

Right Man for the Job

by Wes Ishmael

Red Angus history will remember Bob Hough as the Executive Secretary who helped lead the breed into the mainstream with the conviction of a breeder and the business savvy of a CEO.



Bob Hough served as RAAA Executive Secretary from 1997 thru December 2007.



Respect for RAAA founders and breed principles. Sal Forbes shares her insight with Bob.

"Bob is one of us. He was always a Red Angus breeder, even though he didn't own the cattle. Everything he did was focused on the commercial success of Red Angus," says Harold Hughes of Glacier Red Angus at Polson, MT.

Lee Leachman at Leachman Cattle of Colorado near Wellington emphasizes, "Bob's motivating force was always what was beneficial for the breed, period. His level of integrity in that regard, looking out for the breed rather than playing politics and worrying about keeping a job is phenomenal, especially for someone who has that much tenure."

Both of these past presidents of the Red Angus Association of America (RAAA) are reflecting on the contributions of Bob Hough, who served as RAAA Executive Secretary from 1998 (he was named interim Executive Secretary in 1997) until his resignation in December. Hough came to the association as its first Commercial Marketing Director in 1994.

"I think you measure the effectiveness of someone in Bob's association position when he leaves the organization," says Leachman. "Is it in crisis or is it running smoothly? Obviously, I think the association is in great shape."

You could argue that's something of an understatement. Since Hough accepted the position of Executive Secretary, the association went from running a financial deficit of

\$180,000 to being in the black the first year, and then every year since to the tune of about \$100,000 annually.

When Hough was named Executive Secretary the shelf-life of staff members was primarily measured in months; some were there and gone so fast he never knew their names, literally. As of January 1, 2008, nine RAAA staff members had been with the association for 10 years or more.

In round numbers, during the last decade: the annual budget has doubled from approximately \$1.2 million to \$2.4 million; annual registrations and annual total animals recorded have increased by 57%; active membership is up 39%; junior membership has grown by 63%.

Hough is quick to deflect any credit, emphasizing, "Bottom line, it's the breeders who make the breed, not me or the staff."

However, Hughes points out just as quickly, "We've had some really good board members during those years, but you've got to have a general, especially with the turnover in board members. Bob was relentless at accomplishing what the board directed...In my mind the association and the breed wouldn't be where they are today if we would have had a different executive during that time."

Set the Bar High

Hough came to the association with a producer's work ethic and mental-

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A leader in commercial marketing. Bob addresses the 1997 convention in Nashville, Tennessee while serving RAAA as Commercial Marketing Director.



Still actively hands-on with cattle.



A respected opinion. Bob and Mary Lou Schuler compare lots in the 1997 Rocky Hill Farms sale catalog.

ity. The only reason he ended up with a Ph.D. in animal science from Virginia Tech, and extension experience in cattle country as disparate as Arizona and Maine, is that he and his two older brothers could never figure out how to get along enough to remain part of the family's diversified farming and livestock operation in Pennsylvania.

The only reason Hough was hunting a job without the physical demands of cattle production is that a windbreak fell on top of him while he was managing a Black Angus operation in New Hampshire. His back injury demanded more sit-down time.

And, the only reason he even considered looking at a position with a breed association is because he was impressed that RAAA was looking for someone to focus on the commercial industry.

"Breed associations have evolved, but back then it seemed to me they were primarily social organizations, and they didn't interest me," explains Hough. "But the job description for the Red Angus commercial position definitely didn't come from a social organization; it was about change and it was exciting."

If you're unfamiliar with Hough's full pedigree, understand this is a guy who loves to look at cattle in the show ring. He's judged livestock shows in 15 states, four Canadian provinces, as well as in Brazil and Paraguay. He's served on the management committee of the National 4-H Livestock Judging Contest for 16 years. So, it's not like he didn't understand or enjoy live cattle evaluation.

But, Hough also always understood the value of a breed's genetics are based upon their worth to commer-

cial producers, period. From that standpoint, his view of Red Angus' role in the U.S. cattle industry remains today what it was when he first signed on.

"I believe the role of Red Angus is to be the maternal common denominator in commercial crossbreeding programs," says Hough. He points out the U.S. cattle industry is still at a crossroads deciding whether to go more toward straight-breeding or crossbreeding, though the critical mass continues to gravitate towards the straight side of the fence.

"There are situations where straight breeding makes sense, but when feasible, crossbreeding should be implemented," says Hough. "The trouble now is there are getting to be too few viable low-input breed components for crossbreeding."

Planning is Everything

That's the kind of farsightedness that comes to Hough naturally. Undoubtedly, that's one reason why he always appreciated the vision of RAAA's founders and clung so doggedly to the organization's core principles, along with the strategic planning surrounding them.

"Bob came in and said we had to focus on those core principles; they're what made the breed what it is and they're what would take us down the road," remembers Hughes. "So, all of our strategic planning revolved around those principles as a key to becoming a breed leader. Bob focused on them like a laser. For the 10 years that I was on the board, that's what made the difference."

"Keeping the breed focused on the customer, defined as the commercial cattle producer, through the core principles and strategic plan-

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An economy gone global. Above: Bob and Linda Andersen visit fellow Red Angus breeders in Brazil, furthering international relationships. Below: Bob and Linda strengthen international ties by hosting Reynaldo Salvador (president of the Brazilian Angus Association, 1988-1992).



Always accessible. Bob and Ryan Ludvigson share thoughts at the 2000 convention in Dickinson, North Dakota.

ning has been one of the breed triumphs because it means breed growth is based on a real economy rather than an artificial one," says Hough. "We've had sustained growth for 10 years, and it's based on commercial bull market share, which goes back to our core policies. I think that's one of the things I've done well in this position, keeping staff focused on the core principles and who our customers are." Breed history with a focus on RAAA core principles is also part of the orientation all new board members receive.

In retrospect, it's appropriate that naming Hough Executive Secretary included plenty of farsightedness on the part of RAAA Board of Directors.

"I told them there were a couple of other people outside of the breed I thought they should consider first, and if they weren't interested I'd take it," remembers Hough. The board didn't want to consider anyone else, though; they'd gotten the right man to begin with, only for a different position at the time.

In turn, hiring people became a Hough hallmark at RAAA. In fact, he was so successful at finding valuable expertise that RAAA staff have become something of an industry talent pool, frequently gleaned by other organizations.

"I do think I've brought in good people," says Hough. "In my humble opinion, I think our staff is the best in the industry. I'll stack them up against anybody." He includes in that assessment staff that he hired who have since gone on to lend their talents elsewhere.

"I don't work from fixed job descriptions. I hire the best talent, and then adjust the position," says Hough.

From a member standpoint, Hughes says you'd be disappointed to hear someone was leaving for another job. Bob would adjust the position to the talent, and a year later Hughes says you realized you were even better off than you were before.

Add Value with Vision and Facts

Once you've got the plan and the right people all you need is the tenacity to hold fast to the foundation, the RAAA core principles in this case. When you do, you get ahead even though it may be differently than you envisioned. The Red Angus Feeder Calf Certification Program (FCCP) serves as a prime example.

"The dream everyone had was creating a system that would allow Red Angus sired calves to sell on par with the black ones. As we saw it, color was probably the breed's single biggest competitive disadvantage," says Leachman. Though a lofty goal at the time, Leachman adds, "Today I have customers coming to me and saying they're thinking of switching to reds because the reds are outselling their black calves."

That's largely the result of the FCCP, which is the reason Hough was hired by RAAA in the first place. More specifically, with the Commercial Marketing Director position, association leadership hoped to create pull-through demand.

"If we could sell the feeder calves, then we could sell the bulls. That was the whole premise from the beginning," says Hough.

When Hough was hired for the commercial position in 1994, the Board's charge was to create

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Industry alliances are key. Above: Bob presents Marcine Moldenhauer of Excel Corporation the RAAA 2007 Industry Service Award. Below: Bob presents Cara Gerken of the USDA the RAAA 2003 Service Industry Award.



A legacy of RAAA Executive Secretaries. Left to right: Sybil Parker, Sal Forbes, Bob Hough and Betty Grimshaw at the 50th anniversary convention in Denton, Texas.

demand for Red Angus feeder calves first; concentrate on developing carcass EPDs next.

Hough's answer to the former, after lots of discussion with breeders and other folks in the industry, was the outline for what would become FCCP. The outline was presented and accepted at the 1994 National RAAA Convention. A month later Hough was in Greeley visiting with representatives at JBS Swift (Monfort at the time) to establish a value-based program for Red Angus calves. By early 1995 Hough and Lee Leachman were meeting with mega food-service company, Sysco, about how Red Angus calves could qualify for that company's fledgling Supreme Angus Beef program. Monfort was Sysco's supplier for that program at the time. By the end of 1995 RAAA also became the first breed association to offer a value-based grid—this one with Monfort, negotiated by Leachman and Hough.

Long story short, FCCP became the first program certified under USDA's Quality Systems Verification Programs umbrella—what we'd think of as the USDA Process Verification Program today. As such, FCCP cattle would qualify for Sysco's program. Subsequently, Sysco wanted calves from the FCCP program, gobs of them. However, between Sysco changing suppliers, and growing demand for Red Angus calves in other branded beef programs, the notion of supplying a single brand never materialized.

"We achieved our ultimate goal of selling Red Angus calves at a premium, at the larger sales, but we could never create enough critical mass to supply a single Red Angus branded beef program," says Hough.

So, mission accomplished, but differently than was envisioned at the start.

Incidentally, understanding the possibility and value of USDA third-party verification stemmed from both Hough's work in creating feeder calf demand through graded feeder calf sales in Maine, as well as the USDA contacts he'd established in those endeavors.

"What he did in Maine creating feeder calf demand, in a state not regarded as a cattle state, was a factor in hiring him as Commercial Marketing Director," says Howard Bobbitt of Rocky Hills Farm at Petersburg, TN, also a past RAAA president. "We didn't find out until later how good Bob was at managing finances and staff."

"We rightfully viewed Bob as someone who understood the feeder calf side of the business, but also performance testing," says Leachman.

And how.

During Hough's tenure as Executive Secretary, the industry's first Total Herd Reporting (THR) program was refined.

Moreover, a long list of industry firsts in breed genetic evaluation followed. As examples, there was the first EPD for maintenance energy and the first reproduction sire summary, including heifer pregnancy, made possible by THR. There was the incorporation of data filters to more accurately sift the data going into the genetic predictions. There was the creation of EPDs for intramuscular fat (IMF) and ribeye area (REA) that utilize both carcass and ultrasound measures. Oh, by 1996, Hough had fulfilled his second charge from the Board by designing and implementing a system of genetic evaluation for carcass traits.

While Hough counts RAAA innovations in genetic evaluation among

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the highlights during his time leading the organization, genetic evaluation also represents one of his key disappointments.

"I still think the beef industry in this country should be based on planned crossbreeding, which should be based on the best genetic predictions, and those will come from Total Herd Reporting and multi-breed genetic evaluation," explains Hough. Industry-wide, that possibility still seems a long ways off.

Keep in mind, Hough hasn't limited his genetic expertise to Red Angus. He has a long history of leadership with the Beef Improvement Federation, has served as president of the U.S. Beef Breeds Council and on the Board of Directors of the National Pedigreed Livestock Council. There have been speaking engagements in 27 states, four Canadian provinces, Ireland, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil. That's in addition to authoring more than 200 scientific, technical and popular press articles, writing and editing *The History of Red Angus*, and most recently co-authoring *Breeds of Cattle* (www.breedsofcattle.net). The list goes on.

As Hough enters a new chapter in his professional life, he plans to continue these kinds of contributions, and is contemplating consulting and strategic planning for various organizations.

"Now that I'm no longer working for a breed association I also hope I can get back to doing more public speaking, and back to doing some judging," says Hough.

Wherever new roads take him, Hough plans to stay close to the Red Angus breed.

"In this position I've been around a bunch of great breeders and people and I've learned a lot. I've appreciated the members' support and friendship and their stewardship of the breed," says Hough. "I think Red Angus breeders are some of the very best in the industry. As well, I believe some of the industry's most valuable intellectual property can be found among Red Angus breeders."

That's not idle chatter. If you got to know Bob Hough, you understood quickly that he doesn't put much store in platitudes or beating around the bush. Agree with him or not, like him or not, you could never doubt his sincerity in furthering the commercial fortunes of Red Angus.

Just like a breeder. ■