

Neighbors

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*One Of
Agriculture's
Rising Stars*



ON THE COVER

One of Agriculture's Rising Stars—FFA State Star Farmer Clay Usery of Limestone County shows off the combine he purchased with earnings from his custom harvesting business. See story on page 16. Photo by Matt Collins.



One Of Agriculture

By Matt Collins

If someone had told Clay Usery five years ago that, by the time he graduated high school, he would have his own farming operation, he wouldn't have believed it. But that is exactly what the recent high school graduate has done.

"Back in the seventh grade, I would never have thought it would have turned into this—but I'm glad it has," said Clay as he sat in his family's Limestone County backyard on a summer day, looking across the soybean fields surrounding the house.

As a culmination of his work, Clay was named the State FFA Star Farmer at the FFA convention in Auburn this June.

Clay currently raises cotton, corn and soybeans in a partnership with his brother, Stan, near their family home in Elkmont. The bulk of Clay's work, however, has been custom harvesting soybeans for other producers in the area. Upon request, Clay harvests soybeans for his clients, using a price-per-acre payment plan. "We also haul the soybeans to Athens or the Decatur Co-op for them," said Clay.

Clay harvested 80 acres of soybeans for other producers during his first year of custom harvesting, and last year, he custom harvested 350 acres of soybeans. The growth of his business last year allowed Clay to purchase a 42-foot hopper-bottom trailer and half-interest in a semi-truck with his father, Stanley. Before that, Clay used his father's spreader truck, but his custom harvesting had simply outgrown its capacity.

According to Stanley, who serves on the Alabama Farmers Federation Board of Directors, Clay's customers have been pleased with his work.

"They've been really tickled by the job he's done," said Stanley.

Clay also bought a combine last year, the second one he has purchased himself. He uses it to harvest the crops he shares with his brother as well as for use in his custom harvesting business. "The custom harvesting has been what really helps me make the payments on the equipment," Clay said.

Clay began farming in 2002, his freshman year in high school, with only 10 acres of soybeans.

"I just wanted a summer job and something to excel in," said Clay. "I didn't play sports or anything, so instead of going to practice, I was farming. It was a good way for me to make money. It just kind of developed, and every year I'd say I wanted to do a little bit more. It just gradually grew to what it is now."

Clay joined his brother in their partnership in 2003, and together, they increased the size of the operation to 109 acres, raising soybeans, field corn, cotton and wheat. After the harvest, Clay baled wheat straw as an additional product to sell. Clay also partnered with a friend for a season to raise sweet corn. The two managed multiple plantings and sold 500 dozen ears of corn for \$2 a dozen.

This year, Stan and Clay are raising 50 acres of soybeans, 28 acres of corn and 35 acres of cotton. The brothers rent all of their cropland.

The FFA Star Farmer is selected from students applying for the State Farmer degree who have been working on Supervised



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Agricultural Experience (SAE) projects. The applicants are required to submit video presentations showing some of the work they have done with their projects. Of those who compete for the award, six district Star Farmers are chosen. The videos of those six are shown at the state FFA convention, where the winner is announced.

Clay began working toward winning the award in 10th grade. "I could have gotten my state degree last year," Clay said, "but I wanted to finish the video. The video took about two years to make."

Clay and his FFA advisor, Randy Blacklidge, edited the video.

"It took us about 10 hours to finish it," said Clay. "That was probably the hardest part of the whole thing."

The required form Clay had

to submit strongly resembles an income tax form, according to Stan. "It really prepares you for the future and teaches you about keeping good records and tracking what you've done," he said.

Blacklidge pointed out how well Clay has kept track of his operations.

"Clay kept very good records on everything he did. He could tell you exactly what his profit or loss margin was. He did very well in the management of his various operations," said the FFA advisor.

According to Stanley, Clay has developed financial responsibility through his work.

"He had to borrow his own money to do his operations. He's

gotten a lot of financial experience. He's able to keep his own books, keep the balance on his checking account and budget his expenses," said Stanley.

Blacklidge said Clay is the type of student he enjoys teaching.

"I love to teach students of his caliber. I appreciate his interest in farming. You can see his ability to manage money, crops and marketing," Blacklidge said.

Clay has been recognized before for his work with his crop project.

Twice, Clay was awarded an Agricultural Proficiency Award in Diversified Crop Production for the row crop operation he runs with his brother.

"We're proud of both of our sons," said Stanley. "Both have done well and excelled at what they do in the FFA and their other accomplishments. We're also proud of them for showing interest in the farm. Nowadays it's hard to get young folks interested in farming, with all the hard work and long hours."

On the national level, FFA has the American Star Farmer award, which is considered "the highest recognition in the nation for an



Limestone County young farmer Clay Usery shows off the combine, above, and semi-truck, below, he purchased with earnings from his row crop operation and custom harvesting business.

aspiring young farmer." Clay will be eligible for the award after completing one year of college.

Clay is planning to attend Auburn University in the fall and hopes to double-major in logistics and agricultural business and economics. He intends to continue working in the partnership through at least the first two years of college. "From there, I don't know yet," he added.

Clay said he wants to come back to the Athens area to work after college. "(But) I don't know if I want to be self-employed at first," said Clay, "I'm not sure if I'm ready for that." ■

