The success of the Canadian company Groupe Westco in winning the award for the country's top Cobb500 breeder performance illustrates how far the organization has progressed since its beginnings 30 years ago.

The business was born from a union of poultry producers based in New Brunswick in the far eastern region of Canada just north of the US border. It has grown into one of the largest poultry farming organizations in Canada with activities in eggs as well as broilers and turkeys, organic fertilizer production, transport, energy and forestry.

The award-winning performance is for a company average, adjusted performance to 65 weeks of age, of 149.15 chicks/hen housed on all flocks. Their flock in Barn 302 repeated their success last year for the best Cobb 500FF flock which averaged 150.89 chicks/hen housed adjusted to 65 weeks.

The award was presented to Groupe Westco breeder manager Michele Levesque and her production team by David Engel, Cobb-Vantress technical service manager for Eastern Canada, and Philippe Dufour, Canada sales manager.

"Michele and her team at Westco have consistently produced great results. It is our pleasure to recognize this team for their outstanding performance," said David Engel.

“They truly work together as a team to achieve the best results."

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“Even though they’ve had results that most would say were great, they continually work harder to be the best. Winning the award for the best sold flock average in Canada last year hasn’t stopped them from looking for ways to improve even more.”

Marco Volpe, agronomist at Westco, commented: “We’re really satisfied with Cobb’s overall performance. Their technical support in breeders, broilers and the hatchery has always helped us achieve our goals.”

Groupe Westco began primarily as a buying group – Les Fermes Waska – and expanded in the 1990s by purchasing transport vehicles and pig farms which were converted into housing for breeding stock and then building a hatchery at Baker Brook, New Brunswick. Purchase of further units for broilers, turkeys and breeders went alongside development of new farms and hatchery expansion.

The company Groupe Westco Inc was formed in 2002 with the acquisition of six farming operations and integration of the hatchery and transport businesses. The goal was to become a major force in all sectors of the poultry industry, with this diversity seen as a way of sharing risk.

Today the group has activities across the industry and in several provinces as far west as Manitoba. It hatches 12.5 million chicks a year, and produces 20 million kg of chickens and 2.7 million tonnes of turkey meat.

The policy is to continue investing and expanding with particular focus on growing their activities towards the west of this vast country and in the medium term looking to markets beyond Canada.

There are a number of substantial joint ventures specializing in production of table eggs as well as poultry meat, and Nutritec which converts chicken manure into top quality organic fertilizer valued particularly by golf club owners for improving their greens and fairways.

Yves Boulay Transport is responsible for cleaning and disinfecting the poultry housing between each production cycle, and for carrying the composted manure to peat bogs and farm land or conveying it straight to Nutritec.

Hélîco is a helicopter company jointly owned by a forestry business, allowing time-saving travel around locations across Canada.

Groupe Westco shareholders are also involved in partnerships owning 90,000 acres of forest land in Quebec with new aspen and hardwood mills planned, and in energy generation through hydroelectric dams and wind power.

Workers at the hatchery in Baker Brook, New Brunswick sexing chicks.

The Canadian awards, introduced in 2012, also recognized the best performing Cobb 500SF flock. Couvoir Boire & Frères in Quebec won this award for the flock in Girard #2, averaging 144.91 chicks / hen adjusted to 65 weeks of age.

Pictured being presented with their flock award, from left to right: Alvaro Sanchez, Lionel Benavides, David Engel (Cobb), Steve Gravel and Constant Boisclair.
‘Egg a day’ program benefiting children in Africa

Cobb-Vantress and Tyson Foods are supporting projects under the Millennium Promise Foundation seeking to reduce extreme poverty in Africa, working with impoverished communities, national and local governments and partner organizations to help transform people’s lives. Dr Bret Rings has joined Dave Juenger in his contribution with the One Egg program in Rwanda over the past four years. They each visit at different times, so every six weeks one of them is there to provide hands-on support. We report on a program that has expanded into a global mission.

The program that was born in Rwanda has now branched out into two more locations - Haiti in the Caribbean and Uganda. The goal is not only to provide children with protein, but also to create a sustainable local market.

Rwanda is the most densely populated area of Africa. Slightly smaller than the US state of Massachusetts, it is home to nearly 10 million people, mostly engaged in subsistence agriculture in a fertile and hilly terrain.

One Egg focused on providing nursery schools with protein each day. Thanks to poultry farms operated by Ikiraro Investments, these schools are given eggs so that each child can eat one egg each day of the school week. The project involves 10,000 laying hens per site, using stock from Irvine’s Africa who are also Cobb distributors in central Africa.

Seventeen schools are currently involved, with other sponsorships in prospect. Around 100 children from ages two to five attend these schools. It costs $6,000 per year to sponsor one school, with surplus eggs sold locally and so helping to create a sustainable market in Rwanda.

“We’re providing them with knowledge that is everlasting - teaching them how to help themselves so that they can pass that knowledge on to younger generations,” said Dave Juenger, corporate director of support services at Cobb-Vantress. “After nearly three years in Rwanda, we tried a new model in Haiti utilizing an already existing poultry company and similar sponsorship program.”

The idea was to provide orphanages in Haiti with protein by purchasing eggs through sponsorship from the local Haiti Broilers company. To date, around 500 children are receiving an egg a day from this program.

Expanding into Uganda, the One Egg program tried a different approach, combining the first model in Rwanda with the second in Haiti. This aimed not only to provide children with protein, but again to sell eggs to create a sustainable local market.

Research is being conducted to ascertain the benefit of increased nutrition through eggs in the children's diet. In Uganda, they have completed building a sustainable poultry house, modeled after the one in Rwanda to provide the eggs.

“The Rwanda government is aware of what we’re doing and fully supports our efforts. They want us to succeed, hoping to see Northern Rwanda eventually develop into a poultry capital,” says Bret Rings, veterinarian at Cobb-Vantress.

The first modern feed mill was built recently in Rwanda and will have a substantial impact providing many farms with the feed they need.

Now the program is looking for ways to reach more people by creating new partnerships. The goal is to provide more people with protein, but also to create jobs on these farms as well as developing a sustainable local market.

500 children are also receiving an egg a day in Haiti

Dave Juenger pictured with some of the children in Rwanda.
‘Fantastic’ atmosphere in every venue

‘The best ever’ - that was the verdict on the World Technical School held over two weeks at the Cobb-Vantress headquarters in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, USA.

Forty eight participants from 26 countries took part in the school which featured 20 speakers from Cobb and three speakers from the poultry industry. The program included outside visits to farms, hatcheries, a feed mill and a processing plant. Additionally, the students enjoyed visiting the Tyson Discovery Center and touring the Cobb quality assurance laboratory.

“It was the consensus from our Cobb team of teachers that this year’s World Technical School was the best ever,” said Dr Steve Golden, director of Cobb World Technical Support team.

“From our students’ comments and actions, they seemed to absorb every minute of instruction as we ventured into every aspect of broiler production. Scientific debates and mutual exchange of information was fantastic in every venue … the classroom, the farms and at meal time.

“Our participants returned to their native countries with a much better appreciation for the Cobb bird as well as the Cobb culture.”

(Top) Morning classroom sessions focused on the theory of sound chicken husbandry, but practical applications were observed in the afternoons (below). Students participated in regional cooking completion (bottom).
Key new position in Brazilian livestock industry

General manager of Cobb-Vantress in South America, Jairo Arenazio, has been appointed to the board of the Brazilian Association of Animal Protein (ABPA), representing breeding companies and becoming the voice for both the poultry and pig sectors.

“Having an important role in one of the most active associations in the Brazilian agribusiness segment, we will be able to contribute by offering trends and market forecasts from the breeder perspective.

“As the first director in this new position, I’ll aim to be very active in promoting the interests of both the poultry and pig industries in the Brazilian agribusiness sector.

The new association has been formed through combining the Brazilian Poultry Association and the Brazilian Pork Industry and Exporter Association. ABPA is the largest association representing the animal protein industry in Brazil with over 130 members.

“This was an extremely strategic and intelligent decision because both chains have links in common and are very synergistic,” added Jairo Arenazio. “Now we will be able to move forward much faster to meet all the needs of the two industries.”

Celebrating 10 years of Copacol integration

Cobb-Vantress took part in the celebrations to mark 10 years of hatching egg integration by Copacol - Consoata Agriculture and Industrial Cooperative.

The event held at the Aercol Headquarters in Cafelândia, also celebrated the cooperative achieving the best results in egg production using the Cobb package in 2013. Copacol currently employs Cobb lines in over 80 percent of its production.

“At Cobb we’re very proud and happy to take part in the history of Copacol and to join its participating producers in celebrating 10 years of this integration,” said Flávio Henrique Araújo Silva, technical service manager for Cobb-Vantress. From the first placements we have accomplished much together, gaining knowledge and achieving great results and success.”

Also representing Cobb-Vantress were Fausto Ferraz, business manager, Cassiano Bevilaqua, marketing, credit and collection manager, Oscar Toneto, sales manager, Vitor Hugo Brandalize, from the Cobb World Technical Support Team, and Cristiano Pereira, technical assistant.

Cobb awarded the cooperative a commemorative plaque, marking their first place in egg production.

“Copacol has a very experienced, proactive team that achieves excellent result ratios - so much so that the team’s results are among the top 25% in South America in total egg numbers, while their hatching results exceed the average for the top 25%, placing them in the forefront of results using the Cobb lines”, said Cristiano Pereira.

Visit to Peru with cooperative customers

Cobb-Vantress organized a visit for customers from Brazilian cooperatives to the facilities of San Fernando, the leading poultry company in Peru, to see the practices adopted in the region and how the poultry industry works in the country.

Representing Cobb were business manager Fausto Ferraz, sales manager Oscar Toneto, and technical assistant Cristiano Pereira, along with Milton Bortolini, from LAR Cooperative, Flavio Paulert, from CVale, Jair Casarotto, from Coopavel, Irineu Peron, from Copacol, and Udo Herpich, from Copagril. The team was welcomed by Dr Luis Bellido, the Cobb technician responsible for the Andean Pact.

“Visits like this shed light on regional differences in countries achieving good practices and impressive field results,” explained Fausto Ferraz. “We made the first visit in 2012 to Chile and we already intend to arrange another visit in 2015 to a new destination still to be defined by the group.”
Major Cobb Turkey seminar

Seventy five delegates from the poultry meat sector across Turkey took part in a two-day seminar in north Cyprus - the first event on this scale by Cobb Turkey.

A team of Cobb technical experts shared their experiences and information on a wide range of topics including genetics, nutrition, hatchery, current health subjects and management techniques for parent and broiler stock.

David Beavers, processing specialist in the Cobb World Technical Support Team, explained cost structure of the US whole chicken sector, with feed, chick, plant and grower contributing 55%, 7%, 25% and 9% respectively.

He said the economic value ratio of different traits is dramatically different. For instance, 1% more carcass yield equals almost 10 eggs, and 1% more hatchability is worth three eggs, while one day less broiler growth equates to only 1.1 egg.

“The goal is to produce the most meat at the lowest cost,” said Mr Beavers. “Yield is where the money is and the Cobb broiler has nearly 1% more yield than its competitors.”

Largest Cobb technical seminar for Africa

More than 100 customers representing 13 African countries attended the largest Cobb Africa technical seminar so far, held at Irvine’s Zimbabwe premises.

The seminar is held every second year and this fourth event attracted delegates from as far as Ethiopia, Nigeria, Malawi, Cameroon, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Mauritius, Tanzania, Botswana and South Africa as well as Zimbabwe.

Director of Cobb Africa, Patrick Murphy, said Cobb is making great strides in the African market, showing tremendous sales growth over recent years - as indicated by a market share exceeding 50 percent across the Sub Saharan territory. “This increase is thanks to the growth of Cobb Africa’s current clients as well as new entrants into the market,” he said.

Prominent industry experts at North American technical seminar

More than 100 participants representing 40 customers from Canada, Mexico and seven countries in Central America and the Caribbean attended the Cobb technical seminar at Riviera Maya, Mexico.

The three days were dedicated to breeder, broiler and hatchery management covering ventilation, health, nutrition and economic aspects. Joining members of the Cobb technical team as speakers were prominent industry experts including Mike Donohue from Agristats, Jim Donald from Auburn University, and Dr Susan Watkins and Dr Keith Bramwell from the University of Arkansas.

Heath Wessels, director of North American sales, stated: “Cobb is fortunate to have some great people managing our business in this region - Robin Jarquin in sales and Cesar Coto in technical service. They organized a remarkable meeting and we know it was an enormous success given the positive comments from our customers.”

Mike Pruitt, general manager of Cobb North America, added: “It was terrific to see many of our North American customers from the regions outside the United States. We truly hope that the technical instruction given by the experts at Cobb as well as our distinguished guest speakers will help our customers maximize the potential of Cobb products.”
UK tops EMEA region for parent flock performance

The award for the top Cobb flock for Europe, Middle East and Africa has been won for the fourth year running by the UK – this time going to Scottish farmer Mark Robson of Pressen Hill Farm, Kelso, Roxburghshire.

The award is based on results from more than 40 million Cobb500 parent stock placed in Europe, the Middle East and Africa and completing production in 2013.

The winning flock of almost 34,000 females, supplying the PD Hook hatchery at Dalton, achieved 144.87 chicks / breeder to 60 weeks of age, with a cumulative hatchability of 86.27 percent.

Awards were presented by Roy Mutimer, general manager of the Cobb Europe region, to Mark Robson and his poultry manager Ian Bonney, who also received an iPad. James Hook, chairman of the PD Hook Group, received the company award along with Andrew Gibson and Charlie McManus. Dalton hatchery manager, Calvin Carpenter was unable to attend but is also receiving an award.

The rearing farm manager Mick Ormerod, responsible for PD

Over 1.5 million parent stock chicks from Broiler Budeshego

The hatchery of Broiler Budeshego has delivered its first 1.5 million Cobb parent stock chicks in Russia - just five months after hatching the first chick at Stromyn.

“Opening the Russian hatchery has greatly reduced travelling time to our customers which is reflected in excellent results,” said American hatchery director Don Sewell. “We are losing less than 0.1 per cent of chicks on arrival at the farm, and 14-day mortality is below one per cent.”

The hatchery benefits from the latest technology and well trained staff. Quality assurance officer Yulia Pavlova, who personally inspects all day-old chicks, stated: “Having begun work in production, I know how important it is to have quality chicks arriving on the farm and this motivates me even more to deliver the highest quality to our customers.”

Elinar broiler was the company receiving the chick that passed the 1.5 million landmark. Marina Bushueva, production director of Elinar, commented: “This is the first flock coming from Broiler Budeshego and the quality of the day-old chicks looks fine.

“I would expect a low mortality and low sexing error rate, just like the previous shipments from Cobb, and there is really no difference between the quality of chicks we’ve received from Europe and from Russia. This flock will hopefully also reach the great production results we always achieve with Cobb breeders.”

World beating performance

Performance excellence was rewarded at annual awards function of Rainbow Farm's agricultural department in the KwaZulu Natal region, held at Pietermaritzburg.

Dr Sanjay Maharaj, divisional agricultural manager, highlighted some of the individual world class performances:

• Pullet rearing - lowest mortality <2% to 21 weeks age
• Laying farms - best peak production of 90.1% and exceeding 90% for 2 weeks
• Best total eggs - 170.19 to 60 weeks age
• Best flock hatch - 87.35% (without spiking)

Cobb Europe donated a floating trophy for the best broiler producer won by the Harries farm.

Poultry industry ‘to benefit from recovery in Spanish economy’

With small but stable growth in the Spanish economy again the outlook for the poultry industry is improving, Rafael Gil, general manager from Cobb Spain, told 27th EPEXA (European Poultry Exporting Association) meeting at Barcelona.

“Throughout recent years, annual broiler breeder placements in Spain have been stable at around 5.6 million,” he said. “With the economic crisis in 2008 we saw more demand for whole bird chicken meat and consumers went away from cut-up products, but this trend is gradually reversing.

Not only has the Spanish market shown growth, but Cobb Spain itself has continued to grow and develop over the last few years even through the nationwide economic crisis.

“Our new parent stock hatchery built in 2012 is helping us to guarantee top quality Cobb 500 parent chicks,” said Mr Gil. “It’s the mix of good product performance and customer care and support that we believe has helped the Cobb500 forge ahead in the market.”

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Nutritional appointment

Vitor Hugo Brandalize has been appointed as nutritional specialist in the Cobb World Technical Support Team.

A veterinarian from the Federal University of Paraná in Brazil, Vitor Brandalize holds a Master’s Degree in veterinary science - animal nutrition. He worked for several companies in the Brazilian industry before becoming an executive with Tyson Foods. He will continue to be closely involved with Cobb-Vantress Brasil, as well as assisting in regions around the world. “Vitor is a very open, friendly and dynamic individual who understands all aspects of broiler production,” said Dr Steve Bolden, director of Cobb world technical services.

New Android app enhances global digital strategy

A new Android mobile application, the latest phase in the Cobb global digital strategy. This newest app joins an iPhone app, the redesigned website and other social media initiatives which comprise ‘Cobb Connection,’ - digital communications to help customers and people in the field.

“Our customers, distributors and team members using Android devices around the world want to be in touch with the latest information regardless of their location,” said Roger Vessell, Cobb director of world marketing.

Until now, Cobb Connection has only been compatible with iOS devices. The Android platform provides access to the latest information for managing Cobb products.

“Cobb strives to give our customers full support and the best user experience possible,” said Roger. “This Android addition to Cobb Connection capabilities will give them quick access to the information that will help them make better decisions faster.”

The app supports six languages - English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Mandarin and Arabic, also available on the company’s website.

Clark Baird, North American marketing manager, noted that this addition ensures users outside the US have the same Cobb service wherever they are in the world. “We keep innovating new ways to connect with our customers, allowing them access to information when they need it.”

Throwback 50 years to Cobb starring at Moscow show

One of the memorable moments from the early years of Cobb in Europe came 50 years ago this summer in Russia when the breed was exhibited at the Soviet Union Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow.

The Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev, opened the exhibition and toured the showground. Suddenly he saw a large live cockerel in a cage on the Cobb stand. He immediately went there, going straight to the cage, opened it and took out the bird.

The cockerel was one of a breeding trio and Khrushchev said he would like to raise the birds at his datscha (summer house). Next day a little man arrived at the Cobb booth with some large cardboard boxes.

He’d come to collect the chickens for Khrushchev and that the Soviet leader asked if Cobb could supply a feeding plan which was provided. In return the man handed to Cobb a signed photograph of Khrushchev looking at the Cobb male.

Holding the cockerel (second left) is Dr John Knowles, then managing director of Cobb Breeding Company, who later founded Marwell Zoo which became renowned for conserving endangered African wildlife species.

Dr Knowles still has the original photograph signed by Khrushchev in fountain pen ink at his home in Hampshire, England. He was featured in Cobb Focus two years on the 50th anniversary of Irvin’s being appointed Cobb distributors in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia).

This and other events from the 98-year history of Cobb are featured in ‘Throwback Thursdays’ tweets on the Twitter - @cobbvantress

Follow @cobbvantress and you’ll find lots of interesting facts about Cobb including practical tips on everyday management and useful links.