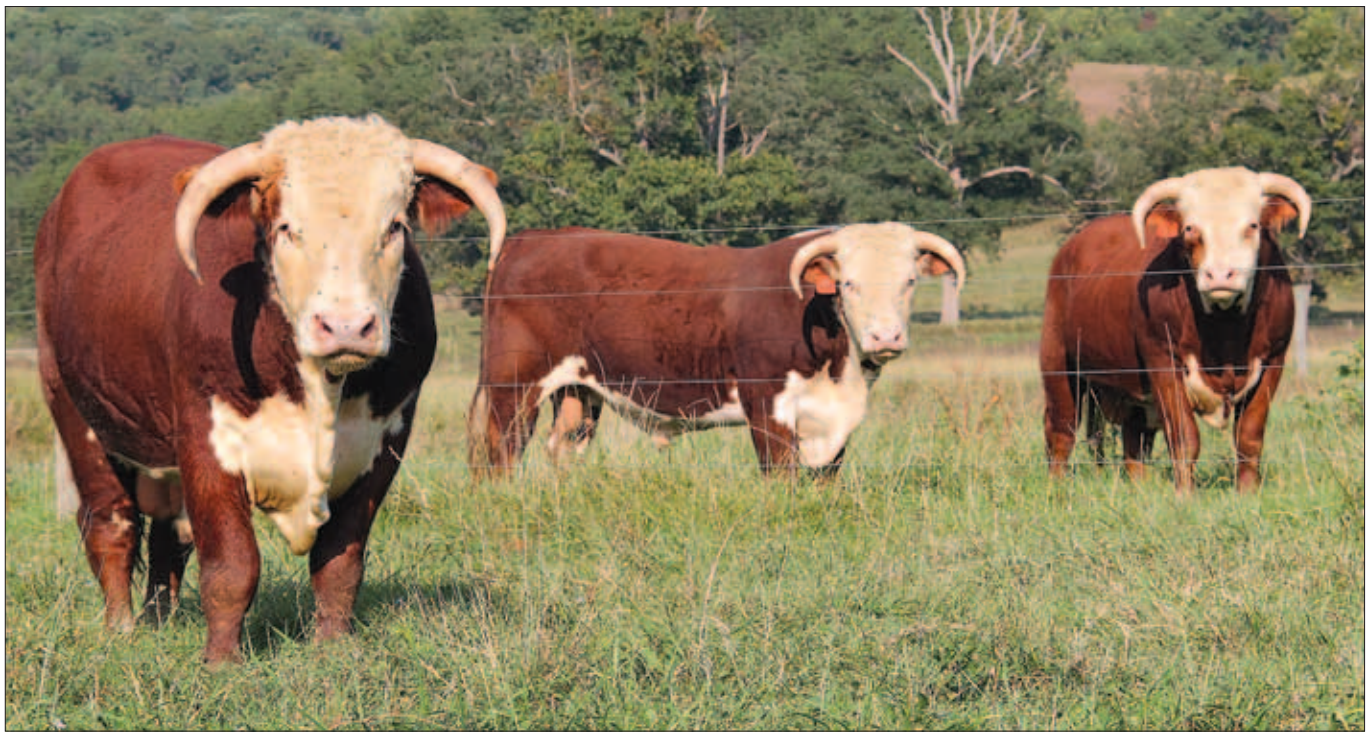
HEREFORD WORLD
Published by the American Hereford Association
January 2014; Vol. 104, No. 8

Inside...



Adding Hereford bulls to the Goose Creek operation has helped improve the cow herd.

Making the Best Cow

Longtime Angus family is utilizing the power of heterosis by adding Hereford bulls to its commercial cow herd.

by ***Sara Gugelmeyer***

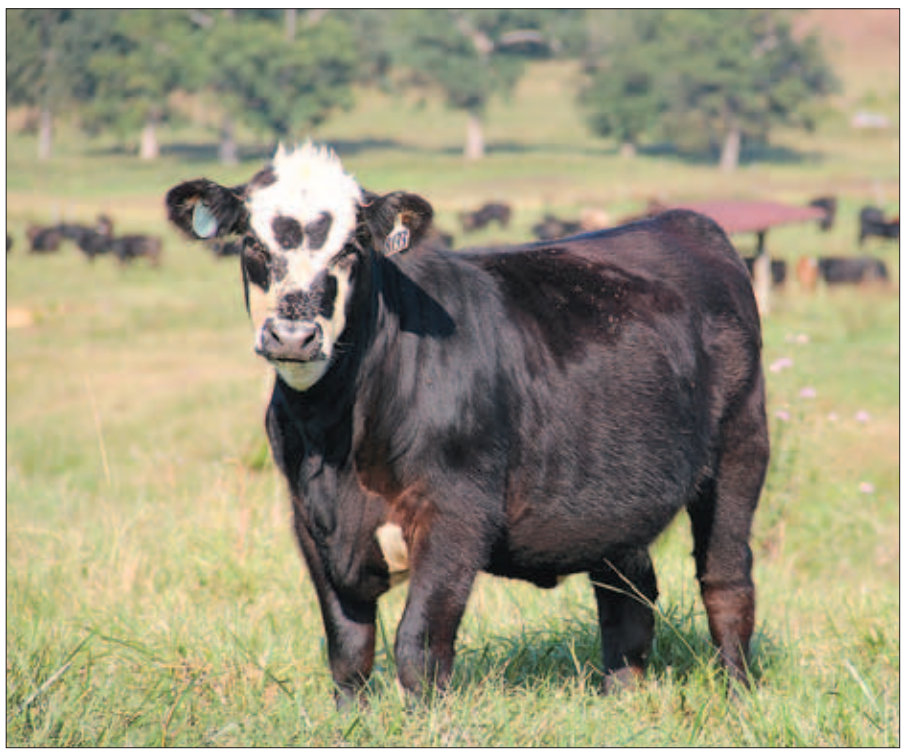
What do you get when you add the best Hereford genetics in the country to the best Angus genetics in the country? Jess Herbers knows the answer: it's the best commercial cow around — the black baldie.

Meet the family

Raised in a cattle-feeding family in western Kansas, Jess knows the power of crossbreeding. "I was raised in the feedyard business," Jess explains. His father managed a feedlot and the associated stocker cattle operation, the Pyramid Ranch, which ran about 5,000 yearlings. After college at Kansas State University (K-State), Jess took the opportunity to manage that ranch.

But it was there at K-State, where Jess' eyes were opened to the seedstock industry. He fell in love with Wynn Dalton. The Dalton name is well known

continued on page 16...



This Hereford-sired heifer represents exactly what Jess Herbers is looking for — a moderate, easy-fleshing, highly fertile female.

...Making the Best Cow continued from the cover

in the Angus seedstock business, as Daltons have raised top-quality Angus cattle in Virginia for 40 years, under the name Daltons on the Sycamore.

The two were married in 2001 and moved back East, where Jess quickly found himself continuing his education. He had to learn about the seedstock business and the cow-calf business and the much-different business of grazing cattle on the East Coast.

Daltons on the Sycamore was already quite the enterprise with a progressive Angus herd run by longtime manager Dennis Eastin. Doug and Beverley Dalton (Wynn's parents) own the land and the company. They have four children all of whom are involved in family businesses.

When he and Wynn moved back to Virginia, Jess had to carve out his niche within the family business dynamic.

"When I got here with my commercial background," Jess says, "we put a lot of ground back into production that had previously been in trees. I got the opportunity to manage the commercial herd (called Goose Creek Valley Farms), which is a separate entity from the registered Angus herd.

"Now, we are all family at the end of the day, but we keep the registered herd and the commercial cow herd separate from a management standpoint and an economic standpoint so that we can measure both herds. We utilize our excellent Angus genetics in our commercial herd, and we use both ends to feed off of each other," Jess adds.

Jess and his wife, Wynn, enjoy raising their two daughters, Curtis Ann (left) and Aubrey on the ranch.

Cow-calf crash course

When Jess took over the management of the commercial cattle, they were mainly a recipient herd for embryos from the registered Angus herd. The base of the commercial cattle herd had come with a land purchase. The genetics were black-hided and Angus-influenced; however, the exact bloodlines were unknown. Jess says he was concerned that lack of knowledge could be a risk in many ways.

"Growing up in the stocker and feeder business, the cow-calf world was new to me," Jess says. "But when I went to managing it, the one thing I saw from a cow-calf standpoint is profitability is based on percentages. If I don't start with a high conception rate, everything goes south from there."

He continues, "I was trying to figure out how to make the best set of commercial cows, given what I was starting with. Everyone I asked: 'What would be your best commercial cow?' said black baldie."

Jess says he thought that rotating Hereford bulls into his breeding program was the best way to get that type of cow.

He knew he had to be sure before he went forward, though. "I knew if I was going to bring Hereford bulls back to an Angus family, I had to be able to prove myself," Jess says.

On all of the commercial calves, ownership is usually retained all the way to harvest. The calves are weaned and backgrounded and then sent to western Kansas to be fed and sold on the U.S. Premium Beef grid. Because of that arrangement, Jess' No. 1 concern was carcass merit.

"I knew with our Angus bulls from Daltons on the Sycamore, from a carcass standpoint, that those traits would be strong and highly heritable. I wanted to be sure I wouldn't hurt myself on that (by using Hereford bulls)," Jess says.

But, he hoped Hereford genetics could help him make a better commercial cow. "I knew that I wanted to take a breed of cattle that could thrive on low inputs and use a sometimes negative trait of fat thickness and turn that into a positive to add fleshing ability to my commercial cows. You don't think of Virginia as being a necessarily harsh climate, but the heat and the humidity in the summer and fescue grass is hard on cattle from a conception standpoint and weaning weight standpoint," Jess says.

"It's hard to believe, but you can go to South Texas and find cattle in better shape than in this country, starving to death in ankle-deep green grass," Jess explains. "That was a big change, coming from short-grass country. But, I remembered, growing up, some of the best cattle were black baldie steers. They are tremendous cattle."

Bull shopping

Knowing he needed some Hereford bulls if he was going to produce those good-doin' baldies, Jess talked to friend and Hereford breeder Paul Bennett of nearby Knoll Crest Farms, Red House, Va.

"That's an old Hereford cow herd that from a carcass standpoint might be the elite herd in the country. They've got generations of cows with data and are highly influenced on carcass traits. Again, for me, carcass merit was a must," Jess explains.

In 2010 Jess made the leap and bought a Hereford Revolution son from Knoll Crest. Jess next headed west to Cooper Herefords in Willow Creek, Mont., where he says he found some of the best Hereford cattle in the country. He bought another bull, and Jess says his only regret was he didn't buy more bulls that first trip to Montana.

There have been challenges, though. Jess started with only about 150 cows, and most of those were needed in the embryo transfer program for the Angus seedstock operation. With careful management and purchases, he has grown the herd to about 450 cows. Now he uses Hereford bulls or semen on all the straight Angus cows that don't get an embryo.

Each year, the straight-Angus replacement heifers are artificially inseminated (AI) to Feltons Legend 242, a Genex sire. In fact, the top end of the 2- and 3-year-old straight-Angus cows are all bred AI to Hereford bulls before entering the embryo program at 4 years old.

"In doing that, I am hoping that the genetic base of the cow herd comes from the freshest-sired calves," Jess explains.

"Now I've got a big enough cow herd to justify keeping 40 or 50 replacement heifers. The straight blacks are AI bred to Legend, and if it's a crossbred heifer or black whiteface heifer, I'll use an Angus sire on her."

Special consideration must be made when running a herd for embryo transfer, Jess says. "You can have a lot of embryo cows, but you'll run out of cows and end up with the tail-end of the calf crop all the time if you don't keep enough cattle back for replacements."

As part of his overall breeding program, Jess currently keeps a bull battery of about six Hereford bulls and uses Hereford semen as well. He estimates right now about 150 out of the 450 are Hereford-sired calves.

Impressive results

The results have been impressive, Jess says. "I am probably only two steps into a six-step process, but I've been very pleased so far."

Jess has seen advantages in conception rates and fleshing ability on the Hereford-sired heifers and cows and advantages in calf vigor, average daily gain, feed conversion and cost of gain on the Hereford-sired calves and calves out of the Hereford-sired cows. All of these advantages were gained without sacrificing carcass merit. Plus, the Hereford bulls are very docile.

"I am really pleased so far with what I've seen," he says.

Jess noticed an advantage as soon as the Hereford-sired calves hit the ground because of calf vigor.

"It's tangible, but hard to measure, that calf vigor," Jess says. "It's real, though. When those Hereford-sired calves hit

There's no doubt Hereford bulls are very docile and easy to handle, Jess says.

the ground, if you're not right there, you may end up roping to get them tagged. They are up and sucking quick, and those calves have a lot of punch to them," Jess says.

The next noticeable difference is at weaning time. Jess has noticed an advantage in fleshing ability on the crossbred calves. And they do well in the yard too.

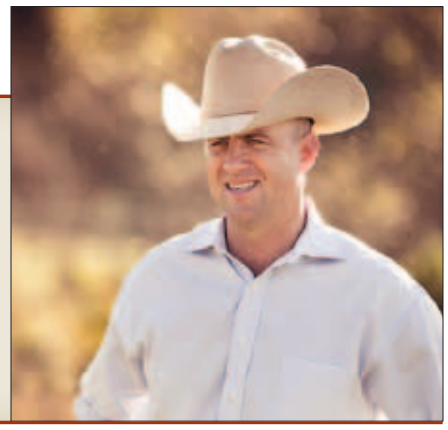
"Where I was really pleased last year was a set of crossbred steers gained (an average of) 3.71 lb. for 187 days and converted at 5:1 and fed for $1.17 per lb. when another set of cattle was feeding for $1.30 during that $8 corn run. That was something that I think is important all of the time, and there was a noted conversion advantage to that Hereford-sired calf."

There's no doubt Angus calves are noted for their carcass merit, but the crossbred calves didn't give up any carcass quality when gaining more efficiently.

"I didn't want to give up carcass performance," Jess says. "Last year was probably the first year with a deep enough set of cattle to make sure that going away from the Angus breed wouldn't hurt me from a quality and yield grade standpoint. Those (Hereford-sired) cattle graded 96% Choice and didn't give up anything from a hot carcass weight or Certified Angus Beef percentage or a Yield Grade percentage yielding a strong 65%."

"It's tangible, but hard to measure, that calf vigor. It's real, though. When those Hereford-sired calves hit the ground, if you're not right there, you may end up roping to get them tagged. They are up and sucking quick, and those calves have a lot of punch to them."

— Jess Herbers



Female advantages

If the Hereford-sired steers have competed well with straight Angus, then the crossbred heifers have done even better. Jess and his longtime friend and Genex rep Tom McCall agree that the advantage of heterosis has helped the Goose Creek heifers considerably.

First, it's noticeable in conception rates. "At preg-check it's pretty typical if she comes through with a bald-face, she will be bred," Jess says. "I think the improved conception rates probably come directly from fleshing ability."

The numbers don't lie. This year, the difference in conception rates on the replacement heifers was obvious. He had 34 total replacement heifers with 14 Hereford-sired and the remaining 20 straight Angus. Nine out of 14 Hereford-sired were bred AI on the first service (64%), compared to the Angus, of which only eight out of 20 were bred AI on the first heat (40%). Ninety-eight percent of the Hereford-sired heifers were bred in the first two heat cycles.

Tom has noticed the difference too. "I am seeing some advantages from heterosis as far as fleshing ability," he explains. "Those Hereford-sired 2-year-old heifers are normally half a body condition score better at weaning time than the straight blacks."

That makes a big difference on getting that first-calf heifer bred back, another measurable trait where Jess has seen an advantage. "I've got my first set of Hereford-sired 3-year-olds this year, and they're really special," Jess says.

A big difference could be seen in getting the 2-year-old heifers bred. This year there were 27 females in that group, 17 straight Angus and 10 Hereford-Angus cross. Of the 10 Hereford-sired, seven were bred AI, and all 10 were settled in the first two heats. Compare that rate with the straight Angus cows of which only 9 were bred AI; 12 were settled in the first two heats, and even after three heat cycles, there were still two opens.

Meeting lofty goals

Because of these results, Goose Creek will continue to use Hereford bulls and semen in a rotational breeding system, according to Tad Melton. Tad is married to Whitney Dalton and lends a helping hand with the business management of the Dalton family ranching activities on both the seedstock and commercial sides.

Tad explains that because of the advantages of heterosis, the operation will strive to keep the base of the commercial cow herd three-quarters Angus and a quarter Hereford into perpetuity. Carcass merit is very important to them, Tad explains, and they've set "lofty" goals for achievement of Prime quality grades on their commercial calves.

"Jess always says 'the packer likes that Prime carcass but the cow-calf man likes a cow that breeds back,' and he is right," Tad quips. "I, however, believe that you can breed cattle that can do it all. It isn't easy, and it doesn't happen fast, but that is our goal."

Tad continues, "We learned in our Angus business, if you want to achieve great outcomes you have to have the best genetics, and we are laser focused on scaling a herd of commercial cattle that descend from the best genetics out there to achieve our goals. Such goals are to produce cattle that breed back and calve early in the calving season, wean heavy calves in a low-input, fescue dominated grazing system, gain rapidly on feed and return us or our customers profits in a retained ownership marketing program. These are lofty goals but why not have lofty goals? To realize them we know we need to use the best genetics, and at Goose Creek that will include Hereford bulls in the future.

"Eventually we hope to be sought out as a source of replacements that will then make those buyers and their customers money."

Jess believes they are close to that goal. "I have retained all the heifers so far purely from a growing standpoint," he says. "I needed them to go back in, but now I am getting to the point where I will be able to market a potload of bred heifers that will be out of the best genetics in the Angus and Hereford breeds. That's my goal going forward."

Lessons learned

Tad shares an important business philosophy often with the family and employees: "Warren Buffett says, 'If you are playing poker and you look around the table and don't know who the fool is, the fool is you.' This is a powerful lesson that in a thinking-based environment, you must know at least as much as all the other participants. How it applies to the cattle business is that we think you have to know how every participant in the beef industry value chain makes money — because you have to create a product that will contribute to their success all the way down the line. We believe this is the future of the industry."

That philosophy has been critical to the Dalton family's commercial and seedstock success.

"We have spent a lot of time understanding how everyone from the AI stud to the seedstock producer to the cow-calf man, from the backgrounder to the feedlot operator to the packer and retailer make money," Tad says. "In our opinion, if you want to be on the cutting edge of the beef industry, you have to know these things and can't just make decisions based on your circumstances or assume that what works for one guy in your segment or down the line will work for you."

Based on this research, Tad says that Hereford genetics are important to the success of the Goose Creek commercial cow herd. "We are striving to build a product in a large-scale cow-calf operation that has all the industry segments in mind. We want ourselves and our customers to make money. We want cows that calve early and breed back on time. When we retain ownership we will be paid strong premiums for a superior product; however, if we choose to market the cattle at weaning, our customers will know what to expect from Goose Creek calves. For us that included adding Hereford genetics to our operation." **HW**

These Hereford-sired females are doing well, despite that Virginia is actually a harsh climate, where less efficient cattle will do poorly because of the low nutritional value of the fescue grass.