

The Power of the Point

SandPoint Cattle Co. raises funds for cancer research while playing host to the Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska.

Story & photos by **Chelsea Good**

Stand up if you're a cancer survivor," says Kenneth Cowan, director of the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) Eppley Cancer Center. Many people stand up from their dinner seats under the long, red-and-white striped tent and look around to see who has shared their burden.

"Now stand if you have a family member who has had cancer," Cowan says. Most of the remaining 3,500 in attendance at the Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska join the cancer survivors.

"How about a friend?" Cowan asks. Everyone is standing.

That's the thing about cancer — most

everyone has been touched by it in some way. Each year, nearly 9,000 Nebraskans are among the more than 1.4 million Americans diagnosed with cancer. Nebraska cattlemen are fighting back through the Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska. The mission of the ball is to promote beef in a healthy diet, to showcase rural Nebraska and to raise money for health care research.

The first Cattle Baron's Ball took place in 1986. In 1999, the name changed to the Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska and the money went from being donated to the American Cancer Society to staying in Nebraska, with 90% going to UNMC Eppley Cancer Center research and 10% being allocated to health care needs in the area of the host family. Through the 2006 ball, more than \$2 million had been donated to the Eppley center. SandPoint's ball raised more than \$500,000 for cancer research and local health care.

Happy to host

"The Power of the Point — Beef. Rural Life. Research" was the theme for the 2007 ball.

This theme was derived from the name of the host ranch, SandPoint Cattle Co., Lodgepole, Neb.

SandPoint managers John and Laurie Widdowson and owners Ray and Mary Alger were selected in 2005 as host families for the June 2007 ball. Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska Advisory Board members visited the 12,000-acre Angus ranch in September 2005, and in November of that year, they were officially asked to host the event. SandPoint had been located in Nebraska for less than two years, and none of the future hosts had attended a Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska.

"I knew it was a big deal and that it'd be a huge sacrifice for our family and our crew, but I don't think I'd even began to realize the scope of it all when we first accepted," Laurie says. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience and something we wanted to do because we really believe in the cause."

The Widdowsons began planning the event even before attending their first ball at a feedlot in Milford, Neb., in June 2006. The planning involved months of meeting multiple nights a week and the help of hundreds of individuals, families and businesses.

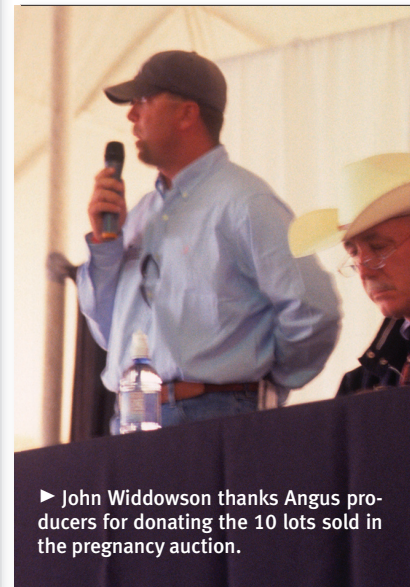
When the day did come, Laurie says it was hard for her to not just stand and watch. "We planned and planned for all these tents and food and 3,500 people and all of a sudden it was there," Laurie



► **Above:** Artists decorated seven, 6-foot-tall fiberglass boots that were auctioned off at the Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska.



► **Right:** SandPoint Angus females greeted guests as they walked into the 2007 Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska.



► John Widdowson thanks Angus producers for donating the 10 lots sold in the pregnancy auction.

says. "Everything came together wonderfully. It was amazing."

There was a wide array of activities for Laurie and her guests to take in. Friday festivities included golf tournaments in nearby towns of Sydney and Chappell, a reception and live auction for trail boss ticket holders, and a private shopping night at Cabela's. The gates opened at 10 a.m. on Saturday for people with \$300 "trail boss" tickets. These attendees enjoyed a champagne social hour, steak and shrimp brunch, and live auction before people with \$40 "top hand" tickets were admitted at 1 p.m.

Afternoon activities included a working ranch-horse competition, style show and wagon ride tours of SandPoint. Attendees could wander through the silent auction offering items ranging from a solar-powered fence energizer to a two-couple sleigh ride in Aspen, Colo. There were also numerous artist and commercial booths, a wine- and beef-tasting tent, and a tent offering cancer health screenings. Other entertainment included a casino tent and an Old West area complete with a covered wagon.

Evening festivities kicked off at 5 p.m. with a prime rib dinner sponsored by Cabela's followed by a final live auction round and concert by Jo Dee Messina.

Making it theirs

Many of these events are typical of Cattlemen's Balls. But, each year is a little different, and SandPoint did something big to set their ball apart.

"I thought that the Cattlemen's Ball ought to sell some cattle," says Ray of his idea to have a heifer calf pregnancy auction.

Ray says they weren't sure how well a pregnancy auction would go at a charity event. He and John decided they wanted to limit it to 10 lots for a first-time event. Ray was responsible for securing five donors. He says he called five of his friends in the Angus business, and they all responded immediately saying they'd be happy to help.

Dru Uden of TC Ranch says John contacted him about donating to the auction, and he did so gladly.

"I didn't know a whole lot about the ball, but John told me about it, and I knew it was going to a good cause," says Uden, who ended up attending the ball and purchasing the commemorative shotgun created for the event by Cabela's at the evening's live auction.

Uden says he also was unsure if the pregnancy auction at the ball would be successful but was pleased when it went better than he had expected. The auction sold nine lots of confirmed heifer pregnancies and a 10th lot of four frozen embryos. Thanks to



► **Left:** Information about lots in the pregnancy auction appear on a screen sponsored by Cabela's. Proceeds of the auction were donated to the University of Nebraska Medical Center Eppley Cancer Center.

► **Below:** Attendees accept beef samples at the Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska.

Superior Livestock Auction, viewers could bid from home or just watch as the auction raised \$82,700. A video before the sale told about the lots and the operations that donated them.

Laurie is excited the extra funds were raised while giving attendees at the ball a glimpse of what she and her husband do on a day-to-

day basis. Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska Advisory Board chairman Ann Marie Bosshamer agrees, calling the auction a unique way to show what SandPoint is good at — raising great Angus cattle.

Laurie adds that another way SandPoint brought Angus to this year's ball was by having donor Angus females on display when guests walked into the event. She says she couldn't think of a better way to greet guests than with beautiful Angus cows.

Also making this year's ball unique were the larger-than-life cowboy boots. The seven, 6-foot-tall fiberglass boots were decorated by six Nebraska artists and one artist from Texas. They were sold during the live auction along with other items, including a colonoscopy and two loads of wet distillers' grain.

Community support

The point that the Algers and Widdowsons took away from their Power of the Point Cattlemen's Ball is that none of it would have been possible without community support.

"All of our 32 committee chairs were local people who had never been involved in the event before," Laurie says. "We found that people are very generous and have talents you wouldn't expect to find in rural western Nebraska."

Ray agrees, adding that people were very giving, whether they were blessed with financial success or not. At the evening meal,



he told a story about one man from eastern Nebraska who took a vacation from work in order to show up at the ranch a couple of days before the event and help however he could.

The ranch's closest towns, Lodgepole and Chappell, have populations of 359 and 935, respectively. It took the help of many of these people as well as volunteers from nearby Sidney and across the state to help plan the event. More than 600 volunteers had a hand in planning and executing the ball. Laurie says Angus producers from across the country got involved by donating to the pregnancy auction, and many people from the Angus community traveled to the event.

After his standing demonstration of how many people are affected by cancer, Cowan made similar comments about the community and beef industry involvement.

"In the past nine years I've never ceased to be amazed at the power of small Nebraska communities," Cowan says. "This event highlights the generosity of the beef industry. Every time I come to a ball I learn something new about the industry, and I enjoyed the auction today, where I got to learn even more."

Cowan thanked everyone in attendance for their support in the fight against cancer. He stressed the importance of working together toward a cure for a disease that affects so many and commended SandPoint and Nebraska cattlemen for doing just that.

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