

GLS Alumnus Erik Burken Honored

Erik Burken, Grazing Livestock Systems/Animal Science 2002 graduate, was recently named in the Top 10 Industry leaders by *The Cattle Business Weekly*.

Since 2008 Burken and his wife have lived in Kaluga, Russia, overseeing the upstart of the Angus Genetics of Russia cowherd owned by Sergei Nitsenko. Today, the herd numbers 3,500 breeding females on three different farms, most of which have been imported from the U.S. within the last three years. Nitsenko's aim is to build a fully-integrated beef system, including two more farms, a feedlot and packing facility, to help re-establish Russia's beef industry.

Burken told *The Cattle Business Weekly* his role is to lend his cattle expertise, design facilities and oversee building projects, assist with planning for the future, and most importantly, train the Russian workforce on everything from cattle care to planting crops and putting up hay. He explained that most of the Russian workers lack practical livestock management experience.

It's a long way — both geographically and otherwise — from having what he describes as a “hobby” cowherd growing up in south central Nebraska to general manager for Angus Genetics of Russia. So how did he get where he is today?

Burken worked for a local sale barn while in high school, and then came to UNL to pursue his bachelor's degree as a double major in GLS and Animal Science. He conducted his GLS internship at the Eater Ranch in the Sandhills where he learned cows can do most of the work — an important lesson that is paying off now in the harsh conditions of the Russian steppes. He also worked for several months at Darr Feedlot in Cozad, NE as part of his participation in UNL's feedlot management specialization internship program. After college Burken worked with Whitestone Krebs at Gordon, NE where he learned the genetic side of the beef business while developing bulls and heifers and inseminating the breeding heifers. In 2008, when

Eldon Krebs sold 250 bred females to Russia and owner Sergei Nitsenko expressed interest in having a manager from America, Burken knew it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Burken said for now, he intends to continue pursuing his beef dream in Russia, but someday he may return to the U.S. to start his own beef herd.

Editor's Note: Source of information and photo for this article, *The Cattle Business Weekly*.



Erik Burken, general manager, and wife Jamie, office manager, for Angus Genetics of Russia.



Back from Namibia

by **Walter Schacht**

The Spring 2011 issue of *The Blade* included my greeting from Namibia, Africa where my wife and I were spending the year. I was on a faculty development leave — teaching and conducting research at the Polytechnic of Namibia. My focus was multiple use management of rangelands and woody plant invasion on grasslands and savannahs. Namibia is a fascinating country with a diversity of ecosystems, wildlife and people, and is an ideal setting to study the interaction and outcomes of managing rangelands for multiple purposes, including livestock production, trophy hunting, wild game production, ecotourism and natural products. The advantages of multiple-enterprise operations vs. single-enterprise operations were made evident by the relatively high financial returns per unit input (e.g., land) and the sustainability of the systems and operations. The unique and successful approach to managing and marketing natural resources in Namibia can be looked at as a model for many parts of the world.

There is a strong cadre of people in Namibia working in resource management. I was fortunate to be part of it by teaching and advising students. I taught three undergraduate courses in range science, natural resource



Dr. Walter Schacht with natural resource management class on a field trip to the Okavango River region in Namibia.

management, and research methodology at the Polytechnic of Namibia. Although Namibian students aren't as well prepared for college/university as American students, they are enthusiastic about education. I certainly enjoyed teaching and studying in Namibia, but I am glad to back in Nebraska.

Student Profiles

Cory Voss

After attending Bruning-Davenport High School where he was involved in 4-H and sports, Cory Voss headed to Southeast Community College in Beatrice to work on an associate's degree in agriculture. While at SCC, he was president of the Agribusiness Club.

Cory didn't know when he entered SCC that he would go on to pursue a bachelor's degree. "SCC was a good start for me, but as I was riding the tractor one

day, I realized I needed to know more than what I could learn in two years at SCC," he said. One of his SCC instructors, Mark Goes, who is also on the Grazing Livestock Systems Stakeholders Board, took a group of students to the 2008 Nebraska Grazing Conference. At that event



Cory Voss

Dr. Walter Schacht (GLS co-founder) and others held a panel discussion about education and careers in the grazing industry. Cory also visited with Schacht at the conference. That experience, and a conversation with Goes, convinced him to apply to UNL, where he is now a junior GLS major.

Two of the UNL courses Cory has really enjoyed are Great Plains Ecosystem (RNGE 440) and Livestock Management on Range and Pasture (ASCI 451). In 440, he especially liked learning about and participating in prescribed burns — knowledge put to good use during the burn his family recently conducted on the land it manages. He has learned a great deal from discussions with the various speakers who give talks and demonstrations in the 451 course, which also incorporates a week-long study in the field. “Dr. Brink really made us work hard during that week in the field,” said Cory. But that is okay with him, because he feels that is how he best learns. “Just reading about things in a book isn’t enough; I need to see and do things in order to understand them.”

After graduation, Cory plans to return to the family farm near Bruning, NE, where he’ll concentrate on the grazing and Pioneer Seed aspects of the operation.

Eric Thalken

To say Eric Thalken came to the GLS major with a varied background would be an understatement! Eric is what we affectionately call in the world of academia a “non-trad” — non-traditional student who is a bit older and more experienced than the average undergraduate student.

Eric grew up in Ogallala and received an Associate of Science degree from Mid-Plains Community College. After that he lived in various places, mostly splitting time between the Midwest and New England, as



Eric Thalken

he had family in both areas. He held jobs in the railroad, oil field, dairy operations, and vegetable farming... to name a few. He gave UNL a try a few years back, but decided mechanical engineering was not right for him, so back he went to the “real world,” returning to jobs in agriculture. He eventually came to two conclusions. One was that he really liked working in agriculture. “I found that the most satisfying, and now can’t imagine doing anything different,” he said. The other conclusion was that he really liked Nebraska!

“Where can you find a better value than these faculty who are so knowledgeable about their subjects and passionate about teaching those subjects to their students?”

So he got in touch with Dr. Dennis Brink (another GLS co-founder), whom he described as “awesome!” In fact, Eric speaks very highly of all the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources faculty with whom he’s had classes since returning to UNL in January 2011. “Where can you find a better value than these faculty who are so knowledgeable about their subjects and passionate about teaching those subjects to their students?” he asked.

Eric may have taken a circuitous route to get where he is now, but it all helped clarify what he wanted and got him where he is today, which is doing very well in agricultural classes he greatly enjoys. His experience as a herdsman even led to his working for the UNL dairy operation while he pursues his B.S. in Grazing Livestock Systems.

Eric’s story illustrates the importance of finding the right “fit” for each student, regardless of what stage in life they are in. We have had several GLS students who came to (and in some cases like Eric’s, came *back* to) UNL in their 20s, 30s or 40s. It’s never too late to get a great education!

Upcoming Educational Opportunities

There are multiple opportunities for students to add to their education outside of the classroom. Three such events related to grazing for which GLS students can apply for partial scholarships are listed below. See the web sites for details on the events.

Nebraska Grazing Conference, August 14-15, 2012, Kearney, nebraskagrazingconference.unl.edu. Many presenters from multiple states will be on the program for this 12th annual event. Past GLS students who have attended (and in some cases, presented) have found this event extremely valuable. The conference draws 225-250 participants.

Nebraska Ranch Practicum, North Platte and Whitman, eight dates June 13, 2012-January 10, 2013, nebraskaranchpracticum.unl.edu. Three-season, hands-on sessions teach how to use decision support tools to evaluate management and marketing

alternatives dealing with grazing strategies and many other aspects of ranching. Application deadline is May 8, and enrollment is limited.

Nebraska Range Shortcourse, June 18-22, 2012, Chadron State College, agronomy.unl.edu/nebraskarangeshortcourse. The week-long course focuses on the principles of range ecology and management and the efficient use of rangeland resources for a variety of purposes.

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