



Father of the Specs

A Q&A with Bob VanStavern.

by **Laura Conaway**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

He was there at the early meetings before the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand was born, and he was present when the first pound was sold. Bobby “Dr. Bob” VanStavern was not only there from the start, he was a key part of the brand’s inception.

Born in West Virginia and raised on his grandparents’ livestock farm, VanStavern quickly learned the value of hard work and standing firm on what you believe.

From a one-room school to a West Virginia University degree, from ROTC to captain in the U.S. Air Force, from his master’s degree to his doctorate in meat science at Ohio State University (OSU) to the 1960 launch of his extension teaching career, VanStavern’s drive has influenced generations.

When Mick Colvin walked into VanStavern’s OSU office in 1976, Dr. Bob was ready. If anything, he had been waiting for ways to put his carcass-judging notes to work.

Waiting for a program that would emphasize quality and taste, he opened his top right desk drawer and began discussing with Colvin the specifications that still serve as the foundation for the world’s largest beef brand.

You won’t find him bragging about it. VanStavern exudes warmth and a humility that is perhaps surprising for a man some say changed the entire beef industry for the better. His assertiveness still shows in the forthright manner that undoubtedly made for early success in meetings with packers and distributors.

Immersed in an industry and academic community trending toward the lean yield of Continental breeds, VanStavern’s grit and determination kept him true to a set of specifications that were headed in the other direction.

A visit with the Ohio icon takes us back in time for a while, as Dr. Bob explains with

poetic simplicity that his job is to teach. On a parallel, ours is to share the conversation about ideas that shaped the modern beef industry. Have a seat at the table as we discuss the beginnings of CAB with one of its founders:

Q: Take me back to the 1970s. We have Harold Etling, disappointed in a bad steak that the menu said was Angus. He and Fred Johnson spoke with Mick Colvin, a regional manager for the American Angus Association at the time, about their desire to start a branded beef company. How did you enter that mix?

Dr. Bob: Well, I did educational programs for the beef industry, many of which involved carcass evaluation. They were beef shows followed by a carcass show. Mick

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was always available to help with those if we needed him, so we got pretty well-acquainted. He would come in and help us get the carcass data, and he attended most of the beef meetings that we had, whether they were production-oriented or market-oriented, so we just spent a good number of years together.

When they started talking, Mick asked me to go to Saint Joseph, Mo., to talk to the Board, but I wasn't in a position to do that, so Glenn Kean, Mick's previous professor at Penn State, went. When they got back from that gathering to talk about it, the committee was all from Ohio, except for [two from Illinois and Kentucky]. Mick invited me to sit in on the discussions, and I did.

When they got around to deciding that they were going to try to get a program going, Mick came down to the office. He was asked to serve as director, incidentally, and decided to do it, and that was very fortunate

for the program. He came down to the office and said he wanted to talk about specifications, and I said, "we don't need to talk, I got 'em right here in the drawer."

Q: That was all it took? Had you been anticipating a program like this?

Dr. Bob: We had been doing a lot of beef research, and other universities had, too, all of it indicating that the level of marbling was so important in establishing flavor, taste. You could argue tenderness if you wanted to. It didn't hurt it any, and chances are it was going to be better with the higher degree of marbling, but you couldn't argue taste. It was just not arguable.

I had been judging these carcass shows on the basis of the specifications I had in mind.



I pulled those specifications from out of the drawer, and he wrote them on a yellow tablet. Been that way ever since.

Q: That's how history was made?

Dr. Bob: Well, you see, you could defend it. We had plenty of research to defend the specs. Of course, at that time it was 1976 — when USDA had just changed their grading system to include lower marbling in a USDA Choice grade, so what you were getting at restaurants and retail stores was what had been USDA high-Good [now USDA high-Select] and the restaurants particularly were suffering because they couldn't satisfy the customers. They were getting this beef that wasn't as good as it had been, so they were ready. They liked it because they were familiar with it prior to USDA's specs changing. It was a natural fit. All we had to do was get people to work together — which wasn't easy.

Q: Let's go back to those specs in the drawer. You hadn't put them together just for Certified Angus Beef?

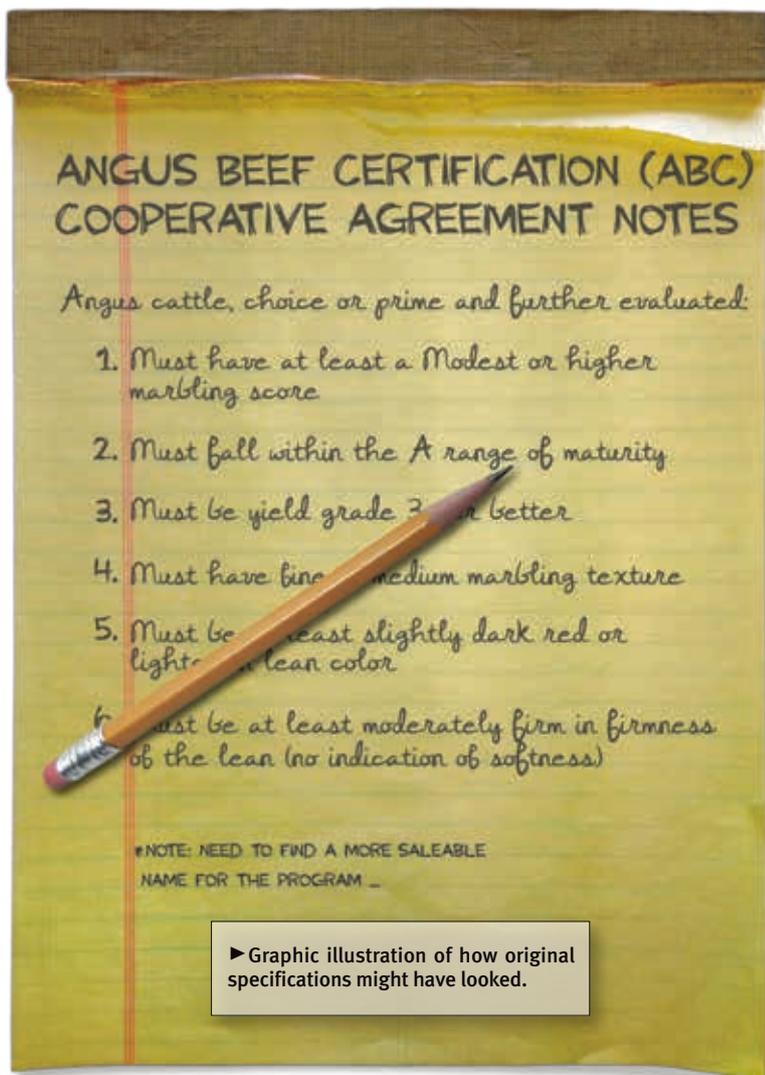
Dr. Bob: No, I had written the specs because that was what I used in my teaching as a standard. I had developed them over time from our research. It was my job to share them. To teach. To help. There wasn't any problem with that at all.

Q: Were they well-accepted?

Dr. Bob: Well, some people kind of wanted to fiddle with them, change them: "You're ruling out a lot of valuable cattle when you go that high with the marbling spec." And I was — 70% of the USDA Choice cattle were in the low-Choice category, so we were ruling out 70% of the cattle available for marketing.

Somebody said, "Let's just put the name on it, 'Certified Angus Beef.' That'll sell it. Put the Angus name on it; that'll sell it." Well it was at the time when General Motors had put a Chevrolet engine in an Oldsmobile and called it an Oldsmobile. I reminded them that you didn't want to put a Volkswagen engine in a Cadillac, so they finally bought into the stringent standards.

Oh, it took some selling. For everyone. Of course the key thing, and I think much more valuable than specifications, was the monitoring system that the program developed to trace that product to be sure when that tag went on there, it was the product it said it was.



► Graphic illustration of how original specifications might have looked.

We had to have some ability to know that when we stamped something with our brand name, that that product was conforming to our specifications. The integrity of the product was essential.

Q: To what extent had others been discussing specification-based beef production prior to CAB? You were at the forefront of research and new ideas. Had those conversations been taking place anywhere else?

Dr. Bob: Oh yeah, but not in the same direction. The direction was the other way because this was the era of the big cattle. Continental cattle were coming in, and the emphasis was going big and lean, so it was going the other way from an industry point of view. Now some stores early on had their own brands and their own specifications, but none of which really involved much of what we wanted to do.

I think the toughest sell we had was the academic community. Most of them had been ingrained with producing lean cattle, simply because they'd been fighting fat for so long. When these lean, muscular, Continental cattle came along, they jumped right on them. As far as I know, at that particular time [the researchers at] Texas A&M were the only ones that were in with us, and it took a little bit of time to get them to say it out loud.

Q: What made you personally willing to go against the grain at that point?

Dr. Bob: The Angus breed was the only breed that could do what I wanted



to do. They were the only ones that could consistently develop a higher degree of marbling. We couldn't do that with any other breed because we just couldn't get enough cattle to have a high-quality marketing program, and we still can't.

We were using our specs on other cattle,

and it was pretty easy to observe what they were. When we had some sire information and then carcass information, you could see the genetics of the thing right away, but no, we were not focused on Angus at all until that.

Q: The eight specs you identified back then have effectively stood the test of time. Was there ever an ah-ha moment when you came up with them, or was it more of a gradual progression? When did pen actually hit the paper?

Dr. Bob: Even as a student at West Virginia University, my objective was to have a higher-quality deal. When it came to how did you select marbling, well, had we gone a third of a degree higher to Moderate, then we would have ruled out a lot of cattle. Even though it would have been superior, Mick and I knew that Modest was absolutely acceptable in terms of flavor and tenderness. It wouldn't have bothered me to have Moderate or Prime!

I assured Mick that Modest would work. The flavor would be there and the tenderness would be quite acceptable. The rest of the specifications came right out of the grading manual, with the color and texture and stuff like that.

Current CAB specifications

Marbling and maturity

1. Modest or higher marbling – for the taste that ensures customer satisfaction
2. Medium or fine marbling texture – the white “fleck of flavor” in the beef that ensure consistent flavor and juiciness in every bite
3. Only the youngest classification of product qualifies as “A” maturity – for superior color, texture and tenderness

The next three specifications ensure a uniform, consistent steak size:

4. 10- to 16-square-inch ribeye area
5. Less than 1,000-pound hot carcass weight
6. Less than 1-inch fat thickness

Finally, four specifications further ensure the quality appearance and tenderness of the brand:

7. Superior muscling (restricts influence of dairy cattle)
8. Practically free of capillary ruptures (ensures the most visually appealing steak)
9. No dark cutters (ensures the most visually appealing steak)
10. No neck hump exceeding 2 inches (safeguards against cattle with more variability in tenderness)

Source: Certified Angus Beef LLC, 2014.

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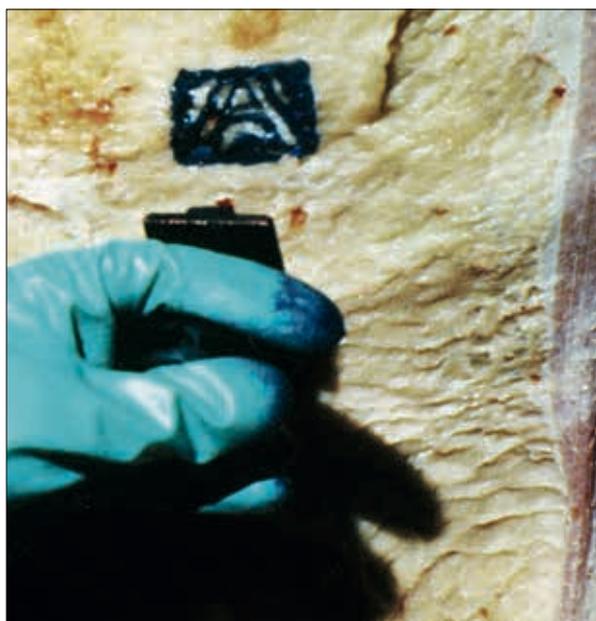
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Q: Let me ask a dangerous question, if I may. What did the money look like at that point? You knew they would have to charge a premium for a superior product, and you already had a lot of naysayers. How did you see it working in spite of a higher cost?

Dr. Bob: The supply of the cattle was one of the early challenges. At that time, packers weren't paying more for higher-quality cattle. Those types of cattle were just coming in and being sorted with the rest, so the packer wasn't out anything. He could, in turn, sell those to his accounts because they were higher quality.

Q: So, in a way, the packers were set. They weren't having to pay more for superior cattle, but were profiting from the quality. The producer wasn't getting an incentive to raise quality beef, and the packers wouldn't like to pay a premium, so why would there be an end to those supply challenges? How did that process evolve?

Dr. Bob: Well, [the packers] do like it now, but they didn't then. Absolutely, you have to start with the producer raising a good calf. It also starts with the packer's ability to market, and if he has a demand from the foodservice industry for a higher-quality product, he's going to get it. When that demand exceeds the available supply, then the packer pays more to get the cattle he needs. When he does that, then the producer gets his money back. It was simply supply and demand. It trickled



► Carcasses receiving the A stamp signifying they met live animal specifications must still pass 10 carcass specifications before being labeled CAB brand product.



► Bob VanStavern (left) and Mick Colvin are two of the founding members of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). Here they pose at the new CAB Education & Culinary Center.

down quickly to producers, more quickly than we anticipated.

Q: As you know, a few years ago the original eight specs turned into 10, simply because the Yield Grade specification shifted. USDA had ribeye size measured back then, but it wasn't included in the specification. What was your reason for not including it back then?

Dr. Bob: We had a Yield Grade spec, but it wasn't very discerning. We still were getting some fairly fat cattle and adding that [change] cleaned that up a great deal.

We were interested in cutability, but we were much more interested in tenderness, juiciness and flavor than we were in how many bites are in a steak. Bites weren't our focus. We wanted every one of them to be superb as far as flavor was concerned, and, of course, that's still the case.

Q: If we went back to that same drawer and pulled out the original yellow tablet, would you change anything? Would you alter the specs?

Dr. Bob: No, I can't think of anything that needs changing about the specs. It's working. If it's working, don't fix it. There may be a time when it would be worthwhile to go to Moderate marbling, but I can't think of any hurry to do that because Modest works so well. That's the only thing that I could possibly even think about changing.

Q: I recently stumbled upon a quote by our current president John Stika from an interview

in 2011 where he said, "CAB grew slowly at first; it took almost two years to sell the first million pounds. Now it takes two or three hours." What do you think when you hear something like that?

Dr. Bob: I think, "Great!" I don't know that I would have predicted that at the beginning. There wasn't any question about whether the program was going to work, but it was a question of "How well?" and "To what extent?" Mick had a better vision of that than I did. I couldn't think of all the things that had to happen for that to work to the extent that it dominated the beef industry.

Q: Not everyone has the honor of sitting down with you to ask these questions, but for all the readers, those folks on the production side, what message would you like to share with them?

Dr. Bob: I would say, figure out where you fit in the system. From conception to consumption, figure out where you fit in the system and do your part to make it work — and that goes for everybody in the system. You'll be rewarded. The added value will be there, and you can add to it by what you're doing, but it's work that adds the value. It's your segment's contribution to the industry, and it has to be of value.

Q: You just celebrated a birthday last Sunday. You and your wife, Sue, spent the day with Mick and Virginia Colvin. Do you still talk about CAB when you are together?

Dr. Bob: We have always stayed in touch. Oh yes, conversations pretty much circle around Certified Angus Beef LLC. We evaluate it, determine what's going on, whether we like it or don't like it. I think they're doing a fantastic job.

Editor's Note: Laura Conaway is public relations and industry information specialist for CAB.

