

Inside...



Winter Bull Management 34



Checking in on MyHerd 64



Reno Celebrates 50 Years 98

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The Quiet Converter

Commercial cattlemen look to Hereford traits when choosing their next bulls.

by Julie White

There's a window of time, or probably more accurately a window of opportunity, for commercial cattlemen that can make all the difference. Miles are logged, catalogs are sifted through, bulls are sorted and money is spent with hopes of making the following spring a successful one — all leading up to breeding season. Each farm and ranch has its own goals and means of going about selecting genetics.

Efficiency and docility

Brookfield Farm near Lexington, Ky., selects Hereford bulls for their efficiency and docility. Ben Roberts, farm manager, says the operation

started as an “old-fashioned” horned Hereford herd nearly 25 years ago. Today, however, the farm now has 500 black baldie cows on 1,800 acres.

“We started crossbreeding and now we breed the Hereford-sired cows to Angus bulls and everything Angus sired back to Hereford,” Roberts explains. “The red and whiteface steers that obviously come from a Hereford, are the best gainers and always the biggest calves we have. We're always happy with them.”

Roberts says Brookfield Farm follows a strict breeding program. Females are synchronized in two sets and artificially inseminated (AI) in May. First-calf

continued on page 30...

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Ben Roberts of Brookfield Farm says he appreciates the quiet temperament of his Hereford-influenced cows like this one.

“All my life, and I’m 54 years old, I’ve never seen a black baldie go out of style.”

— Ron Myers

heifers are also synchronized at this time. “When we do synch, the cows are heat detected and bred. The heifers are time-bred,” Roberts explains. “We calve 25-30 a day when we’re in that two-week period of AI bred females.”

All bull calves at Brookfield Farm are castrated at birth. Roberts markets two pot loads (a 650 lb. group and a 750 lb. group) each year through an Internet sale through the farm’s local stockyard company. “We keep our calves 60 days after weaning and then load them up on a truck and ship them out,” he explains, adding that no steers are kept on the farm.

Brookfield Farm grows its own replacement females, which go through a rigorous culling process based on pelvic measures, reproductive tract scores and gain. “Any heifer that

won’t reach 800 lb. by breeding date (given they gain 1.5 lb/day from weaning to breeding) are culled soon after weaning. The balance are culled based on tract score and pelvic measurement,” Roberts says.

The balance of calves, the lighter weight heifers and steers, are then marketed through the Kentucky Certified Hereford-Influenced Sale. “My intention was to every year sell replacement heifers, but we cull pretty hard,” Roberts says. “We cull our cows pretty heavy and usually have over 100 replacement heifers. Considering we have a 500-head cow herd we are replacing 25% every year with new blood. Over the 25 years it’s turned out to be a pretty nice herd.”

The only cattle purchased by Brookfield Farm are bulls, which are purchased from Boyd Beef Cattle in Mays Lick, Ky. “The Boyds have been great for us and we’ve been real pleased with bulls from there.”

Roberts says there are two key factors that keep them using Hereford genetics: docility and efficiency.

“Their temperament is great,” he says. “We don’t have very much trouble at all with the Hereford breed, but our cows all have Hereford influence in them and I think that has really helped their temperament.”

He adds that Hereford-influenced cattle are efficient. “They tend to be a little bit easier doers,” he says. “That’s one of the reasons we look for balanced EPDs (expected progeny differences), we’re not going for huge calves or huge cows. We’ve got fairly big cows, but it’s because they’re fat, not because they’re huge boned.”

When it comes to marketing Hereford-cross cattle, Roberts says they are no longer docked like they were 25 years ago. “That has changed and I’m glad it has,” he says. “We don’t get docked at all for red-hided calves. We didn’t want to throw away the factory in the beginning. We are tickled with the Hereford-Angus cross.

From the time we started until now, we’re getting 75 lb. more of weaning weight.” Steers will wean off at 105-110 days at 575 lb. when heifers are 30-40 lb. less than that.

When choosing bulls, Roberts says Brookfield Farm is looking for balanced EPDs and tries to stay around 0 on birth weight (BW) EPD. “We work with Boyds to narrow it down to five to 10 bulls and we go from there,” Roberts says.

Brookfield Farm keeps nine bulls for its herd with two to three bulls selected specifically for use on heifers and the balance for cows. “We put one bull with every 60 or so cows,” he explains. “When we buy a new bull we obviously don’t put him with 60, but we put him with 35 or 40 cows to get him going so he’ll know what their business is. That is after AI, so you have less than 30 that are going to natural service. That’s a pretty good number here.”

New bulls are purchased in March and kept separated until breeding time in May. Breeding soundness exams are conducted prior to breeding.

“We only breed once a year, so older bulls are kept together and also fed silage, hay and mineral and let them take it easy for all but 60 days,” Roberts says. “We do vaccinate those bulls every year and deworm them twice. They handle it well.”

Temperament and longevity

Central Illinois cattleman Ron Myers, says he buys Hereford bulls because of their quiet temperament and their ability to remain in good condition with little input.

Myers’ family has raised cattle for more than 120 years. While they have incorporated numerous breeds during that time, Myers says Hereford genetics have been a mainstay.

Myers’ herd is just over 100 head of primarily black-hided cows. Half of the females are bred to a Hereford bull, and the remaining half are bred to an Angus bull. Myers says he would like to move toward a predominately black baldie herd.

“All my life, and I’m 54 years old, I’ve never seen a black baldie go out of style,” he says. “I’d love to be raising a bunch of black baldie calves.”

The farm has used some AI, but the majority of the herd is bred natural service. In a typical breeding season, Myers utilizes four to five bulls — half Hereford and half Angus.

The progeny are sold as 600 lb. feeders in the fall at Carthage Livestock Auction, Carthage, Ill. Myers does raise his own replacement females as well.

“We like to calve out heifers in January and remainder in February and March,” Myers says. “We ultrasound everything and we’re trying to keep everything

in a pretty tight calving window. Those that are late we’ll calve them and sell them as a pair in late April or early May.”

Myers has purchased Hereford bulls from Lowderman Cattle Co., Macomb, Ill., for many years at its spring sale. When selecting a herd bull, he prioritizes growth, muscling, soundness and temperament.

“I have to compliment the Hereford breed on their temperament,” he says. “I had a cow take me about four years ago and got banged up pretty good so we took a hard line on temperament. Obviously pounds of beef we can get is most important, but temperament is a close second.”

Myers appreciates how his Hereford bulls keep their condition through breeding season. “I can bring my Hereford bulls in after breeding season and not have to dump a lot of commercial feed into them to get them back in shape,” he explains. “I love the way they come through breeding season and (the) way they come through the winter.

“As I look at my Hereford bulls compared to my Angus, I love their temperament and the way they stay in condition.”

The offspring of the Hereford-Angus cross have made their own mark on Myers. “It’s been easy to go out in the lot of the weaned calves before sale and sort them,” he says. “When you start looking at pounds to 600-weight, it’s pretty easy to sort those Hereford-sired calves out. They’re growthier and there are more pounds there.”

To achieve his marketing goals, Myers utilizes EPDs and says, considering he is selling a 600-lb. calf, the most important EPD to him is Weaning Weight (WW) — Yearling Weight (YW) is a close second.

“I try to buy some of the best bulls we can,” he says. “I try not to be cheap on my bulls. I’m a die-hard believer in that because a bull makes up half my herd. We all have to watch cost but that’s a place I try not to very much.”

When it comes to keeping his bulls in healthy condition, Myers says, “I don’t have to do a lot for my Hereford bulls — there’s not much babying. That’s how I like it. I love my Hereford bulls. When I look at thickness down the top and look at muscling, there’s just more bull there with a better disposition. It costs me less money to keep a Hereford bull. I’m not having to throw as much feed in front of them as I do my Angus bulls.”

Myers also appreciates the longevity Hereford bulls provide. “I keep the bulls as long as they are still sound-footed and pass the semen test,” he says. “Sometimes we are going five to six years. Seven would be max. I haven’t had any soundness problems. I’m getting great longevity out of them too.” **HW**



Ron Myers says he chooses to raise Hereford-sired calves like these because of their high-growth and efficiency.