

The Best of Times



Matt Copeland, Nara Visa, N.M., considers being named 2011 Hereford Herdsman of the Year among the greatest achievements of his life.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

Meeting the love of his life. Watching his family grow. And, being recognized by those he respects. These are the shining moments in the life of the 2011 Hereford Herdsman of the Year, Matt Copeland, Nara Visa, N.M.

“This is one of the best things to happen to me, aside from getting married, someday having children and then watching my children have grandchildren,” Matt says. “There’s no amount of success you can do up here on the Hill — no amount of purple banners — nothing that will compare to what all of these great people did for me.”

Matt was selected for the award by his peers — other Hereford herdsman and breeders — and was honored prior to the selection of the supreme champion Hereford on Jan. 15 at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver.

Matt is the fourth generation to make Herefords a business on the family’s New Mexico ranch, Copeland and Sons LLC, which has been in operation since 1943. Today, the Copelands run about 130 registered Hereford cows



Kyla, Matt, Cliff and Pat Copeland.

and 400 commercial cows, including 80 cows used for the production of club calves.

He attended Dodge City (Kansas) Community College, where he competed on the livestock judging team and placed in the top 10 in hogs and cattle at the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) national collegiate livestock judging contest. He graduated from Oklahoma State University in 2007 with a degree in animal science and returned to the home operation, where he serves as herdsman today.

Matt works alongside his parents, Cliff and Pat, and his grandparents, Clifford and Barbara. And, when he married Kyla, last June, she became an integral part of the operation, as well. “My dad, grandpa and I are partners in our family operation, and we share the responsibility and the load,” he says. “It’s a family effort. We live and die together.”

The Copeland family has a tradition of respect in the cattle industry. Two years ago, they were named the New Mexico Ranch Family of the Year by the New Mexico Cattle Growers’ Association.

In the ring

Matt has been in the showing from a young age, getting his start showing a bull calf alongside his grandfather at the New Mexico State Fair. “That experience struck a fire in me at a young age,” he says. “I’ve enjoyed showing forever at state and national shows.”

The Copeland family has showed for many years at the state and local levels. And, in the past six years, they’ve hit the national scene, exhibiting at the NAILE, NWSS, American Royal, Fort Worth, Arizona National and Junior National Hereford Expos (JNHE).

In 2002 Matt received the John Wayne Scholarship and the Golden Bull Achievement Award for his contributions to agriculture and the Hereford breed.

However, he says, his greatest moments in the ring were during the 2005 JNHE, when he was named a finalist for the Junior Hereford Herdsman of the Year, placed in the Top 10 of the national showmanship competition and captured the reserve grand champion horned heifer title.

“That was a very successful year,” he says. “That JNHE was a big milestone for me. I mean, I was excited to win a class, much less do what I did. The competition is tough. All of the stars have to line up, and it’s such a prestigious show to win.”

Although winning is great, he says, even greater rewards come from his time in the showing. “Nothing compares to walking into the showing with your friends, elders and people you truly respect,” Matt says. “Win, lose or draw, you’re out there with your fellow breeders and cattlemen.”

Matt also finds great pride in watching the youth of the industry grow into mature cattle producers themselves. “To watch these juniors that were little bitty kids come back with their own show strings is a neat thing for me to watch,” he says. “It’s really fun to watch them grow and mature and to develop into respectable breeders.”

Models to follow

Helping him develop into the person he is today, Matt says, are his greatest mentors: his parents and grandparents. “They are class acts, and if it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t

be in the position I'm in today," he says. "I owe everything to them — my morals, values and work ethic. When they didn't have it to give to me, they gave it, because they loved me."

He credits his wife, Kyla, for her support, as well. "There are plenty of times when you walk into the house late at night and you have to have some moral and mental support," Matt says. "Kyla is that for me. She's a great mentor and support system."

Matt says he appreciates Mark Copus, Burkburnett, Texas, for helping fine tune his clipping and fitting skills through the years. In addition, Gary and Kathy Buchholz, Waxahachie, Texas, have served as incredible role models and mentors, he adds.

Gary says Matt is a great testament to the Hereford breed. "Matt makes cattle and the Hereford breed a priority," he says. "Ranching is a true family heritage, and it's exciting to see a young herdsman come back to ranch with the family and to have the integrity he possesses. Matt has earned the respect of Hereford breeders."

And not only has Matt earned breeders' respect, he says he has tremendous respect for those cattlemen, as well. "Without their support, I wouldn't have achieved what I have achieved," Matt says. "There are so many people who have given so much to me. It may have been a little thing to them — telling me that my stock looked good or offering a piece of advice — but it was big to me. They've all given more than they had to."

Matt has taken the opportunity to return the favor to younger Hereford breeders including Drew Perez, whose family operates C&M Herefords in Nara Visa, just south of the Copeland's ranch. Drew says Matt has always made time to lend a hand, whether it be with branding or weaning at C&M or with fitting at a show.

"Even if he has a heifer in the same class, he'll always run over to help me," Drew says. "I've always appreciated him for doing that, and not many would do that for their competition."



Three generations of Copelands work together on the ranch. Pictured here are Matt, Pat, Clifford, Barbara and Cliff.

In addition, Drew says, Matt is a true herdsman with cattle on display at shows. "You don't go by the Copelands' stalls and see things out of place or disorderly," he says. "They always present themselves as a class act and represent the breed well."

Drew's brother, Kyle, adds, "Matt and the Copeland family are a hard working outfit that does it the cowboy way, when hard work perseveres and family matters." Not only does Matt take pride in presenting his cattle in the best possible light, he says he also enjoys the business simply "for the love of the game."

"Whether you're showing, breeding for show cattle, breeding to improve your breeding program or cow herd or trying to make better bulls for your commercial buyers, to me it's just the thrill of doing it all, to see if your ideas were a step in the right direction," he says. "It's a rush."

Aside from the rush, Matt says he's made speechless by his herdsman recognition. "To be put with the elite group of men and women that came before me is very humbling and honoring," he says. "Never in a million years did I expect to be blessed with such a prestigious honor by all of the people that I've come to know, honor and respect in this breed." **HW**



Advice from the Hereford Herdsman of the Year

2011 Hereford Herdsman of the Year, Matt Copeland, Nara Visa, N.M., offers these words of advice and encouragement to the youth of the Hereford industry.

Put in the work. "Hard work and perseverance pay off, even when you don't think it will," Matt says. "These people proved that to me today."

Dream big. "Never give up on your hopes and dreams, because there is no dream too big if you want it bad enough," he says. "There is still plenty I want to accomplish, too."

Watch and learn. "Find the people that you truly respect, and watch and learn what they do," Matt advises. "Study them, and determine if that's the way you want to do it."

Avoid the drama. "Don't get wrapped up in all the drama — who thinks they're cool and who doesn't," he says. "You just need to do your own thing, do it right and work hard. Do that, and you'll gain the respect of the people you need to gain the respect from."

Chart your own course. "Don't deviate from the path of what you want to accomplish in your life," Matt says. "Stay your own course."

Believe in yourself. "Don't ever let anybody tell you that you can't do it," he says. "Use that as a driving tool. I have. Say, 'Step back and watch me. Hide and watch.' You can do anything you set your heart and mind to." **HW**