



Big on Quality

Taking customers and cattle one at a time, IDFY keeps CAB crown.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

Little things are important at Irsik & Doll Feedyard (IDFY), Garden City, Kan. Little things like relationships, slight variations in performance or grade, and sorting individual cattle to an ideal finish.

Manager Mark Sebranek knows the owners behind every partial pen in the 32,000-head Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot. He can recite sires and *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance rate history for most customers, sometimes down to the cow families.

"We're watching one that sent us a Prime, Yield Grade (YG) 1 steer for her first calf, then a CAB YG 1 steer as a second calf that was on the Prime line; her third calf was a replacement heifer," Sebranek says. "That's the kind to flush."

He advises customers on everything from genetics to health, based on what works at the feedlot. "I do some genetic and management traceback on the best pens, so we can make suggestions," he says.

Driving through the alleys, Sebranek stops at a pen of Texas cattle, then Mississippi, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Virginia and three pens from Pennsylvania. The cattle come in from all over, of course. Most of them are high-percentage Angus and targeting the CAB brand. That's why they come to IDFY.

That's also why the 32,000-head feedlot is a "three-peat" winner of the CAB Quality Focus Award for big feedlots (15,000-head capacity or more). IDFY is the only big yard to win the award, created in 2005 to showcase top CAB acceptance rates.

An award-winning team

From June 2006 through May 2007, IDFY harvested 2,802 CAB-enrolled cattle that hit the target at the rate of 26.1% CAB and 3.4% USDA Prime. That was the highest combined mark for all CAB partners feeding at least 500 head. During a three-year period, IDFY enrolled more than 15,800 head that achieved

26.8% CAB and Prime. Sebranek accepted the 2007 award Sept. 15 at the CAB annual conference in Savannah, Ga.

He shares the credit with assistant manager Jerry Jackson and cattle foreman Travis Pitts. "It's their eyes," Sebranek says with a nod to the wall of trophies the two recently won to prove it. "The day before Beef Empire Days [annual Garden City, Kan., celebration], they pull out 10 head to go into the show. Well, only one places live, but in the carcass we take first and third, with four more in the top 25."

Pitts and an IDFY team won the cattle processing trophy there, too, but it's more than just a contest. "The way we handle cattle here, the first day all the way to sorting, makes a big difference in ability to grade," Sebranek says. "We feed cattle from some of the biggest ranches in the country, one since 1993 when their new arrivals would practically stampede. Now they are calm. We've come a long way."

► **Above:** "It's all about learning your customers' cattle," says Mark Sebranek, manager of Irsik & Doll Feedyard (IDFY), Garden City, Kan., the three-time winner of the CAB Quality Focus Award for feedlots with capacities of 15,000 head or more.

Wild or tame, no single-source cattle can be expected to do their best the first time at IDFY or any feedlot.

“We may not hit the first ones right,” Sebranek says. “We may put more time on them than they need or take them too soon. We learn how to feed your cattle. Last year we shipped a customer’s steers starting at 90 days on feed, this year at 127. We saw they were nearly 80% YG 2 or better last year, so we could give them more time to grade. It’s all about learning your customers’ cattle.”

Quality grades at IDFY were down by 10% this summer, and Sebranek is not satisfied with the 76% Choice average in June. “We should be more like 85%,” he says, “but it will come back.”

The customer base allows for some confidence, with many examples of 95% Choice and harvest groups with 50% or higher CAB acceptance. “It seems like all of our customers are after the same thing, so we kind of specialize in helping them make great cattle even better,” Sebranek says.

Established customers know IDFY will sort for accurate finishing. Prospective customers sometimes question the need, especially if a previous feeder sold their cattle on a grid.

“I ask them if all their calves were born the same week from synchronized AI [artificial insemination],” he says. “Then I explain all the differences 60 days can make. That’s why we sort on 50-pound (lb.) weight breaks.”

The information age makes it easier to convince skeptics. “Besides all the carcass data from CAB, we also run the dollars,” Sebranek says. “We’ll find some great-performing Select calves, and that opens the door to a discussion about what bulls they need.

“We’re all looking for the total package: performance, conversion and grade. Sometimes you only get two out of three,” he says. “Those that do it all can bring home \$1,400 to \$1,600 on this market, so there’s a lot of incentive.”

Environmental influence

It’s not always about the genetics, however.

The feedlot manager sees overshadowing environmental effects in many cases. “Some Northern cattle might see their grade compromised if they spend too much time too far South for backgrounding — different grasses, minerals or overall environment,” he says, for example.

At educational forums, Sebranek shakes his head when some professor says, “If an animal is not genetically bound to make Prime, you can’t bring it up.” Don’t tell him it can’t be done. “To me, that’s like saying you can’t bring

an animal up from Select to Choice. Some cattle feeders also think there is a genetic weight limit, but systems based on those ideas get terrible quality grades,” he says.

“I think the genetics are not the biggest part of it. What we do here with energy and protein can make a lot of difference, if they started them right,” Sebranek says. Most cattle get a single implant, and that may be delayed until cattle are on a full ration.

Some ranchers feed little or no corn at home, because they “don’t want to burn them out.” It’s not the corn, but with all that can go wrong on a ranch, Sebranek does not push customers to feed corn at home, either.

“They might put enough corn in a trough for 3 lb. per day, but some aggressive calves are getting 12 lb., which could burn out some of the best ones,” he says. “Consistent feeding makes a lot more difference than a farmer might think. An employee can create tenderfoot cattle just by his interpretation that 6 lb. in the morning is the same thing as 3 lb. twice a day, and the owner sees the same amount of corn fed.

“My nutritionist talks to some of our ranchers,” Sebranek says. “He may not totally change their minds, but they usually adjust. One Texas customer now feeds grain on his unrolled hay prior to weaning, and that helps a lot.”

Genetic improvement

Genetics are still a big part of it, and Sebranek says that’s why customers tend to send better cattle after time, as they react to feedlot and carcass data feedback.

While averages improve, individual customers can have setbacks. One customer who was making 50% CAB and Prime recently saw grade drop sharply. They are all

working to find the reasons for the decline.

“The sad thing is, by the time you find out you made a mistake on some bulls, it may be coming at you for two or three more years,” Sebranek says. “But it’s a good thing to find those mistakes as soon as possible.”

Every pen teaches the IDFY crew something. A load from Mississippi arrived after a snow and “would not leave the truck, because they did not know what white was.” Once acclimated, however, they gained 4.6 lb. per day and converted at 5.6 feed to gain, at a cost of 69¢.

“They just made 47% Choice, but sometimes over-performing cattle don’t seem to have time to put on much marbling,” Sebranek suggests.

If a pen has a health problem, IDFY will track it down. “We’ll work with the customer to find where it started, if it was related to weather or weaning stress or vaccination program, or what happened when the cattle arrived here,” he says.

“Some customers may give the first shots too early for the products they are using,” Sebranek says. “Sometimes, the first two shots don’t do much. Many people start at weaning, but there’s a lot of stress then. Our customers get the best results starting three or four weeks before weaning and booster then. If they break with something 10 days later, the titres will be there.”

It takes commitment and a cooperative spirit to keep steadily improving genetics and management. “It’s no one thing,” Sebranek says. “It’s everything, but mainly it’s the customer. I wish we could say it’s us. We just try to pick them off at the right time, with the lowest cost of gain, get them out and make the whole thing work.”



► Cattle that do it all — perform, convert and grade — can bring home \$1,400-\$1,600, providing quite a little incentive, Sebranek says.