



# SOLID from the Ground Up

A flushmate to 2014 Denver Supreme Champion and record-high-selling bull — Miles McKee — C 88X Gold Ribeye 1309 ET is Elm Tree Farm's resident herd sire.

*One Kentucky Thoroughbred farm is taking its horse philosophy and applying it to raising Herefords.*

by *Danielle Beard Hayden*

**D**riving through the horse capital of the world — central Kentucky — visitors are greeted by one perfectly manicured horse farm after another. Large, intricate barns, southern-style homes and pastures teaming with majestic Thoroughbreds tell the story of Kentucky's rich equine history.

Twenty minutes outside of Lexington, nestled in the heart

of Bourbon County, one such farm tells a slightly different story. Looking past the paddocks of horses, red, white and docile in nature, pastures of Hereford cattle can be seen lounging in the grass of Elm Tree Farms.

#### **The birth of Elm Tree**

Founded in 1989 by Jody Huckabay, with the help of his late parents, Jody says Elm Tree Farms of Paris,

Ky., began with “one barn, two fields, three paddocks and a wheel barrow.” The farm's name was chosen to pay homage to Elmwood Farms Plantation in Harmon, La., once owned by Jody's grandfather, Dr. L.S. Huckabay.

“My grandfather lost the plantation in the Great Depression, but back in the 1970s, my father was able to purchase some of it back,” Jody says. “His farm and



all his farming properties were named Elmwood, so when we got this property I chose Elm Tree as a spin-off of that.”

Originally from Shreveport, La., Jody says he chose Kentucky for its equine history. He grew up with horses and began riding and showing Arabians. Later, his father purchased some Thoroughbreds and this is where Jody’s passion began.

After graduating from Northeast Louisiana State (now the University of Louisiana, Monroe), Jody was expected to attend vet school, but after a change of heart, he told his parents he would instead attend graduate school at the University of Kentucky (UK).

“I will never forget flying over Lexington and the University of Kentucky farm for the first time, it was absolutely breathtaking. At that moment I knew this is where I wanted to be,” he added.

It was during his time as a graduate student at UK that Jody met his wife and partner in Elm Tree, Michelle. After graduation from UK with his master’s in equine nutrition and with the purchase of the “little run down farm,” Jody says it was tough, and after starving while trying to make it as a farmer, he was thankful when UK invited him back for a couple of years to manage the animal science equine division’s farm. Jody and Michelle married in 1994. From that point, Jody says, their farm took off thanks to Michelle’s guidance.

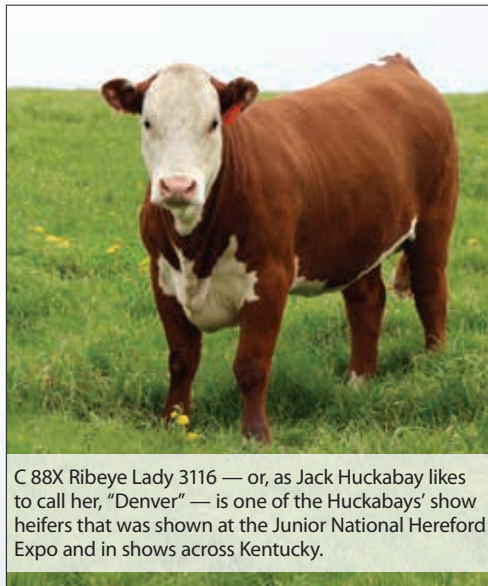
“It was tough at first,” Michelle adds. “We started out with half of a \$500 mare, and we weren’t sure how we were going to come up with the \$250.”

Michelle, a North Carolina native, who had graduated from UK with a degree in animal science as well, is no stranger to the ins-and-outs of the livestock industry.

“I worked for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture and reported the livestock markets for the Bourbon Stockyards in Louisville, which is now closed, but at the time it was the largest livestock market this side of the Mississippi.”

Jody explains similar interests, shared knowledge of the same industry and balancing each other’s skill set is what makes their business work as husband and wife.

“It’s very much a partnership. We discuss everything involving the horses and cattle, Michelle handles all the bookkeeping, paperwork, she really does it all,” he adds.



C 88X Ribeye Lady 3116 — or, as Jack Huckabay likes to call her, “Denver” — is one of the Huckabays’ show heifers that was shown at the Junior National Hereford Expo and in shows across Kentucky.

The Huckabays — Jack, Jody, Caroline and Michelle.



PHOTO BY MELANIE MAUER

The Huckabays hard work did not go unnoticed. While living in a trailer house on their original 100 acres, they befriended a neighbor who ended up selling his land to them upon his death.

The neighbor just happened to be the heir of Dr. Robert Clark, a lieutenant in the Revolutionary War, who had been granted thousands of acres following the war in 1784. Until the Huckabays purchased it, the 500 acres that now makes up the remainder of Elm Tree had not left the Clark family.

“He (the Clark heir) just liked the way we kept our farm up and knew we were young and really trying to make a go of it. This land was never put on the market; we were just able to purchase it outright. We feel

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very fortunate to have been granted that opportunity,” Michelle adds.

### Horse business

What began as 100 acres and a few horses to board has grown into a 600-acre farm with 16 employees that boards approximately 125 horses and houses commercial and registered cattle herds.

“Our main business is obviously Thoroughbred horses,” Jody says. “We board and raise horses for people from all over the United States — from California to New York, even stretching onto Canada — raise them up and sell them at yearling, weanling and mare sales. We also raise our own horses.”

Currently, Elm Tree owns ‘parts and pieces’ of 35 horses

and approximately 10 of its own. The practice of being partners on horses is something Jody says helps protect horse owners by hedging the risk.

“They are a significant investment, our average stud fee is probably \$25,000 to \$30,000, and he’ll breed 80-90 mares a year,” he adds.

With pastures full of their own and others’ significant investments, Elm Tree stresses the importance of constant communication between the Huckabays, the vet and their employees.

“Communication is something we constantly preach to our employees; good, bad or indifferent, we want to hear about it, we may not like it, but we still want to be in the know,” Jody says.

Michelle explains that Elm Tree strives to maintain an open-door policy between the farm and its clients.

“They can come visit the farm whether they call and make an appointment or not,” she states.

“We aren’t going to dictate when they can be here because we aren’t going to change the way we do things whether they’re here or not. We want our clients to know their horses are going to be treated the same all the time.”

For Elm Tree, spring is the busiest time of year.

“This time of year is pretty stressful,” Jody says. “Trying to get mares bred, and with the (Kentucky) Derby, a lot of clients are in the area and drop by to see their horses.”

The Huckabays admit that having one race in the Derby is the ultimate goal for any Thoroughbred farmer. While they may not have one of their own race during the most famous of horse races yet, they do have ties to the Derby grazing in their pastures.

Jody points to a mare and foal, saying, “California Chrome, who won the Derby this year, is out of a sire named Lucky Pulpit. That is Lucky Pulpit’s mother.”

### Change of pace

The incorporation of cattle into their Thoroughbred operation stemmed from cleaning out horses’ stalls, Jody explains.

“We keep all of our own grass hay bedding for the horse stalls,” he says. “A lot of farms clean out their stalls and have people come in and haul off their ‘muck’ for disposal.”

A service, Michelle explains, you have to pay people to do.

Instead the Huckabays decided to recycle the muck by feeding it to cattle. She says there was a couple of farms that had experimented with feeding the muck to cattle.

“We needed a way to dispose of our muck and this made a lot of sense,” Michelle says.

“The cattle love it and it works extremely well,” Jody says. “When the mares urinate on the straw the crude protein jumps from 9% protein to anywhere around 9 to 12-13%.”

This practice, raising both cattle and Thoroughbreds, they explain, is becoming more common for people in the area. It



During breeding season, recipients and registered cattle are found grazing together among the trees of Elm Tree Farms.

is more common for the practice to be used on feeders, but more people are starting to incorporate cow-calf operations.

“About 10 years ago, we went to Idaho and purchased two Hereford bulls from Colyer Herefords and brought them back to breed to our black cows to get baldies and were extremely pleased with the results,” Jody says.

Michelle says they originally bred their Angus cows to Charolais bulls in hopes of achieving smoky calves, but the Charolais temperament wasn't a good fit to combine with the horse environment of smaller pastures and continuous rotation.

“What piqued our interest in the Hereford breed was attending the Red Bluff Bull Sale 12 years ago,” she says. “We were just amazed at the quality of bulls there compared to what we were seeing out here and we decided if we could get some of those and bring them back here to breed to our black cattle to create black baldie calves that would be awesome. Jody started researching which led us to the Colyers. They had the type of genetics we wanted.”

Jody says his love for Herefords actually began as a child.

“When I was 5 or 6 years old, I raised a lot of bottle calves and the first calf I ever raised was a Hereford someone gave to us. It was very docile and a great calf, that's what really got me started,” he credits.

“That's what we really like about Herefords, our son is showing and their temperament is great. In our opinion they are just outstanding cows,” he adds.

For years the Huckabays put their focus on raising the best commercial cattle they could find, but as they began to focus on building a registered herd, they noticed many similarities in their business style between horses and cattle.

“A lot of our cattle ideas we are modeling after our horse operation; our breeding philosophies etc.,” Jody says. “We are trying to buy the best females

we can afford, which is the same for the Thoroughbred business — you want really good mares.”

According to Jody and Michelle, their advertising is letting their livestock — whether it be their cattle or horses — speak for itself.

“We want people to look at our livestock and say, ‘Wow,’ in our opinions, that's a good ad,” Jody says.

Taking the registered Hereford angle to the next level, in the past two years, Elm Tree has introduced artificial insemination (AI) in order to improve its genetics and has also hired a herdsman, Ty McGuire devoted completely to the cattle.

“The horse side is so labor intensive we hired a recent graduate of The Ohio State University who is doing a great job. Ty is super with cattle and knows about fitting and showing which is extremely helpful to us.”

Ty — who is originally from Eaton, Ohio, and grew up raising and showing Angus and Hereford cattle — knew he wanted to work as a herd manager for a larger operation somewhere close to home.

“I didn't know Jody and Michelle before, but I heard they had an opening for a herdsman, and what a great operation it was and what outstanding individuals they are. I applied and it ended up being the perfect fit and the perfect location not only for me, but for my wife who works for the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association in Lexington,” Ty says.

One of the things McGuire finds most enjoyable about his position at Elm Tree is the day-to-day involvement of the Huckabays in every aspect of their operation.

“They are very down-to-earth, hardworking individuals that care about the farm and care about the life and care of the livestock and their employees,” he credits. “They work just as hard as the employees do, they are at the farm every day at 7 a.m. and some nights don't leave until dark.”

According to Ty, the motto of Elm Tree is “solid from the ground

The paternal granddam to California Chrome, the 2014 Kentucky Derby Winner.



up,” something he says everyone at the farm works together to achieve.

“Jody and Michelle have built their herd of Herefords from the ground up. They've went out and acquired some of the best genetics in the nation and continue to build on that,” he explains. “They are building a solid foundation of females and bulls. Which is how it's done — starting from the ground, building it up right, and continuing to improve the herd. I think of them as great mentors.”

For the Huckabays, cattle and the Hereford breed have become as important to them as their horses.

“The commercial cattle we felt really comfortable with and how it fit into our operation,” Michelle says. “It was like the horses were our bread and butter and the cattle were just like our fun stress relief. Now the cattle are just as valuable to us as the horses so there is so much more stress in it.”

Family is now the focus for the Huckabays' stress relief, Jody and Michelle spend their free time with their two children — Caroline, 18, and Jack, 11.

Jody says, “Our glass is half-full, what a blessing to be able to work in the industries we love and be successful.” **HW**