

# The Big Picture

*Grit, tenacity and purpose fuel John McCurry's quest for developing the best Angus cattle.*

*Story by Joann Pipkin*

*Photos courtesy of Legacy Livestock Imaging and McCurry Angus Ranch*

Like a game of chess, you make adjustments. You press on with the moves that work; you re-think those that don't.

It's pretty sage advice.

And, it's that kind of advice that not only brought fourth-generation Angus breeder John McCurry back home to the farm, but also motivates him to grow his family's Angus legacy into one that molds his own children.

With an Angus heritage that spans three generations on both sides of his family, John's passion for the Angus breed and ranching has never been in question.

John's parents, Andy and Mary McCurry, formed Marands Angus in 1977 after their marriage. Andy's roots can be traced to Johnson Workman, a noted pioneer in the breed and the brother of John's great-grandmother, Cora Workman McCurry.

Mary brings her own rich Angus history to the operation. She's the daughter of Tennessee Angus breeder John Sanford Smith, who served on the American Angus Association Board of Directors while the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand was initiated. She is also a former Miss American Angus and served as American Angus Auxiliary president.

After graduating from Kansas State



The fifth-generation of Angus breeders in the McCurry family are already learning the ropes of the family business.

University (K-State) in 2004, John returned to his roots in Burrton, Kan., to farm. He's since transitioned to what has become McCurry Angus Ranch, an operation he manages with his wife, Melody, and young children Aubree, Molly and Drew.

While his roots in Angus run deep, John stays true to a vision his family's legacy helped create: grit, tenacity and purpose.

## Finding focus

As a high-schooler, John got a real taste for genetics, making most of the mating decisions for his family's Angus herd. He went on to study animal science at K-State and worked at the university's beef unit where he gained valuable knowledge and practical experience.

Today, the goal for the ranch's breeding program is simple: create the best animal possible. This is genetically and phenotypically.

It's a goal John doesn't take lightly as he strives to achieve it with every breeding decision made.

In its infancy, the operation focused on marketing show heifers. Then, John realized he was selling what would potentially become some of the best cows in his herd. So, he re-focused and has since started raising bulls for

commercial cattlemen.

"All of our matings are made to create demand for bulls, using genetics we think will benefit the commercial cattleman," he says.

With longevity and fertility as top priorities, John works to develop an animal with superior expected progeny differences (EPDs) that are backed by an appealing phenotypic and genetic profile.

The McCurry Angus Ranch cow herd includes both purebred and commercial spring- and fall-calving cows. Commercial females are used primarily for recipients in the ranch's embryo-transfer (ET) program.

"We just use them once, maybe twice if they're early enough calving, and then put bulls back on them again," he explains.

Commercial calves are marketed through Superior Livestock Auction alongside those of his customers to help create a larger number of cattle in a comparable location with a similar genetic base.

McCurry Angus hosts a spring bull sale to market the majority of the bulls produced, and the ranch also features a commercial female sale in early December.

"We try to use that as an avenue for our customers to market the better end of their bred heifers, commercial open heifers as well as their young cows. Whatever they want to market," he says.

## Overcoming obstacles

It's no secret the challenges many young producers face entering production agriculture.

Yet, John chooses to embrace those trials and press on.

He admits accessing both land and operating capital are the biggest hurdles he and his peers face.

Aside from land at the home place, the McCurrys lease two additional ranches — one 75 miles north, the other 125 miles east. While still appreciative, John says the opportunities haven't come without challenges. Extra time away from his family tops the list.

Unfavorable weather conditions have also daunted their operation in

recent years; John says a severe drought last summer took its toll on their home ranch.

To help compensate for the lack of grazing land, John says he cut the herd while still maintaining quality.

"We've been a lot more aggressive putting embryos in because we see the difference in the superior cows and the superior matings," he says. "A buddy of mine always said nothing replaces hard work, and that's what we think. Just keep your head down and work."

In an ever-competitive business, John finds value in standing out from the crowd. As he works to make the McCurry Angus Ranch brand synonymous with quality, he knows the buck both starts and stops with the customer.

"We try to educate them as much as we can in terms of why we're using the bulls we're using," he explains.

"We take a page in our catalog for each sire group to explain why we used this bull and the attributes we think he brings to the table."

Melody adds, "We try to treat our customers as we would want to be treated. And, that just goes back to our values."

John leans on a motto he first learned from his father's business growing up.

"The customer is always right," he says. "That's what we've always done is take care of them in hopes that they'll take care of us."



The ranch hosts a spring bull sale as well as a female sale in early December.

## Paying it forward

A former member of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) board of directors, John credits that experience with helping him develop a greater appreciation for diverse cultures and landscapes.

"One of the biggest eye-openers from being on the junior board was having the luxury to travel and see different aspects of the world, meeting people from all over the country, differing operations and what made them successful," he explains. "It gave me a whole other view of the beef business."

Growing up, John took part in a variety of junior Angus activities including the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) and Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) Conference. However, he says it was the Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) that helped him hone in on networking with other Angus breeders.

"At BLI, there's 20 of you and you

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are all in the business,” he explains. “That was a great opportunity to learn. And then, the tour stops allowed us to see the whole turn of the beef industry.”

Looking back on his experiences in the NJAA, John realizes the value of youth development. From team building to leadership opportunities, his time in Angus youth programs continues to play a vital role in his life on the ranch.

He and Melody often find themselves helping young juniors start their own cow herd. The McCurrys also have a joint marketing plan with Hutchinson Community College.

“We try to get those kids involved in a junior Angus program while building a cow herd,” he says. “It’s how we [Melody and I] got started. You can envision the abilities these kids have, whether people skills or other resources they might have at home. It’s good to see new kids, new faces, new people in the breed.”

The McCurrys are avidly involved in community activities, serving on committees and boards and donating available resources when possible.

“Somebody was there when we were a junior,” John says. “It’s getting harder to find people to serve in those roles, so we’re doing what we can to fill the voids.”

As youth become farther and farther removed from production agriculture, John knows educating his customers must be an integral part of his job as a cattleman.

“These families want their kids to

experience something they did years ago, so there’s explaining or a bigger learning curve for some,” he says.

“There are a lot of opportunities



The whole family (left to right) Melody, Aubree, Molly, Drew and John, are all involved in the day-to-day operations of McCurry Angus Ranch.

within the Angus breed, whether it’s speeches or writing or photography,” Melody adds. “Everybody might not come back to the farm, but [you can identify] some traits that can better prepare you for whatever career path you choose.”

## Looking ahead

With young children at home, the McCurrys work to find balance between farm life, Melody’s off-farm job and family time.

Recently retired, Mary has stepped in to handle the farm office duties and help with the children when needed while Melody’s at work. Andy also pitches in, helping out with chores or checking cows.

As busy as John stays managing the ranch, though, he’s also a pro at loading the kids in the pickup to check cows.

Seven-year-old Aubree makes

herself at home on John’s lap, guiding the truck and trailer through gates, over hill and dale; all while sister Molly, 4, is perched in the passenger seat taking in all the sights. At only 1, Drew finds contentment strapped in his car seat behind dad.

“We were both raised farm kids, and we know the hard work that it takes,” Melody says.

It’s a life the McCurrys wouldn’t ever trade.

John is hopeful his children will take advantage of the same opportunities he had growing up in the NJAA programs.

“I want them to get the big picture of networking and having

the speaking skills that team sales and cook-off and public speaking all taught me,” he says. “And, they’re going to have to be as big of advocates for agriculture and beef as any. It will be more important in their life than it will be in mine.” **AJ**

*Editor’s Note: Joann Pipkin is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Republic, Mo.*

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