



The Grounds of Opportunity



For many international Hereford breeders, the National Western Stock Show isn't just a cattle show. It's the location for developing cross-cultural bonds, business relationships and educational opportunities.

by Christy Couch Lee

It's no secret: the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver is the prime livestock show for Hereford breeders in the U.S. And, for numerous Hereford breeders from North America and abroad, the NWSS is a critical component of their marketing, networking and education, as well.

Horatio La Valle, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Grant Hirsche, High River, Alberta; and Jarrett Lees, Arcola, Sask., can testify attending the NWSS is worth the time and expense.



Horacio La Valle

Horacio La Valle and his wife, Marta, have traveled from Argentina to attend the NWSS for 30 years. They own and manage Las Tranqueras

Polled Hereford and Angus. Utilizing embryo transfer and artificial insemination on both their purebred and commercial herds, the La Valles market nearly 200 bulls through three sales each year.

They have attended the NWSS since the early '80s in order to see potential bulls for their herd first-

hand, as well as to select new herd sires and semen donors. And, the La Valles purchase females — most often as frozen embryos — from NWSS exhibitors each year.

"Here, you can find the really good ones," La Valle says. "We've been in different places for shows in America, but we feel comfortable in Denver. Plus, it's interesting to see how the sires work at different farms. It's easy to speak with people to get information on what the sires are producing, as well."

La Valle also says the contacts he makes for additional purchases, the education he receives on fitting

Bridging the gap

The American Hereford Association (AHA) and Hereford leaders from around the world utilize the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) to build bonds and strategize for the Hereford breed worldwide.

Many Hereford breeders agree the NWSS is the premier Hereford event in the world. What better place is there for Hereford leadership, including Warren Clark, Herefords Australia chief executive officer, Armidale, New South Wales, and Gordon Stephenson, Canadian Hereford Association general manager, Calgary, Alberta, to meet with AHA leadership and strategize for the years to come?

Clark says he attends the NWSS, representing the nearly 2,000 members of Herefords Australia, to keep abreast of the latest happenings in the U.S. Hereford industry.

"Recent research and trends in the beef industry show that our domestic industry is very closely aligned to the U.S. beef industry and in some cases mirrors certain aspects of the industry," he



Foreign Hereford leaders Warren Clark (left) and Gordon Stephenson (right) annually attend the NWSS.

says. "There's a resurgence of the Hereford breed in the United States, and we want to learn how we can get involved and how we can use and share that information across Australia, Canada and America."

Stephenson says a tight relationship between the Hereford associations in the U.S., Canada and Australia, in addition to Uruguay and Argentina, is critical for the success of the Hereford breed worldwide.

"The Canadian and American Hereford Associations have had a

long-standing relationship in our proximity and in the similarity of methods," Stephenson says. "The Pan-American Cattle Evaluation program was established between our two countries and now has expanded to include the additional three countries. We have a good working relationship with the AHA."

Stephenson says he attends the NWSS to meet U.S. Hereford breeders and to further discussions with AHA staff.

and the conversations with the American Hereford Association staff members are invaluable.

"It's easy to discuss all aspects of cattle production in Denver, because everyone is here," he says.

"Plus, it's nice to come to Colorado to ski a bit," he adds with a laugh.

A marketing outlet

Grant Hirsche began his purebred Hereford operation 30 years ago with his wife, Annette. They, along with his three daughters, Kimberly, Karma and Kelsey, and son, Brian, enjoy the Hereford business, and run up to 450-500 purebred Hereford cows, in addition to owning a retail meat shop.

Hirsche has attended the NWSS every year for the past two decades, even during the five years that the Canadian BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) outbreak restricted cattle from crossing the U.S. border, thus preventing the Hirsches from exhibiting cattle.

"Denver has helped us develop a tremendous American market, and



Grant Hirsche

50% of our income is American based," Hirsche says. "Even when we weren't allowed to bring cattle, we displayed photos and video in the alley. We've utilized Denver every year for marketing our cattle."

This year, exhibiting cattle at the NWSS paid off for Hirsche, as Adams Hirsche and MJT Herefords, Edgerton, Alberta, claimed the banner for reserve champion horned bull with GH Adams Nitro Design ET 377X. Hirsche says the NWSS is critical for their marketing plan, as it's filled with quality cattle and quality cattlemen.

"It's the premier Hereford show in the world," Hirsche says. "The NWSS has been able to maintain its prestige through the years, and it's a huge deal to win this thing. These cattle are incredible."

The Lees family believes Denver is an invaluable marketing tool as well. Jarrett Lees is a fifth-generation Hereford breeder, who, along with his brother, Jeff, and dad, Duncan, is actively involved in the family's 100-year-old Hereford ranch, Blair Athol Farms, on which they breed nearly 200 polled and horned Herefords yearly.

They host two annual sales and exhibit their cattle at the national



Jarrett Lees

show in Canada, as well as the NWSS. They estimate 30% of their business lies in U.S. customers.

Lees attended Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture and Oregon State University, where he participated on the livestock judging teams. These experiences, he says, in addition to working for U.S. Hereford operations including Weimer Cattle Co.,

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"The Denver stock show is one of the premier livestock events in North America," he says. "We are able to discuss common programs and genomics with AHA, and we're also able to visit with many Canadian Hereford breeders and promote the breed."

Clark says the NWSS is the perfect opportunity for Herefords Australia to learn about the AHA's marketing methods, branding and promotion of the breed.

"We want to learn how the U.S. Hereford industry targets producers to generate involvement in the Hereford breed," he says. "We believe that sharing information and talking with producers and AHA staff can help us achieve greater results."

One area in which the AHA is working with foreign Hereford associations is the gene discovery project being conducted in conjunction with the National Beef Cattle Evaluation Consortium.

Craig Huffhines, AHA executive vice president, says the goal of the project is to genotype as many high-accuracy Hereford bulls as possible with the 50K (50,000 SNP panel) chip, which today is the largest and most cost-effective genetic mapping technique in the industry.

"We have chosen to work on the Hereford genome to discover gene markers that might help to improve the accuracy of our

EPDs across all traits in very young animals," Huffhines says. "We have asked the breed executives of Hereford associations from three other countries — Canada, Australia and Uruguay — to collaborate with us in the effort. The combined four countries collectively make up the vast majority of the Hereford population across the world."

Hereford breeders from around the globe could benefit from attending the NWSS, Clark says.

"They could learn by coming to this event to see the number of cattle, to see what's happening in the breed and to learn how they're marketing their cattle," he says. "They could also learn a lot about the quality of cattle in America and the level of marketing and exposure they're giving themselves."

Stephenson says, because of proximity, Canadian producers often have friends and business associates in the U.S.

"The genetics go back and forth, and we don't recognize a border," he says. "The ones who recognize a border are health officials on both sides. But, we're borderless as an industry because of the friendships and relationships that have been built up for generations." **HW**

Susanville, Calif., and LaGrand Angus & Hereford Ranch, Freeman, S.D., helped him to develop bonds with U.S. Hereford breeders.

The Lees have attended the NWSS for decades. Lees, himself, began attending in 1999 and has attended every year since, aside from the years of the BSE border closure. He says the NWSS is critical to their operation's success.

"For us, Denver is the highlight show of the Hereford breed," he says. "You see the majority of the U.S. Hereford operations at this show, and it's the premier event for the polled and horned Herefords in America or Canada."

Seeing the quality genetics produced by U.S. Hereford breeders is a great advantage to attending the NWSS, these cattlemen say.

The value of U.S. Herefords

La Valle says U.S. Hereford genetics have brought many strengths to his herd, especially in recent years.

"In the last years, I've seen progress in cattle being thicker and deeper with more muscle," he says. "The EPDs (expected progeny differences) have also been a great tool for us."

Hirsche says he's placed more emphasis on EPDs for his U.S. customers and has utilized U.S. genetics to improve his herd's numbers.

"When in Rome, do as the Romans," he says. "At one time, our EPDs weren't as good as those from American genetics. So, one way we've improved our EPDs is to incorporate U.S. genetics into our herd. It's helped us to market our cattle and has given our American customers a different genetic base to draw from."

And, the NWSS is critical to market these genetics to his U.S. customers, he says.

Worth the trip

Hirsche says he and his wife began their operation from the ground up. In order to build their customer base, they realized showing cattle was key. And the NWSS, he says, is the most valuable show of all.

"The NWSS gave me the opportunity to prove that I could compete," he says. "By showing in Denver, we've been able to compete against the best in the world."

And, producers abroad recognize just how tough the NWSS competition can be, La Valle says.

"In 2000 we had the NWSS grand champion polled bull, and that was great advertising for us in Argentina," he says. "Breeders in Argentina know that Denver is important, and the breeder with the grand champion bull can sell a lot of semen in Argentina."

Lees says marketing opportunities — in America and abroad — draw his family to the NWSS.

"Every year, we make sales in the stalls because people come to Denver to make breeding decisions," he says. "Coming to the National Western furthers our business and gives us an understanding of where the industry is going."

In addition, Lees says, the variety of Hereford breeders in one location is unmatched.

"At Denver you hit more U.S. surface area — from California to Maryland — than with any other show out there," he says. "You hit so many niches of cattlemen from different regions that we couldn't reach anywhere else in America or Canada."

Making the trek to Denver and navigating the challenges of cross-country trade can be challenging at times. But, these men say the benefits far outweigh the challenges.

Overcoming the odds

La Valle says stringent health requirements can create obstacles when U.S. producers do business with customers in Argentina.

"You have to pass a large number of tests," he says. "For a small American breeder, it can be annoying to sell a few straws of semen — with the health requirements, quarantine, time and money. Many times, if we find we are not ready to buy a large amount of semen, it's not good business. We understand that."

When the La Valles began attending the NWSS, they purchased frozen embryos to ship back to Argentina. As time progressed, they began purchasing cows that remained in America, and embryos were shipped to their operation. In addition, they marketed progeny from these cows in the U.S., as producers in Argentina are restricted from selling genetics to U.S. producers.

Hirsche is familiar with the challenges of restricted trade, as well.

The Canadian BSE outbreak prevented him from selling his Canadian cattle to U.S. customers for five years. However, those years of restriction gave Hirsche a greater appreciation for the ability to attend the NWSS and bring his cattle south of the border.

"I probably value this show more than ever because you don't appreciate things until they've been taken away," he says.

Lees says his family has experienced the same appreciation for the NWSS.

"You don't know what you have until it's gone," Lees says. "Denver is a big talking point throughout the year, and we're gearing up our cattle for Denver year-round."

For breeders abroad who haven't experienced the NWSS, these cattlemen suggest one thing: try it.

Make the effort

Hirsche encourages producers abroad to be diligent when trying to break into the U.S. market. And, he says, the NWSS is a great place to start.

"Don't give up," he says. "It's not easy, but if you want to strive to be at the top at one of these shows, you have to persevere."

Lees agrees. "It's the No. 1 place in the United States and Canada to market cattle," he says. "If you're serious about being in the breed and marketing cattle, Denver is the place to be, bar none." **HW**