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# HEREFORD WORLD

Published by the American Hereford Association

August 2011; Vol. 102, No. 3

## Hereford Adds Feed Efficiency and Carcass Merit

*DCJ Ranch uses Hereford bulls to produce F1 tiger-stripe females.*

by *Troy Smith*

In the South the F1 tiger-stripe female reigns queen, and key to producing those valuable females are Hereford bulls.

Founded just six years ago, DCJ Ranch, near Opelika, Ala., is owned by brothers Dick and Jimmy Starr and managed by Cal Whatley. In a short time, DCJ is becoming a well-known source of F1 tiger-stripes, the result of breeding Hereford bulls to Brahman cows.

Cal says the Hereford breed contributes feed efficiency and carcass merit to the cross. He says a major factor in the decision to use Hereford bulls was the popularity of F1 tiger-stripe females.

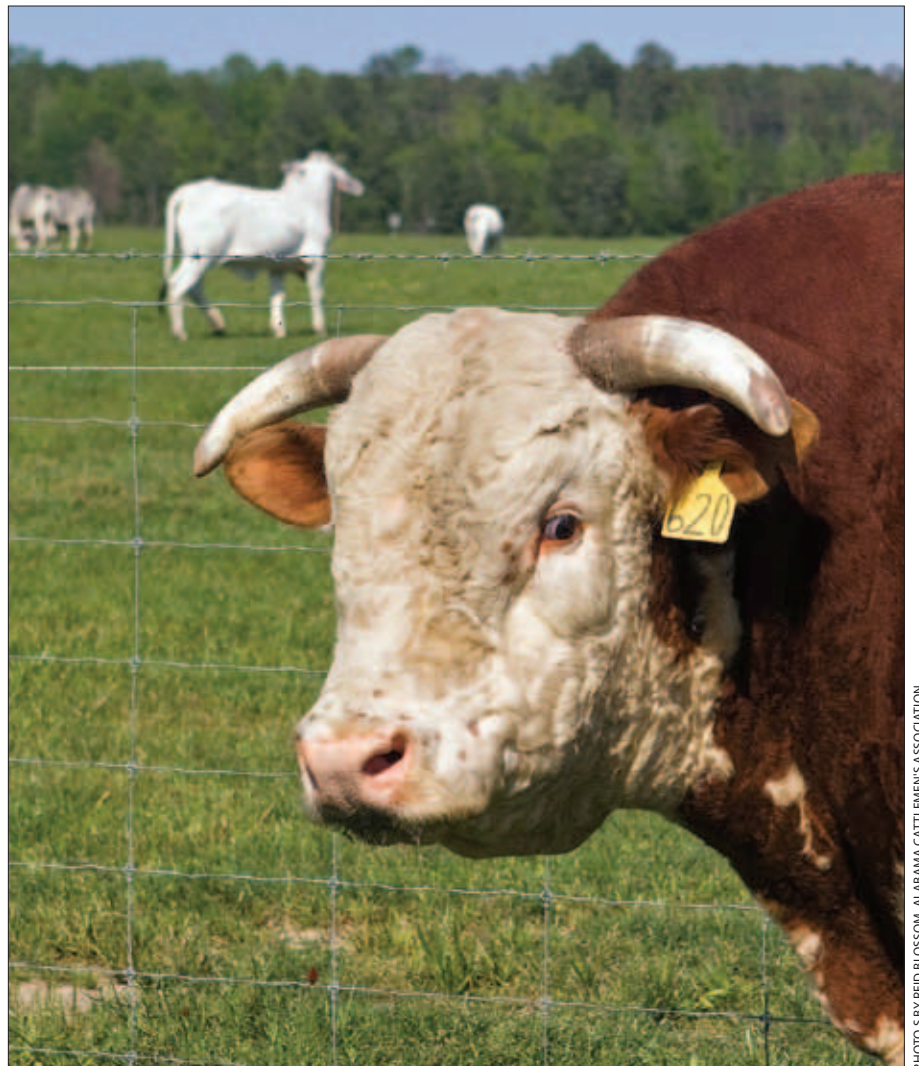
A native of the Auburn area, Cal rides herd on 200 Brahman and 100 Brangus cows, all of which are bred to Hereford bulls. The ranch also has a commercial herd of 700 F1 tiger-stripes, which are mated with Brangus bulls.

According to Cal, there's nothing more genetically divergent than purebred *Bos taurus* (Hereford) bulls and purebred *Bos indicus* (Brahman) cows. The cross delivers maximum heterosis in a brindle-colored female that suits many production environments in the Deep South.

"In this climate, it's hard to ignore the heat and insect tolerance that Brahman cattle offer," Cal says. "With the Brahman influence, producers can avoid a lot of eye and foot problems and other health issues. By crossing with Hereford, we add bone, muscle and carcass merit — qualities that add market appeal."

### Heterosis value

Heterosis has often been called a powerful tool and the nearest thing to a free lunch that exists in the cattle business. Heterosis is the performance



DCJ Ranch manages a battery of 15 Hereford bulls.

advantage that hybrid or crossbred progeny exhibit when compared to the average of their purebred parents.

Beef cattle geneticists cite ample evidence, collected through decades of research, showing how well-planned crossbreeding benefits a variety of desirable characteristics, and particularly lowly heritable traits such as adaptability, fertility and longevity. They talk about how F1 females (first generation cross between two breeds) generally breed back quicker and stay in the herd longer, while producing heavier calves. Data from the U.S. Meat Animal

Research Center (USMARC) in Clay Center, Neb., indicate that, over their lifetimes, those crossbred cows are 25% more productive than straightbred cows.

Commercial cow-calf producers in the Gulf States have taken the message to heart. They want crossbreds and especially F1 females — the first generation cross between genetically divergent breeds that delivers maximum hybrid vigor.

However, when trying to raise their own F1 replacements, producers may learn the lunch really isn't free.

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Each year approximately 200 Brahman cows are bred to Hereford bulls to produce the popular tiger-stripe calves.

They must maintain a herd of straightbred cows that are bred to bulls of a different breed to produce the sought-after F1 heifers. That usually means they must manage two cow herds and the necessary separate breeding pastures. It can get complicated, and it's not without cost. Buying F1 replacements can simplify matters.

DCJ Ranch has sought to serve that market, as well as produce F1 females for its own commercial herd.

#### DCJ program

"We run mostly tiger-stripes ourselves," Cal explains. "We think the F1 cows really fit this environment and a production system based primarily on grazed forages. For us that's mostly improved pastures of Bermuda grass or Bahia grass." He also notes how Bermuda grass has the potential to produce a greater volume of forage, but Bahia grass' longer growing season usually provides for more calendar days of grazing.

"We raise a little hay and buy some too, but we emphasize grazing with as little supplemental feed as possible," Cal adds. "Because of drought, we've fed more hay this year. But that's not typical."

Picky about the bulls he buys, Cal uses expected progeny differences (EPDs) to select bulls with balanced

traits. He is a stickler for structural correctness, wanting bulls to be able to travel. He also looks for bulls displaying plenty of red pigment around their eyes.

DCJ Ranch usually maintains 15 Herefords in its bull battery. On average, two new bulls are introduced each year. Older bulls are replaced after reaching six or seven years of age, making room for the fresh genetics. Cal says the Hereford bulls have been easily maintained under a system emphasizing grazed forages and minimal supplemental feed.

Calving on DCJ Ranch starts in November and concludes in January, while cows are grazing winter grass. Generally, pairs are rotated through pastures of standing, stockpiled forage until the summer grass becomes available. Calves are weaned in early June. They are old enough by then, says Cal, to put early



Cal Whatley (right) and his Hereford bull supplier Perry Debter.

summer's lush, high-quality forage to good use. To hasten growth, calves are supplemented with a self-fed, controlled-intake ration (Purina Accuration®). Steers weigh 750 to 800 lb. by August, when they are marketed through a regional feeder cattle marketing alliance. For the most part, heifers are sold on the ranch at private treaty.

"We push the steers a little bit, but we like the heifers to grow slower," Cal offers. "I put more limiter in the heifer ration to hold down consumption. Heifers run in bigger pastures with the water at one end and the feed at the other. It encourages them to get out and move – to travel."

Cal says the Pfizer SelectVAC® preconditioning program is applied to all calves, and all are tested for persistent infection with bovine virus diarrhea (BVD). Heifers are calfhood vaccinated against brucellosis. It all contributes to the calves' marketability, as does the application of electronic identification (EID) tags and enrollment in an age- and source-verification program.

"We're trying to get these cattle as ready for the customer as we can, paying attention to genetics, nutrition and health. And then we market them," emphasizes Cal. "We've built some good relationships with buyers – the kind that result in repeat sales. For example, our F1 steers usually sell through the same order buyer, sending load lots directly to Texas feedlots."

#### Marketing plan

Cal is working now on securing feedlot performance and carcass data on calves. Knowing how they have done – how calves feed and how they grade – will help guide genetic selection for the future. It should further enhance marketability of DCJ Ranch feeder cattle and replacement females too.

Buyers of replacement females often like to know, and even see, where the heifers were raised. Selling females privately

at the ranch allows Cal to foster some lasting relationships with customers that visit the ranch.

Hereford-sired heifers out of Brangus cows provide an alternative for those customers favoring black-baldie females with less Brahman influence, but the F1 tiger-stripe heifers are particularly popular.

Marketing a select set of heifers through the Debter Hereford Farms bull sale has introduced even more buyers to the DCJ kind of female. The Debter family's seedstock operation near Horton, Ala., serves as a source of Hereford bulls for DCJ Ranch. According to Perry Debter, Cal takes bull selection seriously and makes his choices carefully. He says Cal's careful bull selection shows in DCJ females, and they provide favorable advertisement for Debter bulls.

"Cal often comes here ahead of the sale and spends time going over the offering," Perry explains. "He looks for growth and a strong maternal background. He picks bulls out of good mothers, paying close attention to milk and udder quality. And he wants bulls with a lot of dark pigment around the eyes. He's trying to produce quality cattle that are as trouble-free as you can make them."

Cal says there is a strong demand for the mature bulls replaced by DCJ each year. So the older bulls are often sold as guest consignments to Debter sales, and go back to work in other commercial herds.

Debter's son, John Ross, has started a commercial herd of F1 tiger-stripes which are bred back to Hereford bulls. Cal says some of his customers are doing the same thing. Others choose bulls of different breeds as a terminal cross on the F1 females.

"The Hereford-Brahman cow is useful just about anywhere in the Southeast," offers Cal. "She can be crossed on good bulls of just about any breed to produce a quality product. And she's generally going to keep doing it longer. Her longevity is a real advantage to the commercial producer." **HW**



The DCJ ranch team says utilizing Hereford genetics allows them to add bone, muscle and carcass merit to the calves they produce.



The ranch also manages a herd of 700 tiger-stripe females.