

BUILDING A LEGACY

York Farms is this year's IBA Seedstock Breeder of the Year and their son, Cody York, is IBA's Outstanding Junior of the Year.

By Amanda Miller

For the York family of Palestine, the cattle industry has always been about more than raising livestock. It has been about building a family business centered on reputation, customer relationships and values strong enough to carry the operation from one generation to the next.

This year, that commitment was recognized in a rare and meaningful way. York Farms was named the Illinois Beef Association's Seedstock Breeder of the Year, while Cody York earned Outstanding Junior of the Year honors. This is a unique combination highlighting both the operation's long-standing success and the next generation already helping shape its future.

When the family first learned they had received both awards in the same year, the significance did not immediately sink in. "When the Illinois Beef Association contacted us, they said they weren't certain this had ever happened before," Joel York recalled. "The more I thought about it afterward, the more significant it felt."

For a family deeply immersed in the day-to-day responsibilities of running a seedstock operation, the recognition served as an opportunity to pause and reflect. "You feel like you're just doing what you do every day," Joel said. "You don't necessarily think you're doing anything different than anyone else, so when people recognize you for that, it's really humbling."

For Cody York, the Outstanding Junior of the Year recognition carried a similar meaning. "It kind of gives you the idea that even when nobody's around to see what goes on every day, people are still watching," he said. "People recognize those things, even though you may not realize it."

Building the Operation

The roots of York Farms trace back generations in Crawford County, where the family originally operated a commercial cow-calf herd before transitioning into purebred Angus cattle. "My grandfather and dad had a commercial cow-calf operation," Joel explained. "The first purebred Angus heifer I got was in 1996, so about 30 years ago."

From there, the operation steadily evolved. The family began purchasing additional purebred cattle throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s while simultaneously investing in reproductive technologies and expanding their marketing program. Joel York completed artificial insemination training while attending Lakeland College and began incorporating AI practices into the herd around 1998 to 2000. Embryo transfer work followed in 2004.

Over time, York Farms moved from consigning cattle to established sales to hosting its own production sale at the family's home farm near Palestine. "This year was the thirteenth production sale here at the farm," Joel said.

Today, York Farms consists of approximately 100 Angus and commercial cows, as well as commercial recipient cows used in the embryo transfer program. The farm also includes around 1,400 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat and alfalfa. Joel works alongside his father, Robert, and son Cody in the day-to-day management of the herd, while Joel's mother, Cindy York, and wife, Missy York, handle countless behind-the-scenes responsibilities that keep the operation running smoothly. Their youngest son, Brady, now a high school sophomore, is involved as well.

In recent years, the family experienced a life-changing natural disaster that forced them to reconsider their future in the cattle industry. On March 31, 2023, a tornado swept through the home farm, devastating much of the operation. Joel recalls the heartbreak of seeing the farm his parents spent their lives building left in shambles. In the aftermath, the family faced a difficult decision: step away from the industry or use the tragedy as motivation to rebuild and come back stronger than ever. Fortunately, York Farms chose the latter.

A Philosophy Built on Details

Ask the York family what has guided the operation over the years, and the answer comes quickly: details matter. "That was always something Dad stressed to me," Joel said. "And I've always tried to convey that to our boys. Sometimes those little things make more of a difference." That mindset shapes nearly every aspect of the operation, from breeding decisions to customer service.

"We've always tried to produce the type of cattle that you would want to buy," Joel explained. "Don't try to offer and market things that you can't 100% stand behind, because your reputation and standing behind those cattle is really what it amounts to at the end of the day."

That same attention to detail also extends into the family's breeding philosophy. York Farms focuses heavily on balancing profitability, predictability, performance and phenotype in its cattle. "We've always tried to keep profitability top of mind for the customer and us," Joel said. "Very performance-driven as far as the genetic choices, but also keeping added phenotype built into every aspect."

The operation has become particularly known for calving-ease bulls, though Joel emphasized the importance of maintaining performance traits and pounds alongside birth weight. "At some point, those cattle are going to step on a scale, and that's truly what they're worth," he said. "They need to have pounds and performance."

That philosophy eventually led the family to branch into SimAngus genetics as well, allowing them to better meet customer demand while maintaining the development style and management practices their buyers had come to trust.

The Work Behind the Sale

While the annual production sale may last only a single day in February, preparation for it spans the entire year. "When you're done with one, you're already starting on the next one," Joel said. Breeding decisions are made with future sales in mind, from selecting mating pairs to planning calving dates and evaluating potential sale cattle months in advance.

The marketing process itself begins long before the sale season arrives. Shearing, clipping and preparing cattle for photographs typically starts in late summer and early fall, before photos are taken between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In recent years, the family has also embraced online marketing and digital sale platforms, particularly through an online show heifer sale that Cody York helped develop after returning home from college.

"We had always talked about maybe trying it," Cody said. "Then I helped some friends with their online sales while I was at Lakeland and thought maybe it was something we could do, too." The family launched the online sale last year and quickly found success.

"It went very, very well," Cody said. "We were very successful with it, especially for the first year." That online presence has dramatically expanded the operation's reach. During the February production sale alone, buyers participated from states including Utah, Georgia, Alabama, Oklahoma, Texas and Michigan.

"We sold about a third of the gross sale dollars online this year," Joel said. "That's a pretty big chunk." Still, despite the rise of digital marketing and online bidding, the family believes personal relationships remain at the center of the business.

"A guy in the seedstock business told me a long time ago that you have to go to your customers," Joel said. "The only day they're coming to you is sale day." That statement has shaped how York Farms approaches customer service, from making post-sale deliveries to checking in with buyers long after cattle leave the farm.

Joel shared one story from this year's sale that perfectly captured the importance of maintaining those personal connections. A man in his 90s drove two hours from Indiana to evaluate a bull before the sale. He later returned on sale day, only bidding on that one particular bull he had previously looked at and purchased it. He later drove back to York Farms with a neighbor to haul the animal home himself.

"That right there, in a nutshell, is exactly what we're talking about. The power of people cannot be replaced in the industry," said Joel.

The Industry that Built Him

For Cody York, the cattle industry has never been something separate from everyday life — it has always been part of who he is. "Ever since I was able to walk, I was always going to the barn with Dad," he said.

Some of his earliest memories include sitting beside the chute while cattle were worked, helping around the barn and eventually stepping into the show ring himself. When the family purchased his first show heifer at eight or nine years old, what began as a childhood activity quickly turned into a passion.

Over the years, that passion expanded far beyond showing cattle. Through involvement in the Illinois Junior Angus Association, 4-H, FFA and the Illinois Junior Beef Board, Cody developed leadership skills while also building relationships throughout the industry. Those experiences and the willingness to stay involved behind the scenes ultimately helped shape the qualities recognized through the Outstanding Junior of the Year award.

To him, the award represents more than success in the show ring. It reflects years of consistency, leadership and dedication to the industry both inside and outside the barn. "Everybody always says hard work pays off, and this really instilled that belief in me," he said.

His father believes that commitment is exactly what made the recognition so meaningful. "It's easy to see the banners or the success on sale day," Joel said. "But there's a lot of day-to-day work and consistency behind all of that. Cody's always been willing to put the time in."

After graduating from Lakeland College in 2025 with an associate degree in ag production, Cody initially considered veterinary school before deciding to return home full-time to become more involved in the operation. "I wouldn't change my decision at all," he said. "It's been really good being home and gaining a greater understanding of the operation while learning new things every day."

Today, he has taken ownership of several newer aspects of the operation, including helping launch the family's online show heifer sale. The project has allowed him to combine his passion for cattle with marketing, networking and creating opportunities for younger exhibitors entering the industry. "Being able to provide those experiences to juniors now that I had whenever I was that age — that's kind of a full-circle moment," he said.

Looking ahead, Cody hopes to continue growing York Farms while helping ensure the next generation of cattle producers finds the same opportunities and mentorship that shaped his own junior career.

"Get as involved as you can," he said when asked what advice he would give young cattle producers. "The relationships and connections you build are things you'll carry with you for the rest of your life."

Looking Toward the Future

While the cattle industry continues to evolve, the York family remains optimistic about what lies ahead. Joel said much of that optimism comes from watching younger generations embrace innovation while still valuing the industry's foundational principles.

"The drive the younger generations have to keep things moving forward keeps me optimistic," Joel said. "Maintaining that solid foundation and adding the advancement — whether it's marketing, science or genetics — that's what's exciting."

For Cody, the excitement comes from the constant pursuit of improvement. "Nobody's ever made a perfect one yet," he said. "Trying to better the next generation all the time keeps me excited about it."

At its core, however, the operation still revolves around the same values that built York Farms decades ago: consistency, relationships, pride in the work and a willingness to pay attention to the details.

"If you enjoy what you do, it never really feels like work," Joel said. "And no matter what direction the next generation takes it, if you pay attention to the details, have pride in what you do and treat people how you'd want to be treated, that's really all that matters."

