

## Managing Herefords

# Tattoo Techniques



## Permanent Identification Starts with a Successful Tattoo

*Don't run the risk of having an illegible tattoo by using an improper technique.*

Proper identification at birth and legible tattoos are essential to maintaining accurate parentage and production records of Hereford cattle. A readable tattoo is also a requirement for registering an animal with the American Hereford Association (AHA). Hereford breeders were the first to adopt the ear tattoo as a requirement for registry.

Tattooing can be done any time before registering, although it's best done when the animals are young. Twig Marston, director of the Northeast Extension and Research Center and professor of ruminant nutrition for the University of Nebraska, recommends tattooing calves before 3 months of age.

"The younger you tattoo a calf, the more legible the tattoo will be," says Twig. "The tattoo will grow as the calf gets older, making it easier to read."

Twig says successful tattooing is a result of proper technique and the completion of a series of steps. Here are some steps that can be taken to help ensure a legible tattoo.

### Proper equipment

Success starts with having the necessary tattooing equipment. Before beginning, a breeder should have a complete set of number and letter characters, if used. Sets of tattoo

characters have one of each number (0-9) or letter (A-Z), so you may have to purchase more than one set. Tattoo equipment can be purchased from a livestock supply dealer.

Remember that a registered tattoo can have a maximum of eight characters (digits and/or letters) applied in a straight line.

There are a variety of different types of tattoo pliers, which use removable digits, on the market. Some pliers have revolving heads and will hold two different tattoos at once.

You'll need a rag or a sponge and some rubbing alcohol to clean out the ear before you apply the tattoo.

Tattoo ink, green or black, is critical in getting a readable and permanent tattoo. With the aid of a toothbrush, the ink can be worked into a fresh tattoo easily.

A good working chute is also critical to a legible tattoo. The chute should restrain the animal from making quick head movements. "The only stress on the animal during the tattooing process comes from poor restraint," Twig says. "For a readable tattoo to happen, the animal must hold still and be kept from moving its head."

### Ready to begin

Once you have the calf in the working chute, check your records and

establish the tattoo that will identify the calf. Place the corresponding digits in your pliers. Twig suggests checking the tattoo on something like a piece of cardboard or an old feed sack. Otherwise, you run the risk of incorrectly tattooing the calf.

Check to make sure that all of your digits make an even perforation. One common mistake breeders make is not throwing away dull, broken or hair-matted characters. Such digits do not allow for deep penetration into the ear tissue.

Cleaning the ear and ridding it of all wax and dirt is the next step. Twig says the key to a good tattoo is a clean ear. "To really do a good job, you need to clean out that ear with alcohol," Twig stresses. "You can't get a tattoo to take with all the wax and dirt that is normally in the ear."

The ear should be dry before moving on to the next step — applying ink. AHA recommends tattooing the animal in the upper two-thirds of the lobe, reserving the lower third of the right ear lobe for the Bangs tattoo. Tattoos in either ear can't exceed eight characters in length.

The Association also strongly advises that breeders place the tattoo in both ears to enhance the chances that a complete tattoo identity can be established.



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Cleaning the ear and ridding it of all wax and dirt is key to a good tattoo.

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# Tattoo Techniques



“Make sure that the tattoo is stamped in the center of the ear, close to the head,” says John Meents, AHA upper Midwest field representative. “Not the tip or the end of the ear.”

Tattoos should be placed where the skin is lightest in color and free from hair. Be sure to avoid ribs or cords in



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the ear, as placing the tattoo in one of these ribs means a poor tattoo as well as an excessive flow of blood.

Before tattooing the animal, rub the ink in with a toothbrush or your thumb. By doing this, the ink will more likely be carried into the new tattoo.

When ready to proceed, place the ear between the jaws of the pliers. It's important when clamping the pliers to use the right amount of pressure.

“Close the jaws quickly and firmly and release quickly to avoid tearing the ear,” says Twig. “Use enough pressure that it pierces the skin, but don't go so deeply that it bleeds profusely.”

The only way to stop an ear from bleeding after the use of too much pressure is to reapply ink, Twig points out. Put on more ink and use that toothbrush to get the ink down in those perforations. The ink helps the blood to coagulate.

Make sure that the ink is worked thoroughly into the tattoo to ensure a legible and permanent tattoo mark. When the tattooing process is finished, clean the characters to remove all hair, dirt and blood. This is also the time

when you should throw away and get replacements for the ones that are dull.

### When to tattoo

There are advantages and disadvantages to tattooing at birth or the alternative, waiting to tattoo calves as a group.

Max Stotz, Star Lake Cattle Ranch, Skiatook, Okla., has tried both, but prefers to tattoo at birth. “We find we have less human errors and don't miss calves if we tattoo at birth,” says Max. “You must get that tattoo close to the inner ear and make sure it is not too far out or on the ribs.”

Bob and Jami Goble, Ridgeview Farms, Alto, Mich., prefer to tattoo calves at weaning in the fall. “We feel since the calves are older the tattoo looks better and continues to look good,” says Jami. “Not to mention we do not turn green everyday for three months while we are calving, and mother cows are not breathing down our backs.”

### Imperfect tattoos

The Association recommends checking all tattoos at weaning or any time an animal is in the chute. Tattoos are not



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## Tattoo Techniques



always perfect. Two frequent causes of imperfect tattoos are poor technique and, for breeders calving during the cold months of January and February, frozen ears.

Gobles have been able to minimize the number of frozen ears through management practices.

“We bring cows down off the hill when we can see they are getting close to calving, although some calves still hit the ground out in the elements. The sale ring in our barn is heated. The cow and calf can be placed in the barn till the calf warms up, or if their ears are a little cold, we place neck warmers on their ears,” Bob says.

Jami says they use neck warmers that are made for people. “We lay their ears flat to their neck by slipping a neck warmer over their face. The heat from their neck warms their ears. The cow can still lick her calf but the ears warm up quickly,” she says.

Other suggestions for managing frozen ears include putting alcohol on cold ears to revive circulation or using duct tape to hold the ears next to the head. Both practices work well during

long stretches of cold weather in the middle of calving season.

### Establishing a herd ID system

Before tattooing, an effective and well-planned herd identification system must be established. This system should benefit the producer and make herd recordkeeping easier.

Depending on a breeder’s needs, a tattoo can reflect several different things. The tattoo can refer to the year the calf was born or the offspring’s parents or relate a number in a sequence as to when the calf was born.

The Gobles say the system they use is simple. “The first number in the tag is the month they were born; the remaining numbers are the order they were born in,” Jami says. “If a calf is the 15th calf born in February, its tag number is 215 followed by the current letter year. If a calf is co-owned, the letter year comes first but still follows in the same numbering order.”

The international letter code system, where a letter represents the year a calf was born, has become popular worldwide. W is the letter producers are

### Year and Letter Code

1999-J	2006-S	2013-A
2000-K	2007-T	2014-B
2001-L	2008-U	2015-C
2002-M	2009-W	2016-D
2003-N	2010-X	2017-E
2004-P	2011-Y	2018-F
2005-R	2012-Z	2019-G

using to represent 2009. The letter for 2008 was U and calves born in 2010 will be Xs. With this system the letters I, O, V and Q are not used.

Guy Colyer, Colyer Herefords and Angus, Bruneau, Idaho, says the key to any good system is to avoid duplication. “We use a five digit number for herd ID and a four digit tattoo. For example, our first calf born in 2009 has a herd ID of 09001 and tattoo 9001.”

Breeders need to develop a tattoo system that fits their needs, depending on how important the sire, dam, or the relationship of age between calves is to them.