



The Echols' Focus: Growing Kids

Cattle aren't the most important commodity raised on this West Texas ranch.

by **Teresa Oe**

Cattle come and go, but Hereford kids grow up to lead the industry to great heights. That's why Tom and Lisa Echols say they have focused foremost on "growing kids."

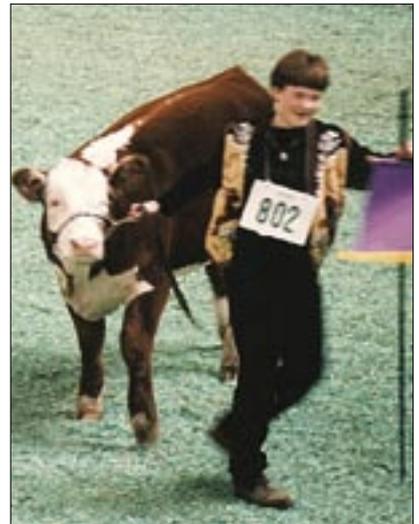
Echols operate the Trammell-Swanson Muleshoe Ranch, which is located near Breckenridge, Texas, and owned by their family with Lisa's sister Mya and her family. Rich in history and long on chores, the ranch is the perfect place for work and play.

The Muleshoe ranch has been in Lisa's side of the family for 128 years and Hereford cattle have been a mainstay for better than the latter half. In the last couple of generations, a new tradition has been growing — a strong emphasis on junior programs.

When Lisa was growing up, her mother, Patricia, used the Texas Junior Hereford Association (TJHA) as a means to teach her children and also her husband, Howard, who didn't grow up around agriculture, about the cattle business.

Inevitably Tom and Lisa's children, Lauren and Will, also got the proper introduction early in life to all that was Hereford and country living.

If you follow Lauren and Will's journeys through childhood and early adulthood, it becomes clear that their parents' philosophy about "growing kids" is right on the money. Here are two young people with great potential to advance not only the Hereford breed, but the entire beef business.



Lauren is awarded reserve champion for her Hereford heifer at the Houston Livestock Show in 1997.

Lauren's journey

When Lauren was only knee high to a grasshopper, her favorite place to be was in the commercial Hereford heifer pens in Ft. Worth with her dad, pushing around the females that did so well for the family year after year.

Surprisingly when Lauren grew old enough to show, it wasn't her steer that was her favorite, but her pig. Still, it didn't take long for her to fall in love with showing cattle. It just took the right critter. After an ornery steer experience, Tom allowed Lauren to make her pick of the heifer calves. "She was mine; I picked her out and we had a special bond," Lauren says.

In the many years of showing Hereford heifers that followed, Lauren notes that some did well and some didn't, but most of all it



Pictured is the Echols family (l to r): Lauren, Will, Lisa and Tom.



Lauren Echols gives her retiring address at the 2004 Junior National Hereford Expo after serving three years on the NJHA board of directors.

was a learning experience for the whole family. Things had changed since her mother had showed, so everyone learned together.

Through the TJHA, Lauren also learned social skills. A confident and talented young woman, you'd hardly believe that she was a "painfully shy and awkward kid," who preferred her cows to most people.

Lauren says she kept to herself until she decided she wanted to run for the TJHA board. She ran two times, unsuccessfully. She jokes that she then realized, as painful as it might be, that she would need to talk to people to get them to vote for her. The third time she ran she succeeded.

Lauren then went on to be the sweetheart and queen of the TJHA, as well as a National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) public speaking champion and a national director. It only took one shot for her to make the board this time, and a whole lot of friends, memories and opportunities followed.

Lauren credits her term on the junior board as the reason she landed an internship with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) upon graduation from Texas A&M University (TAMU). She credits her work ethic learned on the ranch as the reason she was hired full time after only a couple of months. She worked for the NCBA at their office in Washington, D.C., for the past year and has recently accepted a position with the USA Rice Federation on their Government

Affairs team, also located in the District of Columbia.

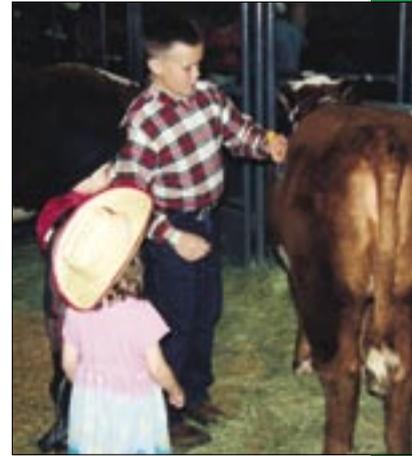
A Hereford kid grown great, Lauren is sure to represent the breed, beef business and American agriculture for many years to come. Eventually she too hopes to grow kids and cows.

Will's journey

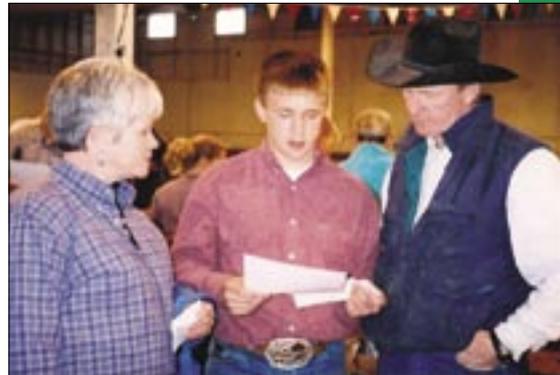
Will's Hereford journey began inside a showbox. Yes, that's right, inside. Lauren tells that Will was only 3 years old when she began showing. An exhausting experience for a toddler, Will was known in his early years as the "kid sleeping in the showbox."

Will admits that he wasn't much help on the ranch as a young kid. He liked going to feed cows with his dad, but was mostly there just for the ride. Everything changed the year Will turned 13. That summer he truly worked on the ranch. "It was the hardest work of my life," Will says. From 6 or 7 in the morning until midnight or after, father and son worked side by side.

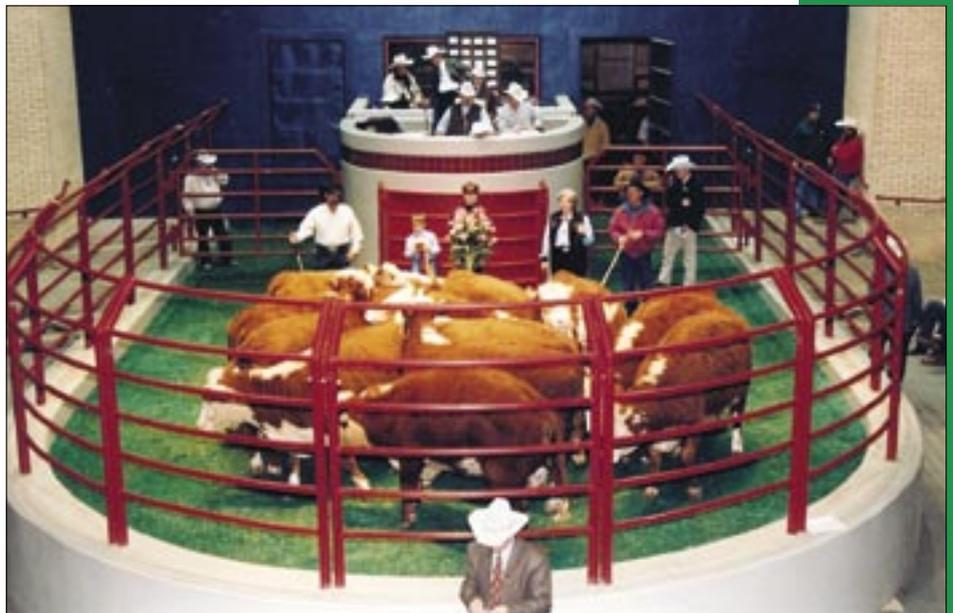
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For years, Will Echols has been educating kids without farm backgrounds about the value of agriculture.



Will prepares for the 2003 futurity contest in San Angelo, Texas, with his parents, Lisa and Tom. Contestants show their animals, judge cattle, give reasons and then "sell" their animals in a marketing event.



The Echols family exhibited pens of commercial Hereford heifers at the Ft. Worth Stock Show for many years, often earning top honors. Here, Will and Lauren proudly display champion decorations.



Muleshoe calves are the result of carefully studied bloodlines and EPDs. Tom Echols' program focus is not the production of cattle, but the production of beef. Hence, the fact he is selecting for and tracking carcass traits.

To that summer and his parents Will attributes all his success. He learned that if you want to achieve something you can, but only by putting in the extra effort. Will applied this work ethic to his show career, and it paid off. Last year, he won a brand new Ford pickup at the Houston Livestock Show for the best pen of three steers. He estimates that he put 400-500 hours of work into the steers, but he now has a "girl catcher" that makes every hour well spent.

When Will was younger, Lisa and her father wanted him to compete in public speaking as they had seen the lifelong benefits of having great communication skills. Will wasn't crazy about the idea in the beginning, but he gave it a try through the TJHA and 4-H. He now loves getting in front of a crowd, and has won district

and state FFA public speaking contests. During this, his senior year, he has addressed students at more than 25 high schools about goal setting, honor and integrity as the Texas area IV FFA president.

Will has also served in almost every capacity in his local 4-H club, and in 2005-06 was second vice president on the State 4-H Council. He was the third in his family to serve on the council as both Lisa and Lauren had in years past.

In his spare time, Will plays football, baseball and golf for Breckenridge High School.

A person could get tired just reading about all this young man does, and his ambitions for the future are no less impressive. After graduating from high school, Will plans to attend TAMU to major in agricultural economics with a policy

emphasis. "I hope to come back to run the ranch and be a businessman as well," Will says. "I would like to get my MBA (Masters of Business Administration) from Harvard like Grandpa (Howard) did."

No doubt, the "kid sleeping in the showbox" will accomplish all that he sets his mind to.



A lesson in stewardship

Lauren and Will Echols, brother and sister, hope to someday together run the Trammell-Swanson Muleshoe Ranch they grew up on near Breckenridge, Texas. They were the sixth generation to get their start on the ranch and hope to keep it in the family for generations to come.

From their father, Tom, the Echols kids learned much about stewardship. "You have to leave it better than you got it," Tom says.

Practicing what he preaches, Tom has made a conscious effort to identify and improve areas of the ranch that need it most since he and his wife, Lisa, took over in 1990. As a full-time veterinarian, focusing largely on herd health and management, Tom has utilized his expertise and access to quality technology to advance the Muleshoe cattle herd.

Tom thoroughly researches bloodlines and expected progeny differences (EPDs) to execute matings that will produce quality offspring. With the knowledge he's gained in the veterinary profession, he makes use of both artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET). Tom also collects ultrasound data, as his present goal is to improve carcass characteristics. He carefully selects for and tracks ribeye area and intramuscular fat.

His efforts have clearly been worthwhile, as was indicated at the 2007 Houston All-Breed Range Bull Sale. One of his Hereford bulls had the highest tenderness score (derived from a DNA-marker test) over all breeds, a 9 on a scale of 1-10.

The cattle herd isn't the only aspect of the ranch that's been updated under Tom's direction. He's studied rotational grazing and implemented several different systems to make the best use of grass available in an often drought-stricken area of West Texas.

The extra time and labor to make these changes has been worth it to Tom to do what's best for the land and herd he hopes to pass down to his children. He has worked hard also to instill this stewardship and work ethic in Lauren and Will, so that future generations might be able to make a living off the land he once tended. **HW**

In conclusion

You might say that "in conclusion" is a pretty boring way to end such a story of great talent and promise for the future. But you can be certain that the Echols kids learned from their speech coach (Mom) that the conclusion is the perfect place to emphasize key messages. If Lisa were writing, she'd take this opportunity to say, "Thanks to the AHA (American Hereford Association) for investing money to sponsor premier youth programs. Kids are our greatest asset in the cattle industry. Growing kids who want to continue this way of life and be a part of the industry is the best thing we can do." Six generations prove her true. **HW**