

The All-Around Cattleman

Herefords play an integral role in Bill Goehring's multifaceted cattle and auction enterprise.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

Few people have their finger on the pulse of the cattle industry like local sale barn managers. Bill Goehring of southeastern Iowa is no exception. He and his wife, Becky, and their four sons run the local auction barn in Keosauqua, Iowa, and they own and do most of the caring for a purebred Hereford cow herd, a commercial cow herd and yearlings in backgrounding yards and, in their spare time, receive and process and/or ship several hundred head of cattle a week.

Hometown cattleman

Bill and Becky's cattle operation is right where Bill grew up near Libertyville, Iowa. Bill's family raised Quarter Horses and commercial cattle when Bill was a child. Then in 1975 Bill got his first registered Hereford females as a 4-H project. He became active in the junior Hereford association through showing his home-raised heifers and served on National Junior Polled Hereford

Council in 1984. He's remained in the business ever since.

He graduated from Iowa State University with an animal science degree in 1986, the same year his parents bought Keosauqua Sales Co. He and Becky worked at the sale barn and grew their interest in it and the family cattle operation, and by 2003 they had sole ownership.

Through the years Bill's Hereford operation continued to progress and evolve. "I've had some good success with Hereford cattle," Bill says.

His herd consists of about 90 Hereford cows, and Bill says he'll sell around 30 bulls a year, almost exclusively to commercial cattlemen. He usually sells seven or eight show heifers and retains about 18 heifers for replacements. The rest are sold as feeder cattle. He complements his purebred business with an Angus-based commercial cow herd of about 200 head, which are bred to home-raised Hereford bulls to produce sale-topping black baldies.



Bill is also always on the lookout for calves he can upgrade through his backgrounding program. He buys them, preferably around 400 to 600 lb., and backgrounds them on a total mixed ration until they weigh around 800 to 850 lb. Then they are sold or finished in a local confinement feeding facility or at a yard in Nebraska.

Bill admits he has a lot of irons in the fire as far as the cattle business goes, but with the help of Becky and their sons, Curtis, Luke, Ted and Colby, all between ages 24 and 19, everything works together well.

Commercial focus

The Goehring Hereford operation uses the latest genetics through artificial insemination to produce the best bull possible

for the commercial breeder. Bill says the Hereford bull market has improved greatly in the last three years. "The need for some genetic change away from an all-Angus sire group is the reason mostly," Bill explains. "The research and information that came from Circle A a couple years ago also really helped. Truly, though, Hereford cattle have gotten better. All that's allowed us to sell bulls better."

Bill points out that raising bulls with the commercial producer in mind is key. "You have to have good bulls to compete with other bulls in our area. If you've got good bulls, it doesn't necessarily matter what color they are. We have and need to continue to make Hereford cattle better as a breed, especially those of us that are focused on selling bulls to commercial people."

Bill admits his part of the world is not really big ranch country. While there are some big producers in the area, he says the average cow herd is 27 head, so he sells one or two bulls to a lot of customers. His customers want problem-free, low-maintenance calves because most are farmers or people who work in town and have some acres they aren't utilizing in other ways that can be grazed.

It's on these types of customers that the Goehring family must focus, Bill says, because most calves are sold at weaning. "The majority (of my customers) are interested in increasing pounds of weaning weight. But they don't want to pull calves. Birth weight is very important. Honestly, I think first, when they come looking for a Hereford bull, it's for weight. They want pounds. But they will sacrifice a little birth weight over those little black calves if they're going to wean more pounds. But they don't

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Bill strives to produce the best possible bull for his commercial cattlemen customers. It starts with plenty of nice, even calves like these to choose from.



Bill says the sale barn business and the other family cattle dealings complement each other well.

want a dead calf. It has to be a balance of birth and weaning."

For these reasons, Bill has been focusing on lowering birth weight slightly in his purebred herd. Lately, he's had more and more customers wanting to use Hereford bulls on heifers. Bill says, "I don't want to shrink weaning weights but I don't mind taking a pound or two off the birth weight if they're still growing really good."

Bill finds that the Hereford seedstock business complements running the auction barn, in his situation. There are few purebred Hereford producers in his area, so if a sale barn customer calls him looking for a Hereford bull, he's not stepping on someone's toes by suggesting

his own. In the last three years, many new customers are in the market for Hereford bulls, and Bill says he helps connect seedstock producers from across the country with bull buyers. It has worked out well for those buyers switching from Angus to Hereford bulls, Bill says.

"There's a gentleman just down the road here that was pretty much just Angus. He was using Angus bulls year after year on a set of originally Hereford-cross cows. He kept seeing weights go down. His calves were weighing 450 to 500 in January and (since he started using Hereford bulls) they weigh 550 to 600. We increased heterosis by putting another breed in there, but because our bulls were better quality, it really helped too."

Disposition is also important, Bill says, and his customers appreciate a gentle bull. "They don't like bulls that are growly or ornery, and their retained females are quiet."

Family effort

Disposition is important to the Goehrings as well, because they're busy people. Besides all their cattle ventures, they raise cow-bred Quarter Horses. It's a family tradition. "My granddad is supposed to be one of two guys that had the first Quarter Horses in the state of Iowa," Bill explains.

Although they don't have as many mares as when Bill was a kid, he raises six to eight colts each spring. Most are sent elsewhere for training, but Bill's sons use the colts on the ranch for various jobs.

Bill stresses his sons are invaluable to the whole operation. "They are all involved here, either as partners on cows or drawing wages. I am definitely glad to have them. They do 95% of the work, chores and moving cows and all that. They are a terrific asset. I couldn't begin to do what we do without them."

Because Saturday is sale day for the Goehrings, their sons didn't have the opportunity to show cattle at weekend shows. Therefore, Goehring Herefords haven't spent much time in the showring. But, their youngest son, Colby, in particular, has taken to showing and finds a way to get in the ring. Last summer, family friend Tommy

Coley took Colby along with him to the Junior National Hereford Expo in Indianapolis.

"That piqued his interest," Bill says. "So he got a bull and heifer ready for the Iowa Beef Expo (in February) and they both sold well. We just can't do all that, but he has an interest and took care of them and got them ready to go."

On Saturday in Keosauqua, not just cattle are trading hands. The Goehrings offer a place to buy and sell anything and everything including hogs, sheep, goats, even hay and fence posts, and of course all classes of cattle.

One of Bill's favorite things is to see calves out of his bulls come through the sale ring. It gives him an idea of what he needs to adjust in his own program and what buyers are looking for in the calves. "I get to sell a lot of calves out of my bulls and nothing aggravates me worse than having a sorry set of cattle come through the ring," Bill says.

It's also great news when he hears about his bulls siring calves that top other auction markets. "One of the biggest strings of calves that went through a competitor's market a couple weeks ago was out of my bulls and they were the high selling calves in the auction. That's important to me," Bill says.

Bill says as long as bull producers keep the commercial cattleman in mind, the Hereford breed will continue to see success. "Barring a special interest group doing something that would jeopardize the whole industry, we could never be put in a better place to stay profitable in the cattle business than we are right now. High corn has made for high cattle because of lower numbers, market weights are less and we are in the driver's seat for being able to sell one at a good value to the public. The generation interval is so slow in building cow herd numbers we are four to seven years away from numbers catching up and honestly population will outrun what we can produce for beef cattle for a while," Bill says.

But, he stresses that quality is more important than quantity when it comes to the seedstock business. "Hereford cattle will be strong; where we could get in trouble is if we keep bulls that aren't quality animals, if we try to sell numbers just because they're red with a white face. We need to keep them good so that the cattle that our Hereford bulls are producing are competitive. As long as we can outpace the competition with quality, we can sell Hereford bulls definitely." **HW**



The Goehrings' black commercial cows produce market-topping baldies when crossed with their Hereford bulls.