

Spurring Success

Oklahoma native and Board President Jot Hartley serves as a catalyst to discussion and trusts in the accuracy of group decisions.

Story & photos by *Shauna Rose Hermel*

American Angus Association President Jot Hartley is not one to seek counsel among those who agree with him. In fact, he's more likely to seek conversation with someone who disagrees. But don't mistake his intent. He's not looking for an argument; he's seeking the truth. The way to find the truth, says the Oklahoma native, is to ask questions.

In addition to operating Spur Ranch with his wife, Renee, Hartley is a trial lawyer specializing in real estate law and litigation, especially in areas of eminent domain. He is schooled in the process of researching a situation, discovering facts relevant to the case and bringing those facts to light in a court of law before a judge and jury. He puts his faith in the accuracy of group decisions for a living.

It's a system he's put to good use as a director and president of the American Angus Association.

Questions from the start

Hartley joined the Board in 1999, a somewhat tumultuous time for an organization experiencing the pains of growth.

"One of the first things we did during my tenure on the Board was establish Certified Angus Beef as a full-blown subsidiary of the American Angus Association," Hartley recalls. Upon reflection nine years later, he says it had the desired effect.

"It created a certainty in authority and established communication and responsibility, and it eliminated some of the turf wars that were existing at the time," he explains. "The Board at that time really stood up and said this is how it is going to be done and everybody is going to have to conform. They did what a Board should do, and that is to take action to eliminate an operational problem that existed."

That was the first of many times, Hartley

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► "Outside of the Angus world, I make my living by walking into a room and within 30 minutes reading 18 people as to what their wants, desires and prejudices are," 2007 American Angus Association President Jot Hartley says. "I try to understand their position and the basis for their position. I think that's very important not just for the president but for every Board member to try to do that. That's how you end up with the best decisions and as much consensus as possible."

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says, that being able to think like a lawyer without being the Association's legal counsel allowed him to play a unique role on the Board. "I knew how these things operated, and I knew how structure should be," he explains. "I was able to help explain it as a Board member and not as a lawyer."

Though the role is unique, Hartley says he is not unique to the role. While they may not be licensed lawyers, other Board members do think like lawyers, Hartley adds. "I mean they analyze it, they try to get their facts together and make a decision based on the best available information that they can obtain."

Another aspect of thinking like a lawyer, he says, is not hesitating to ask questions. "A lot of times Board members sit back because they don't want to offend anybody or they don't want to make it appear they're being overbearing," Hartley explains. "As a result, they don't ask questions that they have. It's a shame when that occurs because there are other Board members who have the same questions or who would appreciate hearing the answers, and it makes for a better process."

Fellow Board member Norman Garton of

Nevada, Mo., attributes Jot's questioning skills to his profession and says he has used them to make a positive contribution to the Board's decision-making process. "Jot has effectively led the Board in making many important decisions using this technique. Answers to his many questions gave other Board members a clearer understanding of the issues being discussed."

As an officer, Hartley has strived to encourage new Board members to participate, and he delights in the fact even first-year Board members feel comfortable asking questions. "That shows an evolution in the culture of the Board," he notes.

"I am a new director, and Jot made sure I felt comfortable in the boardroom by encouraging me to voice my thoughts and opinions," says Cathy Watkins of Middletown, Ind. "He was always willing to answer my questions concerning how the Board meetings function. He definitely made my first year easier and more productive."

Asking questions has never been a problem for Jot Hartley, though he admits his inquisitive nature takes a little getting used to. Recalling one particular incident at his first

working Board meeting, Hartley says his questioning put a particular staffer on the defensive at first. But, the two have since become very good friends.

"He learned that when I asked something I wasn't trying to embarrass him, I was trying to get information as a Board member to use to make a decision," Hartley explains. "Ever since then, when I ask him for something he never takes offense and he always supplies the information, but that's a change in culture that has been developing in the last several years."

Considering the topics the Board analyzes today, empowerment to ask questions is a fundamental necessity. "Maybe it's not any different than 20 or 30 years ago, but it seems like we are dealing with so many things that are dramatic shifts in technology that we are not equipped as individual breeders to deal with," Hartley says, noting issues such as the use of DNA in genetic evaluation. "We are having to rely on experts more and more for information, so it makes it critical for a Board to ask questions and not be afraid to admit you don't understand something or you don't have that knowledge."



►**Above:** "We must always remember that our success and dominance is the result of a breed of cattle with innate characteristics and traits that allow our commercial customers to produce a product that is unique in its ability to satisfy the demands of today's consumer," Hartley says.

►**Right:** Leading Hartley's bull pen today, Spur Success 2801 typifies the low-birth-weight, high-performance genetics Hartley seeks to produce.



“During his tenure on the Board, Jot had to deal with multiple issues ranging from legal situations to sweeping policy changes. He approached each issue methodically and always based his decisions on sound science and business principles,” says John Crouch, executive vice president of the Association. “Jot exhibited strong leadership in representing not only the Association membership but the beef industry as a whole. History will treat Jot’s contributions as significant parts of the development of the Association.”

“Jot’s legal background, combined with his knowledge of and passion for the Angus breed, make him a leader who understands all facets of the challenges facing our Association,” Watkins adds.

Family business

A third-generation cattleman, Jot Hartley’s grandfather and his grandfather’s brother were Hereford breeders, partnering in Hartley Brothers Hereford Ranch under the Spur brand. It was Jot’s father who first put the brand on Angus cattle 50 years ago as he started Spur Ranch.

Bob Hartley was an innovator in performance testing. A founder of Oklahoma Beef Inc. (OBI) at Stillwater, one of the largest bull tests in the country, Bob also helped organize Performance Registry International (PRI). Through this predecessor to Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®), individual breeders banded together to establish a performance procedure to evaluate bulls for carcass merit through progeny testing.

“My dad was really good about including me in the operation, and he made my brother Clay and me partners at a pretty early age,” Jot says. “We were minority partners, but at least we had a stake in it.”

Jot says he enjoyed the registered end of the business. “I really enjoy running the numbers, planning the matings and watching thoughts materialize as an animal, then seeing customers take those animals and improve their operations with them.”

Not sure the cattle operation would support three families by itself, Jot looked to Oklahoma State University (OSU) to play baseball and get a degree in finance, intending on a career as an investment banker. Some highly visible cases of fraud within the investment banking community made that career less appealing, and Jot went on to the University of Oklahoma for law school.

Upon his return to Vinita and the ranch, he joined the law practice of local attorney

Baseball fanatics

Hanging on the wall of Jot Hartley’s law office in Vinita, Okla., is a picture of the 1996 Oklahoma High School State Champion Baseball Team. Among the players is Jot’s youngest son, Jimmy, who played in the outfield and sometimes as second baseman.

“There was a lot of pride in these kids from Vinita,” recalls Hartley, who helped coach the team. “The other towns couldn’t even spell our name at the beginning of the tournament. They could at the end.”

The family’s immersion in the sport is obvious as Jot describes his own stint as a catcher at Oklahoma State University (OSU) and coaching both Jimmy and his older son, Travis, through their baseball careers. Conducted toward the end of October, the Spur Ranch annual sale is dubbed the World Series Angus Sale, denoting both the timing of the sale and their enthusiasm for the sport.



► Jot met and married his wife, Renee, while attending OSU. She now teaches fourth-grade reading at Vinita Elementary.

Meet the family

Jot met and married his wife, Renee, while attending OSU. She now teaches fourth-grade reading at Vinita Elementary School and, as Jot puts it, “has endured nine years of my absences while fulfilling my responsibilities on the AAA and CAB boards.”

Travis followed in Jot’s footsteps, obtaining a finance degree at OSU and continuing to law school. Travis and his wife, Shana, a registered nurse, have moved back to Vinita where Travis has joined the Hartley Law Firm. Daughters Emma (born the night before the sale three years ago) and Abby are the newest additions to the Hartley family.

Jimmy attended OSU for a degree in marketing and is now an assistant video coordinator for the Colorado Rockies, providing an extra degree of interest in the playoffs this year.



► The Hartley family includes (from left) Travis holding Emma, Jot, Renee, and Shana holding Abby. Assistant video coordinator for the Colorado Rockies, Jimmy was unavailable for photos this summer.

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George Pitcher while maintaining his part of the ranching operation.

“My Dad was still the majority owner in the ranch until about 1988,” Jot explains. “He turned it over to Clay and me in the mid-1990s.” Moving up the ladder as a pilot for American Airlines, Clay sold out his interest in the operation, leaving Jot as the sole owner.

“My dad turned over a hell of a cow herd 20 years ago,” Jot acknowledges, giving his father credit for his performance-oriented, Emulous-based herd. Today Jot manages about 400 commercial cows on 2,500 acres of native and improved grasses in eastern Oklahoma.

Jot says his customers still consider birth weight their No. 1 concern, which makes it his top consideration in producing the 125 bulls he sells each year through the Spur Ranch World Series Angus Sale and private treaty. Scrotal circumference and disposition are also traits to which he pays close attention, admitting those emphases have eliminated use of some bulls he would have liked to use.

Performance is still a top consideration, and 60-80 Spur bulls are tested through OBI each year. Testing that many bulls, Jot says, allows him to maintain larger contemporary groups and obtain third-party verification of the herd’s performance ability.

Spur bulls have consistently excelled at OBI, where Jot fed the first bull to exceed an average daily gain (ADG) of 6 pounds (lb.).

Today, Spur Success 2801, a bull owned in partnership with Sydenstricker Genetics, leads Jot’s bull pen. The high-gaining and high-indexing bull in OBI Test No. 031, Success typifies the low-birth-weight (BW EPD: -.8), high-performance (YW EPD: 112) genetics Jot seeks to produce.

Spurring success in the boardroom

As president of the American Angus Association, Jot has demanded performance in the boardroom as well, asking the Board to contribute more of their time and consideration to some of the tasks at hand.

“In many ways we are at a crossroads, not a precipice, but a critical time for strategic

decisions on action or inaction that will define our breed, our membership and our association well into the future,” Jot said in accepting the role of president at the Annual Convention of Delegates in November 2006. “Our recent dominance as a purebred registry has enabled the American Angus Association to provide services and support research activities that a few years ago could only be dreamed of.”

Jot challenged members to recommit the Association and the breed to attaining even greater relevance. He promised to challenge the Board and staff to provide innovative and useful services and programs to maintain the Association in its position as the premier breed registry in the world.

He has made good on that promise, assigning task forces to thoroughly research issues — such as multi-breed evaluation, whether to accept red Angus into the American Angus Association registry and how to position AngusSource® to be a force in the industry — and to lead discussion before the full Board. He encouraged more

Peer review

During their tenure on the Board, Directors of the American Angus Association interact closely with each other as they discuss the issues and conduct the business of the world’s premier beef cattle breed registry. In doing so, they get to know each other on a unique level. We asked Jot’s contemporaries to share their insights about him as a director and officer of the Association.

What is unique about Jot’s leadership style?

“One thing I always admired about Jot was his forward thought process. As a director and an officer, his thoughts were focused on the future. Jot always supported programs that had the potential to strategically place the Association and Angus breed in a position of leadership.” — **John Crouch**

“Jot is unique in his leadership style in two ways: Through his actions as president it is obvious he expects Board members to simultaneously express their opinion and respect fellow Board members’ opinions. In the naming of committees and task forces, Jot is not trying to build consensus, he wants topics debated and explored. Secondly, Jot has never met a disagreement that he didn’t like. His quest for understanding a topic allows him to hear multiple perspectives before he makes a decision. With Jot, disagreement on an issue is not personal, it is an opportunity for both parties to learn, from each other, more about the topic. Jot has the unique ability to debate an issue with passion and then socialize with his verbal sparring partner during a break. These skills reflect Jot’s training as a lawyer.” — **Joe Hampton**

What makes Jot an effective leader?

“Jot goes out of his way to make sure that each Board member is involved in the decision-making process. He asks for input from

each director, even if that director does not necessarily agree with him on an issue.” — **Cathy Watkins**

“As with any board, there are some members who are more vocal in their opinions, while others are more reserved. Jot actively draws out input from all of the Board members. Because of his leadership style of listening with a genuine concern to all, the Board of Directors has been able to move forward on several issues that we have struggled with for several years.” — **Richard Tokach**

“Jot wanted everyone’s opinion on the Board. He encouraged questions and discussion. He had respect for each person’s feelings. Jot pushed the Board to think about the future of the Association. He wanted us to be proactive, not just reactive.” — **Steve Olson**

“Jot has done an excellent job as president of the American Angus Association. He has not been afraid to look at or bring up controversial subjects, and he has tried to look at these issues from an objective position. He has shown a professionalism for leadership and has done an extremely nice job of creating smaller task forces to get something done on individual issues. He has done a very, very good job of involving the entire Board in decision processes.” — **Bill Davis**

“In his serving as president this past year, it has been a joy to work with the Association through some tough issues. Jot has the ability to ask the strong questions, ones that stretch your mind and imagination in all directions. Jot is comfortable with himself, and articulate in getting his point across.” — **Jay King**

“Jot and I came on the Board at the same time. From the beginning he reminded me of the proverbial bull in a china shop. He has the uncanny ability to continue to ask questions until he gets to the point of the matter, and he helped us to condense very complicated decisions.” — **Ben Eggers**

frequent meetings via teleconferencing and e-mail, led a long-range planning meeting for Board and staff in April, and added an extra day to the June Board meeting. Angus historians may one day consider that meeting one of the most monumental events in the history of the Association.

Actions taken by the Board are bound to come under criticism, Jot realizes. “You have to make decisions that are best for the entire membership. There is a balancing that goes on with that. Sometimes what’s good for the membership as a whole isn’t good for one aspect of the membership, so you are always going to be subject to criticism depending on whose ox is getting gored at that particular time.

“The one thing I hope the membership will take from my service,” Jot continues, “is that I always approached it from what’s best for our membership and our breed and not individual considerations. If we can keep doing that as a Board, we will do the right thing.”



► Herd manager Bunt Lay (left) has worked with Jot at Spur Ranch for 40 years.

What do you think Jot’s most significant contribution has been as a Board member, officer and president?

“One of Jot’s most significant contributions as a Board member was his leadership in updating the Charter and Bylaws of the Association. It proved to be a formidable task, but he was successful in shepherding that lengthy document past the Board of Directors and ultimately the Delegates at the Annual Convention.”

— **Richard Tokach**

“Ensuring that all AAA Board members sit in on the Breed Improvement Committee, whether or not they are assigned to that committee. This helped all of us to stay up to speed on the many involved and intricate issues addressed in this committee.”

— **Cathy Watkins**

“I am proud of Jot for leading the charge in the newly formed company Angus Genetics Inc., a project started some 10 years ago. Though changes have been made from the original ideas, the concept remains the same and it is much needed if the Angus Association and breed are to remain dominant. My hat is off to Jot and the Board for stepping up to the plate; a home run has been scored.” — **Minnie Lou Bradley**

“Jot’s most significant contribution to the American Angus Association is one that most members do not realize the importance of. His leadership in updating our Charter and Bylaws was top-notch. This endeavor was much needed, and Jot showed great leadership not only with his committee, but also explaining the changes during the Annual Meeting. I only hope that when these documents are revised in the future to meet the needs of changing times that the committee chairman has abilities equal to Jot’s.” — **Joe Elliott**

“He’s done a really good job of investigating and drafting the code of business ethics for both the employees and the Board of Directors. It was something that needed to be changed, and he had

the fortitude to get it done. We enacted it at the September meeting. I would compliment Jot on his abilities as an attorney, as well as leader of the Angus Association, in getting this done, as well as the bylaw changes he worked on a couple of years ago that greatly improved our bylaws.” — **John Schurr**

Do you think Jot’s profession as a lawyer contributed to his ability to lead the Association? If so, how?

“Definitely! His understanding of the legal aspects of issues facing the Board helped us to sort through challenges quicker and more efficiently.” — **Cathy Watkins**

“With his background and experiences as a lawyer, I don’t believe Jot felt as bound to tradition as some. Jot is strong on looking at issues from a big-picture perspective and then presenting his arguments to the other Board members.” — **Richard Tokach**

Has Jot helped you personally as a member of the Board of Directors?

“Jot has encouraged me as a Board member. From guidance as a new Board member to debating issues at other cattle events such as Denver, BIF or NCBA, he has challenged me to understand the activities of our breed, our industry and our Association. I am a better Board member because of Jot’s influence.” — **Joe Hampton**

“In my six years of serving on the Board with Jot, I have been privileged to serve with many great Angus leaders. I also have been lucky enough to call many ‘friend.’ With Jot, I have been fortunate in both respects. He has taken time away from his family and law practice to be a great president, and I appreciate it very much. His expertise and logic will be greatly missed.” — **Jay King**