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Resourceful

The Snedden family and its Hereford-based cows take care of themselves.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

The Snedden family has been in the cattle business for 150 years and ranching on the same diverse but harsh land in the southwest corner of the San Joaquin Valley near Maricopa, Calif., since 1907. It's there, amidst the oak scrub, sagebrush, saltbrush and rocks, that you'll find low-maintenance, easy-doing Herefords, thriving and providing a way of life for three generations of Sneddens. It's a half hour from a small-town school and miles even from electricity, but just like the cattle, which put food on their table, the Sneddens take care of themselves, getting power from their own generator and homeschooling the children.

The Snedden ranch has always been in the commercial cow business and will continue to be, says Austin Snedden, the fifth generation on the land. He, along with his parents, Richard and Susie, and his wife, Sarah, and four young children make up the family that lives and works on the ranch currently.

Hereford-based

"Herefords seemed to match best, based on their ability to adapt, and the ease of management based on disposition," Austin says. "Over the

years Sneddens have used a little bit of everything including Longhorns, Shorthorns, black Angus, Jersey heifer bulls, but we have stuck with Herefords because they are the most well rounded. Herefords have the ability to thrive in harsh conditions, and get out and forage, while at the same time having a good disposition. There are other breeds that can do well in tough country, but generally you have to sacrifice disposition to get it."

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With that said, their commercial cow herd is crossbred, to maximize the benefits of hybrid vigor, with Red Angus. They strive to maintain a productive herd with each cow being $\frac{2}{3}$ Hereford and $\frac{1}{3}$ Red Angus.

Austin explains that their ideal cow is moderately framed and very fertile. It's an arid climate, and they utilize no irrigation, so the cows must do well on what they can find.

"In our country, a cow with too much frame won't rebreed and her BCS (body condition score) throughout her life will always be lower," Austin says. "I don't want them tiny, but a moderate cow here has a definite advantage throughout her whole life. We keep only those that are structurally sound, feminine and easy fleshing."

"Our goal is to run the registered cattle as similar to the commercial cows as we can."

— *Austin Snedden*

The Sneddens retain ownership on their calves through the stocker phase, so that efficiency passed on to the calves is important as well.

"Steers and those heifers that don't make replacements are run as stockers through the winter then sold as yearlings," Austin explains. "We have really steep canyon country and it's not good for calving cows in. We turn those calves in there and let them grow through the winter then generally sell early spring. It's the cheapest form of gain. It's winter and it's tough, but we will put a couple hundred pounds on them then sell."

Although Richard and Austin have made some improvements to the land in recent years, like adding cross fences and more water tanks to better utilize the grass, this is largely the way the family has run its commercial cows for a century.

Raising their own

But back in 1972, Richard decided to try his hand at raising his own seedstock.

"We've always been a commercial cattle business but we started the purebred deal because there became fewer and fewer Hereford cattle," Richard explains. "That's why we started the registered business so we could stay in the Hereford business. We've never had any plans to be a total registered operation. But with both, we can see the effects of our bulls and how they stand up and work the country that we have."

Austin says, "The seedstock herd was primarily started to create bulls for ourselves. Our country is so demanding that my dad and grandpa were having trouble finding bulls that would hold up and make cows that would work for us."

Their operation is split with 80% commercial cows and 20% registered. They raise registered Herefords and Red Angus.

"We only buy outside bulls to use as herd sires on our purebred cows and then our commercial cows are all covered by bulls that we raise," Austin says. "Originally we weren't looking to sell any bulls, then we started selling a few bulls and now we sell 25-30 Hereford bulls a year."

The Red Angus bulls are used on their commercial heifers, and a



few are sold as well. Richard points out that there are plenty of options for low-birthweight Hereford bulls, but the Sneddens like the added vigor a crossbred calf gains when out of a first-calf heifer.

The seedstock the Sneddens raise is just as low-maintenance as its commercial herd.

"Our goal is to run the registered cattle as similar to the commercial cows as we can," Austin says. "We want all those genetics to be what works. For example, if they need their hooves trimmed they'll have to do that at the slaughterhouse because we know the commercial cattleman doesn't have time to do any of that stuff. We try to keep the maintenance as low as possible. We want those cows that you never have to stop in the squeeze because they just take care of themselves."

Richard had been continually improving his registered herd, and when Austin returned to the

operation in 2004 after graduating from college at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, Calif., he knew what he wanted to contribute to the family ranch.

"I traveled around the country shopping for herd sires and I realized something," Austin says. "My dad has built this herd and the cattle he and my grandpa put together were as good as most of the cattle I saw anywhere. It became my goal to tell people about it. My dad was raising these cattle for his own purposes, but it's been my goal to let people know what he's worked so hard on so we can see his cattle work for other people too."

He adds, "My dad created this registered herd and his primary goals have always been productivity and functionality. It's fertility first and low maintenance second and those two go together. But for 44 years he made strict selection decisions and didn't really care what other registered breeders were doing. I've been spreading the word and stirring up demand for these cattle."

Richard modestly points out that he's enjoyed getting into the purebred business but says the real blessing is having Austin return to the ranch to work with him.

Richard and Susie have five children, and the ranch is a family operation amongst all of them, but Austin, along with his wife and children, is the only one who has returned to work there full-time.

"It's a blessing to have him come back and work with me," Richard says. "I was able to work my whole life with my dad. None of us are carbon copies of each other so we spread out the responsibilities by what our best attributes are. My wife has been a real help in not only taking care of family and hospitality but she's been a hard worker in outside work and keeping track of the bookkeeping on the place. A lot of family comes back and helps during the busy times. It's a family operation and that's the greatest blessing." **HW**

