



Cow-calf pairs graze on Willits' newest land purchase, the former home of a working race track. "It's pretty ugly right now; it doesn't look like much, but we're in the process," he says. The actual track will soon be leveled to make room for facilities where he can do his embryo transfer work.

Building a Major League Herd

Former MLB outfielder channels dedication into building a quality cow herd.

by **Katrina Huffstutler**

A different hotel in a different congested city every couple of nights — it's enough to drive any wide-open-spaces-loving, small town kid crazy. But if your dream is to play in the big leagues, it comes with the territory, and you've just got to find a way to cope.

For Reggie Willits, former outfielder for the Los Angeles Angels, that meant scouring websites and pouring over expected progeny differences (EPDs) during the six months out of each year he was traveling with the American League team.

"At night, I studied nothing but bloodlines and pedigrees," the

switch-hitter-turned-cowman says. "It gave me something to make me feel like I was at home."

To make it easier, his parents would forward issues of *Hereford World* from Oklahoma to his California home. He'd pack the magazine for each trip and, as soon as he was in the hotel for the night, he'd turn to the ads in the back and start bringing up websites.

"I'd go on there and open every single website," Willits says. "I'd just search the whole thing, studying what kinds of cattle, what bloodlines they used."

He also relied heavily on the *Hereford.org*-housed database for searching animals and EPDs to fast-track his education, and subsequently his cow herd back home in Fort Cobb, Okla.

Getting started

But Willits wasn't always interested in the cattle business. Growing up — just up the hill from the house he lives in now — he was all about sports, as was his sister, who went on to play in the WNBA.

His parents didn't raise cattle, though his grandfather did.

"He farmed and ran some cattle [so I was exposed], but I just wasn't that interested," Willits says.

After high school, Willits went on to play baseball in junior college and then for the University of Oklahoma.

The Angels drafted him in the seventh round of the 2003 Major League Baseball (MLB) draft, and he remained with the organization for the nine years he played professionally. Once he was called up to the major leagues and was "finally making some money" versus the low-paying gig that is minor league ball, he decided he needed to make an investment, so he and his wife, Amber, bought land in their hometown of Fort Cobb, Okla., near his childhood home.

Once he had the land purchased, he started thinking he needed a few cows to turn out, so he bought a few out of his grandfather's commercial Angus herd, and the Double Seven Ranch, named for the number he wore for the Angels, was born.

"I didn't know anything," Willits says. "Nothing about it." Some things he did know about — hard work and determination.

"In baseball, I was never the biggest or most athletic," he says. "I was just a guy who worked hard. That's what I do in life in general. Once I put myself into something, I always seek out to not just do it, but to do it really well."

He purchased his next set of females — black baldies this time — from local farmer/rancher Johnny Peck. It didn't take Willits long to realize the power of



This photo of Reggie, Jaxon and Eli was taken when Reggie was still playing professional baseball (and before Hunter was born). He says getting to play at that level was a huge blessing that directly allowed him to get into the Hereford business he loves so much. Reggie hopes one day his sons will take over the operation and will continue to improve it. "The kids love working with the cattle and that's what I love the most — enjoying them with my family," he says.

PHOTO COURTESY OF REGGIE WILLITS

Hereford influence, so he set out to purchase his first Hereford bull.

A team effort

That's when Peck directed Willits to John Loewen, a man who would become not only Willits' Hereford supplier but a friend and mentor as well. The duo frequently talked from the road — often four or five times per week — and Willits says the one-on-one education with someone as smart as Loewen was invaluable.

"I'd ask him questions, try to learn as much as I could, and that's how I decided on where I went with my herd, as far as bloodlines," he explains.

Loewen says even early on, though, he was impressed with Willits.

"We would talk for hours," Loewen says. "I couldn't believe how quick he was picking up things on animal breeding and especially our EPDs."

Soon, he realized why.

"It came to my mind it was very much like his baseball career," Loewen says. "Those guys take statistics very seriously just like we do with EPDs. Also, Reggie is real disciplined."

"It wasn't like he had just jumped into it. He studied it, and he applied the same principles that he had to learning the game of baseball to learning the cattle business. They're used to talking batting averages, they're used to talking all kinds of things I don't even know about, and he was able to do that same thing with EPDs. I've never seen anybody pick it up that quick."

But being a fast learner wasn't Willits' only strength. Loewen says Willits' lack of experience was actually a huge plus.

"He really had the advantage of coming into this business without any preconceived ideas," Loewen says. "He didn't have any hang ups on pedigrees, breeders — anything like that. He didn't have any of that stuff that holds older breeders like me back. He came into it with a totally fresh approach and was able to just make a tremendously fast advancement."

Loewen says that dedication has paid off. He adds that he's never seen anyone get a cow herd to that quality level in such a short amount of time — but that doesn't mean Willits is in some sort of race. "I'm kind of a fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants kind of guy," Loewen says. "I jump here and I jump there. He's not that way; he puts a lot of thought into what he does and so I think he's in this for the long haul."

While Loewen was helping Willits learn the Hereford business, he certainly wasn't the only one contributing to the growth of the Double Seven Ranch.

"My dad and grandpa helped me a lot as well," Willits says. "Without them and people like Johnny Peck and Phil Perryman (who does the AI [artificial insemination] work), it wouldn't have been possible for me to have cattle and be on the road playing baseball."

He says he had a lot of people in his corner who knew how much he enjoyed the cattle and how much of a release it was for him.



To make sure his Hereford genetics are in demand, Willits focuses on the traits he believes will most benefit fellow cattlemen. From maternal qualities like birth weight and good udders to those carcass traits that will better the bottom line, he's a stickler for cattle that perform and will keep customers coming back for more.

"My grandpa would feed the cows for me, because I would leave when we were still feeding hay. My dad would cut and bale my hay for me. They would both keep them checked up and anytime there was work to be done, people from around the community would come in and help them do the work," he says.

Moderate cattle, extreme dedication

These days, now retired from the MLB (though coaching high school baseball to stay in the game) and living full-time in view of his cattle, Willits is up to about 100 cows. And though he originally started buying Herefords to make black baldies, you'd never know it by the sea of red and white in his pastures today. And those few cows that aren't Herefords? Most are recipients for Hereford genetics.

He says the progressive nature of the Hereford breed helped steer him into life as a seedstock operator.

"I just felt the Hereford breed was doing a lot of things that were up and coming and really cool," he says. "I'm sure there are lots of breeds that do genetic and DNA testing, but I think the Hereford people are doing a good

job of educating people like me who aren't very smart. They constantly put out the information on the websites and the magazines, and I think some of the things they're doing are just putting themselves above everybody right now."

He adds that the demand for Hereford genetics — as well as the demand he expects in the future — was a huge selling point.

"The known benefits of crossbreeding coupled with the fact that the majority of the U.S. cow herd being black, it just makes sense that Herefords will be really popular for a long time," he says.

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"When a guy buys a bull from me," Willits says, "I don't just want him to buy a bull; I want it to be something that makes him money. And not just

when he takes it to town, but the next guy, I want it to make him money all the way through the food chain."

While he's made major strides in building those qualities into his herd, he's far from satisfied.

"I guess I'm like anybody else. I'd like to see it get better and better. It seems like the more I study the EPDs and the more I study bloodlines, the more I do the DNA testing and the flush work and embryo transfer, the stupider I feel," Willits says.

He's often reminded of something Johnny Peck told him when he first got into cattle.

Peck would often say don't chase a fad. Instead, find something that suits you and stick with it. It'll eventually come around to you.

"That's exactly what I try to do," Willits says.

Dustin Layton, Oklahoma-based fieldman for the American Hereford Association, says he believes Willits is right on track.

"I think the most important thing is to breed functional animals that have merit behind them — whether that be EPD-wise or cow family-wise or whatever," Layton says. "Yet that's not always done today. But he's doing that."

Layton has no doubt Willits will accomplish whatever he sets out to.

"He's just a very driven person in everything he does," Layton says. "I'd say if he gets up at 5 every morning, he gets up at 5, not 5:02. He has a real enthusiasm for the beef industry, for raising beef product, and I think that's a good thing to have. Some people kind of get in and want to do this or that, but I think he really has some good goals set for himself. And I think he plans on achieving them."

If the past is any indication, he will, regardless of how much hard work it takes to get there. **HW**



After years split between Oklahoma and California, Reggie Willits and his wife, Amber, are now happily raising their three boys in the couple's hometown. The boys, left to right are, Eli, Jaxon and Hunter.