



A Problem Solver

American Angus Association President Joe Hampton thrives on finding innovative ways to solve problems.

Story & photos by
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Standing amongst the blueberries lining their carport, Joe Hampton grins and tilts his head back a bit. “You can’t grow blueberries in Rowan County,” he says, eyes twinkling in fun as he contradicts his wife of 30 years. Robin had just shared that she had been picking about a gallon a day for the previous two weeks at their home near Mount Ulla, N.C. — in Rowan County.

As you begin to question, Joe takes a step back, then rocks forward as he steps into an explanation of how researchers at the station are developing lines of blueberries that will thrive in areas where they have not been known to grow. With the enthusiasm of a kid in a candy store he shares how they are not only getting them to grow, but they are finding varieties that will mature at different times, allowing future Rowan County blueberry growers to harvest the popular fruit from June through October.

It’s one of the many success stories from Joe’s work as superintendent and

research operations manager at the Piedmont Research Station near Salisbury, N.C. Whether it’s research projects to get strawberries to bear fruit when temperatures exceed 90° F, comparing management of layer hens in pasture environments vs. conventional layer houses, or challenging his team to develop a solar-powered golf cart to navigate the station more efficiently, the 55-year-old draws energy from the challenge. He thrives on putting together the teams to consider the challenge at hand and helping them to find innovative solutions.

Of course, not every trial on a research station is successful in producing a product for customers to use. As Joe says, “That’s OK, too.” The reason it’s OK, he says, is you undoubtedly learned something in the process that will eventually get you to where you want to go.

It’s that perspective that Joe brought to the American Angus Association Board of Directors when he was elected in 2003.

“Joe’s experience in his off-the-farm job provided him with the leadership skills needed to head our Association,” says Cathy Watkins, a fellow Board member from Middletown, Ind. “Joe made each and every one of us think deeper, longer and harder.”

“He understands the huge picture of feeding the world and knows the importance of research, education and outreach for the good of our country and the world,” shares Kevin Yon of Ridge Spring, S.C., calling Joe a true agriculturalist. “He has a wealth of knowledge about other segments of agriculture, as well as the cattle industry.”

A researcher at heart, Joe is known by his peers for his desire to understand all the facts and the different viewpoints surrounding an issue before taking a stance (see “Peer Review”).

He brushes off the significance of being asked by his fellow North Carolina Angus breeders to run for the Board, saying it’s

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► **Above:** Joe Hampton stands on the deck of the home he and Robin had physically moved to Back Creek from a high school 20 miles away. Modest but definitely sufficient, the 30 × 50-foot home was built by the carpentry class as a class project. “That’s just how we like to do things,” Joe explains.

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tradition for the state to nominate someone every 20 years or so and the timing was just right for him to be the one asked. No one, he says, was more surprised than he was that he actually made it to the Board, and he didn't consider the fact that he could someday lead the Association until the day he was elected treasurer. He shares his "President's Perspective" beginning on page 58.

Back Creek

But while Joe is passionate about his day job at the research station, he is equally passionate about Back Creek Angus, the cattle operation he and Robin own in partnership.

"Everything important in my life happened in 1981," says Joe. "We got married in '81, I went to work for the research station in '81 and we bought our first registered Angus cow in '81."

Neither Robin nor Joe came from Angus rootstock. Joe was the son of a dairyman, and Robin's family hailed from the Eastern shoreline. They met in North Carolina State University's (NCSU's) Scott Hall, while both were pursuing degrees in poultry science.

After graduation, Joe took a job with Carroll Foods of Warsaw, while Robin got a master's degree in human nutrition and physiology, then took a job as an emergency loan officer for the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) in counties close to where Joe worked.

While he loved the job at Carroll Foods, Joe says it was too much responsibility for someone at that age, and he burned out.

"He swore when he left the dairy he would never milk another cow, but we needed grocery money, so he milked cows," Robin explains of the young couple's return to Rowan County and the family farming operation.

They married Aug. 1, 1981, and within a month, Joe was hired to manage the poultry barn at the Piedmont Research Station. Robin helped care for the exhibition animals that were part of Hampton Enterprises until she found a job as a bank teller in Statesville, then later re-joined the FmHA staff as an assistant county supervisor.

As a sideline, and for more grocery money, the tireless couple began managing the breeding and calving program for Dunmore, an Angus herd at Mooresville, N.C., owned by James Moore, a heart surgeon at New York General Hospital in New York, N.Y. As they worked with the cattle, they began to accumulate some of their own, mainly commercial, but buying their first registered cow in 1981.

Choosing Angus

A drought in 1986 spurred some tough management decisions.

"We said everything that we can't feed that we don't want to feed needs to go," Robin explains. They sold the cows without registration papers.

When they decided to get into the registered business, it wasn't a slam-dunk they would go with Angus, Joe says, admitting he subscribed to other-breed journals.

"Whenever the American Angus

Association had a selection tool, it meant something," Joe recalls. "And an operation like us — a mom and pop deal, never going to be a big operation — we needed help to make improvements to our cattle. Whenever we evaluated what the different breed associations could do, Angus sort of came to the top."

At the time, the Association was making strides in its performance programs and providing producers estimated breeding values (EBVs), the forerunner to expected progeny differences (EPDs), on registration



► Both with full-time day jobs off the farm, Joe and Robin Hampton share the responsibilities of Back Creek Angus, a 100-cow first- and last-generation Angus operation in central North Carolina. "This isn't a job, this is our life," Joe says. "The farm is here because this is what we want to do."



► Joe has played a significant role in supporting breed improvement efforts, as well as the development and growth of Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI). He chaired the Research Priorities Committee and has championed efforts to further Association research on such practical matters as feed efficiency and hair shedding, along with the incorporation of DNA into the national cattle evaluation (NCE).

papers. A researcher at heart, Joe liked the data collection and analysis opportunities the Angus Association offered.

“That’s what brought us to the Angus breed,” Joe emphasizes. “We said we can evaluate our cattle and make them better, and that’s what we wanted to do.”

He did have his concerns about the popular phenotypes of the time.

“These bulls were extremely tall, and they weren’t very sound,” Joe recalls, keeping the door to other breeds open. “From the beginning, the rules were if this Angus thing

didn’t work out, we could go get a good horned Hereford bull or a Simmental bull and turn him out on those cows, and we’d still keep doing what we were doing, we’d just have commercial cows. That kept us from chasing any of the fads. Our belief continues to this day that cows need to be good commercial cows first, then they can be registered cows.”

In 1988, Joe was asked to take a superintendent’s position at the Upper Piedmont Research Station in Laurel Springs,

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► Joe poses with Steve Leath, then CEO and president of the North Carolina Research Campus at Kanapolis, under a mural of the 12 super foods that adorns the ceiling of the campus’s core research lab. Leath, who has since taken a position as president of Iowa State University, credits Joe for fostering the partnership between the campus and the station to allow them to conduct field research to help achieve the campus’s goal of finding nutritional solutions to better health.



► Joe and Robin enlist the help of commercial cattleman and customer Dennis Myers to develop their bulls and heifers for them. The relationship started when Myers had a problem with a bull he had purchased from Back Creek.



► In connection with the North Carolina Research Campus, NCSU’s Jeremy Pattison conducts research at the Piedmont Research Station to find strawberry progeny that will perform in different environments and for different uses. Part of the research has included taste panels by chefs to find a strawberry with better cooking traits.

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N.C. Robin could continue to work for FmHA [now the Farm Service Agency (FSA), after reorganization in 1995]. They kept the farm in Mount Ulla, trucking the cows to the mountain in the spring and bringing them back to Rowan County in the fall to overwinter near their hay supply.

The couple traversed the 90-mile stretch of highway for 16 years, until Joe was offered the superintendent's position at the Piedmont Research Station where he had started his career. Now back in Mount Ulla full-time, the couple is comfortably at home.

The herd today

Back Creek is home to about 100 mama cows, two-thirds of which calve in the fall to match the breeding program to their predominantly fescue forage resource. They calve 30-40 cows in the spring to provide some 18-month-old bulls with yearlings in their annual Black Saturday Bull Sale hosted the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

The cows and a flock of Katahdin ewes (a meat-type breed of hair sheep) graze together, along with two llamas and a few Mammoth Donkeys used for predator control, through 5- to 8-acre paddocks in a rotational grazing system.

"We intend for them to eat everything

in this pasture," Joe says, explaining the different species eat different forbes, with the sheep eating weeds cows won't. "If I put the sheep out there, then we get a very diverse forbe coming up. That's a healthier situation, because every year is a little bit different. One year favors one type of grass. Another year favors a different type. I don't care what kind of grass I have, I want my cows to have something to eat."

That's a switch from their original plan to move to an endophyte-free monoculture like the general farm publications advised, says Joe. "That's where we were headed, but it occurred to me that none of my neighbors did that, and we're raising bulls to work in their programs. Our operation needs to mimic their operations."

To guide their genetic selection, the Hamptons surveyed their customers to see what types of genetics they sought, Robin says. At first exasperated when results came back all over the board, they soon realized their customers needed different types of bulls to fit individual situations. That guided the Hamptons to select for three types of bulls — easy-calving bulls, high-growth bulls and carcass bulls, as opposed to trying to make one bull fit all three objectives.

Customer satisfaction is paramount

to Joe and Robin, especially since most of their customers are neighbors. They take guaranteeing their bulls seriously. If a customer isn't satisfied, they make the bull good. Joe says he once made a bull good for a customer because the bull wouldn't put his head in a headgate.

That philosophy solidified a relationship between the Hamptons and Dennis Myers, a commercial cattleman from Yadkin County. When Myers had a problem with a bull he had purchased, he asked Joe and Robin what they were going to do about it.

"I said 'whatever it takes,'" Joe recalls. Since then, Myers has become a regular customer and, selling his calves in load lots at a premium, a poster child for what the Back Creek bulls can accomplish in a commercial herd.

Joe and Robin have started contracting with Myers to graze pairs and manage the weaned calves for Back Creek. He develops the bulls until sale time and the heifers through breeding.

"We bring everything back here to calve out," explains Robin, but contracting with Myers expands their forage resource and assists in time management as Robin now works as a FSA district director in 14 counties and Joe has traveled extensively while serving

Peer Review

During their tenure on the Board, Directors of the American Angus Association interact closely with each other and staff 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 Joe Hampton's fellow Board members what qualities set Joe Hampton apart as a leader on the American Angus Association Board of Directors. Here's what they had to say.

Joe is a deep thinker. While some of us are considering an issue at hand, Joe is contemplating how our decisions will affect related issues that future boards will encounter. He realizes that decisions made today have impact not only for the present, but for future generations of Angus breeders. — *Cathy Watkins*

Joe is honest, extremely intelligent, insightful and dedicated to the good of the industry. He has a unique ability to answer a question by posing a series of questions to help the entire group reach a solid decision. Joe is good at letting others arrive at a sound decision, usually only offering his input as needed. — *Kevin Yon*

President Hampton's calm demeanor and excellent organization have allowed for greater input from the membership and other Board members. — *Jarold Callahan*

Joe's respect for the views of other Board members and his ability to then build consensus on challenging issues illustrate his outstanding leadership skills as chairman this year. — *Milford Jenkins*

Joe is always ready for challenges that may come up. He faces them with an open mind and listens to what the members have to say. — *Doug Schroeder*

As president, Joe proved to be a good listener and stayed focused on the many issues that faced the Board. Joe has been very dedicated in keeping the Angus breed and Association moving forward in these changing times. — *Jim Rentz*

I believe a great leader does not care who gets the credit for good things accomplished while they are in office. This certainly describes Joe Hampton! — *Steve Olson*

The quality that sets Joe apart is the fact that he is a pure Southern gentleman in his leadership of the Association, always listening and then responding. — *Scott Foster*

Joe is quick-witted, smart, good on his feet, has a dynamic personality and, most importantly, looked like me. Joe is never afraid to offer his opinion, especially after deep thought and thorough investigation. Joe was treasurer during some trying financial times for AAA, and offered strong support to me while I was president. — *Jay King*

on the American Angus Association Board.

By continuing to listen to their customers, using Association tools to evaluate their genetics, and keeping their customers happy, Joe and Robin have the goal of making Back Creek Angus a one-generation Historic Herd.

“We bought this farm, we bought the equipment, we bought the cows,” Robin says. “This wasn’t something Joe’s mom and dad or my mom and dad left us. We are a first-generation and, since we don’t have any kids, this will be a last-generation Angus operation.”

The population growth around the Mooresville, Lake Norman area may make that a challenge. A neighboring horse farm is being offered for sale at \$29,000 per acre.

But where there is challenge, there is opportunity, says Joe. In this case, it may come in the form of demand for local products and popularity of farmers’ markets in the area. On any given day of the week, there is a farmers’ market open within an hour of their house. Don’t be surprised to see Back Creek beef and blueberries as a regular vendor.



►A star quarterback in high school, Joe had multiple scholarship offers to play Division 1 football. A work-related accident that broke his back the summer following graduation ended his hopes of playing college football like his father. In his characteristic Southern drawl, Joe says, “That’s OK, I did this.”



Joe was never the first to speak on a topic in a Board meeting. He was open-minded and listened to what others had to say. You could just see his mind working as others spoke. He is a deep thinker, and when he did speak others respected what he had to say. One thing that I liked very much was that he explained things in “Southern English,” which made it much easier for me to understand. — *Joe Elliott*

Joe was extremely sincere and devoted to the long-range plan, always interested in the input from the membership. — *Charlie Boyd*

Joe always tried to keep constructive dialogue, but he could do it with some levity. I spent seven years on the Board with Joe and wish I would have known him earlier. It took five of those years to understand his form of the English language! Joe is a big man with a big heart. — *Bill Davis*

Joe is a true gentleman and is one of the few folks whose mind works faster than his mouth. When he says something, it has been well thought out. — *Phil Trowbridge*

How will you remember Joe’s contribution to the AAA Board?

Joe Hampton has been an excellent president and great parliamentarian for the American Angus Association Board of Directors. He will be most remembered for often asking, “What is the pleasure of the Board?” while refraining from interjecting his own opinion. Joe brought a new perspective to Board operations with his

long-range planning agenda in which he moved staff and Board members to facilitate more input from the membership. — *Arlen Sawyer*

As treasurer, Joe faced a downturn in Association business due to genetic situations and the economy. He stepped up to the challenge, creating a task force to develop a plan to correct the problem both for the current year and for upcoming budgets. Joe’s quick, decisive action ensured the continuing financial soundness of the Association for our members. — *Cathy Watkins*

I will remember Joe as a humble servant for the Angus breed. He loves Angus cattle, but might just love Angus people more. — *Kevin Yon*

I personally will remember Joe for bringing diversity to the Board, which I believe is very important. — *Doug Schroeder*

Joe’s mark on the American Angus Association as president will be the leadership that he brought to our strategic planning initiative this past year. Challenges and obstacles will always confront us, but with those come opportunities for growth. Joe’s contribution in asking us to always find those opportunities for our Angus breed will be his legacy far more than the actual plan itself. — *Milford Jenkins*

Joe’s presidency will be viewed historically as an era when science and technology played an ever-increasing role in the Angus industry. — *Jarold Callahan*