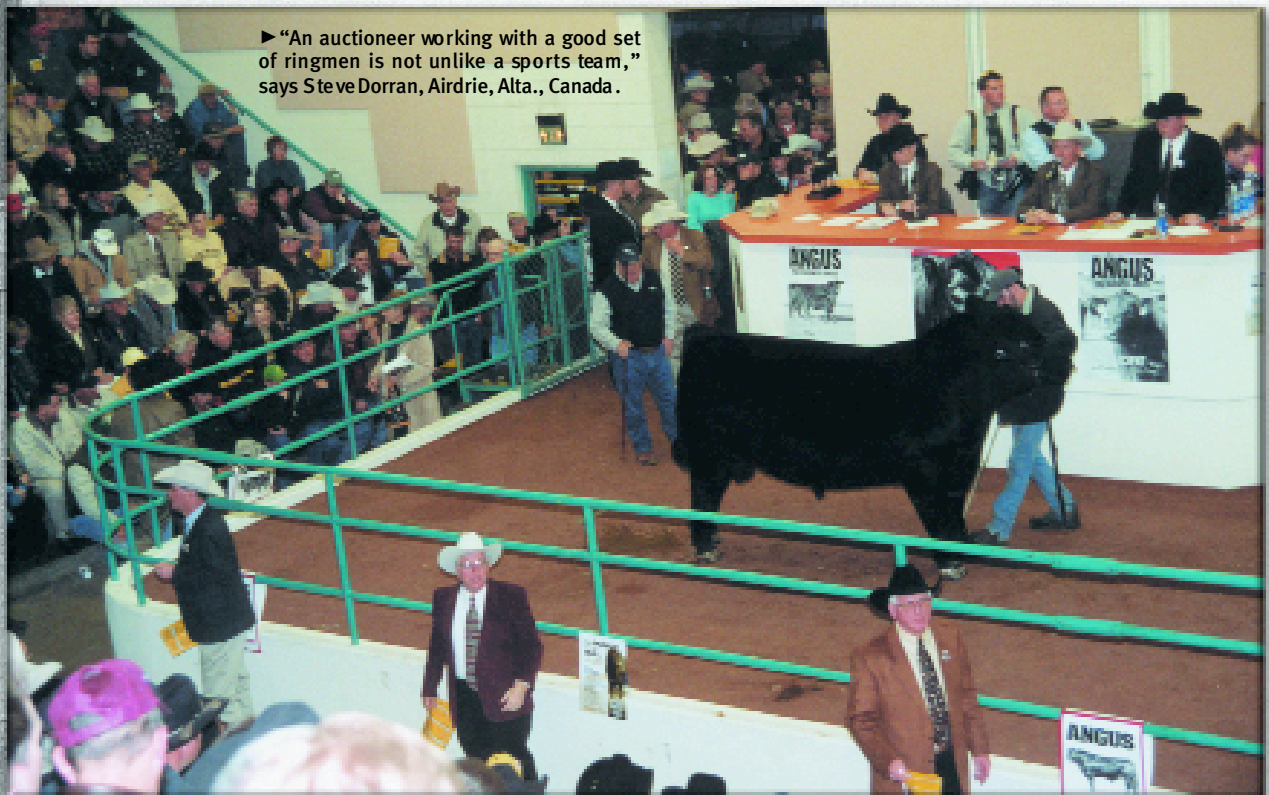
Who'll Bid?

Auctioneers practice their craft to sell cattle —
and discover true value along the way.

Story & photos by **Brooke Byrd**

*Twenty-five dollar bid it now, thirty dollar, thirty
Will you gimme thirty, make it thirty
Bid it on a thirty dollar, will you gimme thirty
who'll bid it at a thirty dollar bid?*

— “The Auctioneer,” by LeRoy Van Dyke



► “An auctioneer working with a good set of ringmen is not unlike a sports team,” says Steve Dorran, Airdrie, Alta., Canada.



► “My dad told me a long time ago, never ever work your butt off and try to sell a bad one too high, but never sell a good one too cheap,” says Joe Goggins, Billings, Mont.

He's the man behind the microphone and the voice calling all the shots. He's the one you trust with your bid — the auction referee. The auctioneer is perhaps the most visible figure at the livestock auction, and he's the one who brings in the final paycheck for many cattle producers.

Auctions bring in millions of dollars each year. According to studies by MORPACE International and Harris Interactive, total live auction sales surpassed \$200 billion in 2003. Livestock auctions made up 9% of all live auction gross revenue in 2003, with \$17.1 billion, a 10.2% increase from 2002.

Online auctions have had a big role in the growth of the auction business, says Jim Pennington, instructor at the World Champion College

of Auctioneering, Bakersfield, Calif. "eBay® has really, in the last few years, brought a lot of attention to auctions," he observes. In turn, more attention has also turned to the auctioneer. More and more producers are deciding to sell their animals at auctions, and the auctioneer is the most important player.

Life on the go

Most auctioneers, 93%, are men, and 35% are college graduates. More than half own their own businesses and 59% are between 45 and 64 years old. Being a livestock auctioneer involves a life full of travel and stories and requires a unique set of skills.

"There are license laws in 37 states in the U.S., where there are certain requirements to be an auctioneer," notes Pennington, who

now owns a real estate auction franchising company after 25 years in the livestock auction business.

To fulfill those requirements, many wishing to become auctioneers attend auction schools where they learn the ABCs of the auction business, Pennington says. "A little bit about advertising a little bit about accounting a little bit about contracts and a little bit about due diligence."

However, many auctioneers, like Pennington, grow up learning their auction ABCs. "My grandfather was an auctioneer, and my father and uncle were auctioneers," he recalls. "I basically grew up in a livestock auction market from when I was just a baby."

Joe Goggins, Billings, Mont., also grew up around livestock auctions. "I went to bull sales all my life with my dad," he says. "I'm

Calling the shots

To the untrained ear, an auctioneer may sound like he's just mixing a bunch of words and numbers together. However, his chant is much more complicated than it appears.

An auctioneer is "the communicator between the buyer and the seller, and he does that through a chant," says Jim Pennington, instructor at the World Champion College of Auctioneering, Bakersfield, Calif. "You use a chant to accept bids to establish a market value through competitive bidding — what I have and what I want."

Pennington's school teaches the chant to people already familiar with the auction business. He focuses on teaching a basic chant, or groove, that students can later personalize. "We try to scratch a groove in their subconscious of the basic chant," he says. After making a mistake, "they can always go back to that original groove that we drill into them so they can get back on track."

"The next step is to be able to communicate in a rhythmic, pleasing fashion," he continues. "Anyone who's never done it could communicate by saying, 'I have one dollar, I need two dollars.' ... The art of bid calling is to take that basic principle and develop it."

In order to be clear and rhythmic, "Repetition is the mother skill," Pennington says. "You need to know numbers; they need to come out subconsciously, almost forward and backward." As an auctioneer takes bids, he is "continually getting a new bid and a new price established of what you have and what you want."

Breathing is also vital to the chant. "You almost have to learn how to breathe all over," Pennington observes. Different skills must be developed, such as "breathing at the right time, knowing how long that breath is going to last, increasing your lung capacity, learning that you must

breathe with your diaphragm and understanding what your diaphragm is, and where is it and how it works."

Practice is absolutely crucial because of how many things an auctioneer must do at once. "You're thinking about your crowd; you're thinking about the item you're selling; you're thinking about the salesmanship of what could I say to make this bring more money, keeping track of where your last bid was and scanning the crowd for another bid, then all of a sudden remembering what price you have and what price you want," he says. "A lot of times a new auctioneer will just go blank."

Speed is a factor an auctioneer must consider. "What a lot of people don't understand is this — auctioneering speed does not come from how many words you can say a minute," Pennington explains. "The speed comes from the rhythm, the timing and the breathing."

"It's all about taking a set of numbers and emphasizing those numbers with very few filler words," he continues. Filler words are one way an auctioneer establishes a distinct personality, but they can also interfere with breathing. Pennington teaches his students to interject words like "dollar bid" between their numbers, but points out that "the more syllables you use, the more the rhythm is just not there." He also avoids certain filler words that begin with "w" or "h" because they expel air. "If you just say 'bid' or 'dollar bid,' you constrict your throat and you are in control of the amount of air coming out of your lungs," he says.

After mastering the basics, an auctioneer can then work his own unique personality into his chant. Above all, though, Pennington notes that the chant must be clear. "You might think you're the best-sounding, fastest auctioneer in the world, but you fail if even a small percentage of your crowd cannot understand what you are trying to communicate."

For more information on the World Champion College of Auctioneering visit www.championbidcalling.com.



just kind of self-taught.” Now an auctioneer at Public Auction Yards (PAYS) in Billings three to four days a week, Goggins travels around the United States to sell about 100 purebred sales a year.

“The travel deal is tough,” he admits. “In the spring of the year, starting the first of February, until about the first of May, I’ll be gone probably three to four days a week.

“You miss a lot of ball games,” he continues. “You do spend a lot of time away from your family, and that’s probably the real negative part of the whole thing.”

Steve Dorran, Airdrie, Alta., Canada, says he travels 200 days a year, selling about 150 purebred Angus sales in the United States and Canada. “You get used to going in and out of airports and driving rental cars.

“I’m a people person, and I love being around people,” he continues. “Because I enjoy doing what I do, it doesn’t seem to be monotonous. There’s a different sale every day, and because you’re working in different states and different countries, you’re not working with the same people day after day.” Since about 80% of his sales come from repeat business, he often gets to catch up

with the people he’s met.

At the top of their game

Some auctioneers participate in contests. Pennington, the 2000 International Livestock Auctioneering Champion and the 1998 Reserve Champion at the World Livestock Auctioneer Championship (WLAC), says, “They judge you on rhythm, on speed, on clarity—how does the auctioneer move the sale along and conduct himself.”

Goggins, a repeat finalist at the WLAC, adds, “One of the major criteria is, would you hire this auctioneer?”

While a contest provides one test of auctioneering skills, the main test is in the salering or auction barn. “A good [auctioneer] will make cattle bring quite a bit more than just an ordinary one,” Goggins explains. In order to do so, however, he must combat the many things that can go wrong.

The worst thing in the world, Goggins says, is being sick. “I’d just as soon have the flu as a sore throat.” Fatigue from long days and hours on the block and on the road can cause problems, as can power outages and harsh weather.

The presence of live animals also adds an interesting element. “I sold a sale one time where a bull got underneath the block, right underneath us, and it’s just like riding a bucking horse,” Goggins says. “I’ve had some bulls jump out of the ring and into the crowd; I’ve had a couple jump in the block. You see all kinds of things.

“There’s never a dull moment around one of these deals,” he continues.

What it takes

One of the first things that spring to mind when considering an auctioneer is his chant, or dialogue during the sale (see “Calling the shots”).

“Everyone has his own bid chant,” Dorran says. “That is probably one of the things that sets us apart and makes us unique.”

Pennington’s school focuses almost entirely on teaching the chant. “The chant is the auctioneer’s communication between himself and the buyers, representing the seller. Broken down into the very basics, the auctioneer is conveying to the buying crowd what I have and what I want,” he explains.

The most important part of the chant is