



mAking It look easy

Breeders share their experiences and thoughts about using artificial insemination (AI) in their herds.

by **Corinne Patterson**



There are many decisions or ideas breeders can agree on — or agree to disagree on. But for three breeders from different regions of the country, different programs and different management schemes, one decision is unanimous.

“There wasn’t much of a decision,” Mark Frederickson says of electing to use artificial insemination (AI) in his herd. “It was easy to make simply because a person of my type of scale and my economics, AI gives me the chance to utilize genetics I couldn’t normally afford to buy.”

Frederickson Herefords near Starbuck, Minn., is home to 120 Hereford and 30 Angus cows. Frederickson and his wife run the operation alone most days now that

the kids are grown. They started using AI in the 1970s — about the same time they began reporting records — and today AI about 30% of their herd.

Ned and Jan Ward, Sheridan, Wyo., calved out 350 Herefords in February and March 2006. Ned, who’s been involved with Hereford cattle his entire life, says they have been using AI in their breeding program forever.

“We use it as a tool to sample proven genetics from other proven programs,” Ned says, adding, “We can use their genetics to bring in an outcross bull into our herd without purchasing the bull.”

For a smaller operation, Bill Yowell, Killeen, Texas, says he can’t justify purchasing a \$20,000 herd sire for his 40 Hereford cows. But through AI, he says he’s been able to access bulls he couldn’t normally afford to compliment his cow lines.

Yowell learned to AI when the tool first came out in the 1970s and says he’s used AI on at least a few cows most years. His herd has fluctuated from 25 original heifers in 1968 up to 400 cows. Today’s scale back has offered him the opportunity to balance the land and the cattle to be self-sufficient. Since 2003 he’s AI bred 100% of the herd.

“We are calving the first set of heifers right now that are the product of our first heifers back in 2003 of breeding all the cows (by AI),” Yowell says. “You come look at these heifers and their calves and their milk and their udders. You would think that it made a tremendous difference — there’s really a difference.”

AI management

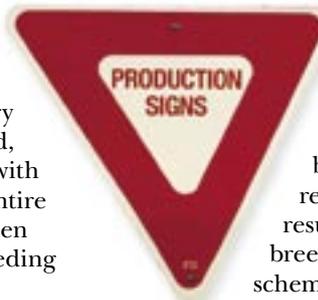
“I’m a staunch believer in AI. As any breeder in the industry you can move yourself so much quicker by utilization of AI,” Frederickson says. “But you still have to match your AI system to your management program and to your environment.”

There are several different management requirements and needs even within a herd. Many times heifers are managed separately from the rest of the cow herd because of nutritional requirements, which results in different breeding management schemes for producers within their own herds.

Frederickson does most of his AI work on his heifers because they are already in a smaller pen and are easy to synchronize by adding MGA (melengestrol acetate) to their feed ration. AI allows him to take advantage of jump-starting his heifers to cycle, allowing breeding for calving in March. The rest of the cow herd calves in April.

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before I go to grass,” Frederickson says. “The cows are a little tougher because they are out on grass, and heat detection becomes more of a problem to find, watch and check them.”

With the cow herd calving in April and coinciding with the onset of green grass, breeding time begins around the third week of June. Because of the management challenges faced with his cows already out on grass, Frederickson says he has found that the utilization of CIDR® (controlled internal drug release) inserts improves his results. But Frederickson says that time is the most important factor in making AI a success.

“You just spend time. With an operation like myself with not so many cows, I know all the cows. When they are not acting their normal moods, then they are coming into heat,” he notes. “You don’t go out and zoom by and see if anything is riding. You sit down and take your time and watch.”

Ward uses AI to kick-start his heifers on track to becoming productive cows in his herd. Prior to breeding season, the heifers are backgrounded so that they are gaining and in good condition for their first breeding. Synchronization gets the heifers grouped up and calving on the first day of the calving season, he says, which allows him to really concentrate on the heifers before the cows start calving 30 days later.

“It’s a good thing for our heifers to get calved out early to give them time to get back in shape. It gives them a few more days to get ready to get rebred as 3 year olds and gives them all the opportunity not to back up in the

calving cycle, but stay at the front of the calving cycle,” he says.

Ward feeds MGA and then gives the heifers a shot of Estrumate®. He watches for heat and breeds 12 hours after a standing heat. “I do the work of AIing, and Jan does the hard work of detecting heat and bringing them in — that’s the tough job,” he adds.

Wards AI for about 21 days; during this time they live with the heifers. They do not use time breeding or mass breeding. It’s nearly the same process with the cows. They use a synchronization program and breed following a standing heat. The job of watching heat isn’t practiced just during breeding time.

“We keep a track record prior to the breeding season of what cows have been in heat after they’ve calved when we are feeding. We keep a track record on who came in heat and when her next cycle should be so we kind of have an idea of what’s going to happen,” Ned says.

In northern Wyoming, green grass isn’t around during Wards’ February/March calving season. During this time of year, Ned says it’s critical to monitor the quality of the diet and mineral program for both the cows and the heifers. Making the switch from a dry, hay-based diet to green grass is avoided.

“In the spring of the year the cows are craving green grass and wanting green grass. They are tired of eating hay. But the grass is too washy, and there is not enough of it,” Ned says. “So instead of changing their diet just prior to breeding we keep them on their steady diet of hay, and supplement them with protein cake. We don’t change their diet to the green feed solely and expect to get them AIed and bred. By keeping them on their constant quality of hay and protein, we’ve seen a big plus there.”

Diet control is only one variable the Wards try to eliminate.

“Don’t throw any variables into your cows by mixing any strange cows into your cow herd bringing

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in new diseases that are going to throw a wrench in the program,” Ned says. “Vaccinate your cows, and try to get the vaccine in them well in advance so that immunity is there.”

While Ned admits there’s a lot of time and thought and some financial commitment put forth to use AI in his herd, it’s well worth it. He says, “You’re putting out money to buy semen and using different genetics, but in the long run it’s making you money.”

Yowell begins the breeding season about the middle of May. All the heifers and cows are synchronized through a program he works with Select Sires to implement. He has been working with this company for many years, and they store his sires’ semen, assist with AI and sell him the supplies needed for breeding.

On breeding day all the cows and heifers are sorted into separate pens by a specific sire Yowell has predetermined for breeding. He says this helps eliminate confusion on which straw of semen to pull for each animal when things start rolling. His manager handles the semen and loading the AI gun. His daughter keeps records, and his grandson brings the cows up to the chute.

“We try to follow the rules pretty precisely and maintain good hygiene,” Yowell says of their AI process. “If you have cattle that are problem free, in good health and you line them up with proper nutrition, you are apt to get pretty good results.”

Yowell points out it’s not only important to focus on animal health when doing AI; it’s something that breeders should always consider. He has worked to keep his herd disease free by keeping a closed herd. “We have a very high level of confidence in our health program, and we don’t anticipate that we have any health problems,” he says.

While the crew has the breeding process fairly fine-tuned, there are still some challenges they face.

“The most critical thing is the nutrition level of the cows,” Yowell says. “Nutrition is key, not only the feed, but also their minerals from the time right before calving up to breeding. When we go back and look at weaknesses in the program we are sometimes able to point to that. This past year we had a devastating late fall; we’ve had a drought. A lot of times you look at grass, and it’s not as good as it

looks. We feel that handicapped our conception this year.”

Another key breeding decision Yowell says he makes is the selection of his replacement heifers.

“We don’t feel like anyone can look out in the yearling heifer calf group and tell who the best cow is going to be. Therefore, we keep and breed all of our heifers, all those except for those we cull and ship to the market,” Yowell says.

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New program encourages AI use

In April American Hereford Association (AHA) members were able to enter any artificial insemination (AI) sire in the Non-Certificate AI Sire program. This program allows breeders to nominate a bull into the AI program without selling AI certificates.

“With this program the Board and staff are sending a bold statement,” says Jack Ward, AHA chief operating officer and director of breed improvement. “We



believe that we need to continue to build the breed’s momentum by increasing AI use in the Hereford breed and are willing to give up some potential AHA revenue to do so. As breeders utilize AI more, it will send a message to customers that Hereford breeders are serious about genetic change and are committed to providing a product that will be more predictable.”

Specific requirements of the program:

- A bull can be nominated into the program as of April 2006.
- Calves being born after Dec. 1, 2006, are eligible to be registered through the program.
- There will be a random sampling of parentage verification of all AI and embryo transfer (ET) calves.
- Producers will pay \$250 to enter a bull in the program.
- An agreement must be signed by all bull owners and filed at the AHA. If a bull is syndicated, then a representative of the syndicate must sign the agreement.
- Once a bull is entered into the program, he will remain in that program and will not be able to move between certificate and non-certificate programs.

According to Ward the goals of the non-certificate program are to increase AI use within the breed and increase registrations of AI-sired calves. “I encourage all bull owners wishing to sell semen to take a close look at this program as it could increase the sale of semen and eliminate the administrative work that goes along with the sale of AI certificates,” he says.

An agreement form was printed on page 51 of the May/June *Hereford World*. For more information about the program, contact Ward at (816) 842-3757 or jward@hereford.org. **HW**

Tougher decisions

While it's a good thing that AI is convenient and that it makes top genetics more readily available, Frederickson points out that it doesn't make the decision on which sire to use any less important.

"When you utilize AI, it's convenient to use, so your choices are much more important," he says. "My piece of advice to anyone who AIs — because it is so easy to get a hold of so many genetics — is to make sure that you do the research to choose the genetics that will move you in the direction that you want to go. Don't use it just because it's available and easy to do. Use it to improve your herd."

Using bulls with high accuracies can also help producers accomplish their goals through AI. While most semen can be purchased by just looking at a picture with some data printed underneath, Frederickson says producers can still benefit from the industry's traditional method of beating down the road to find the next great herd sire.

"My philosophy always was to find a breeder whose philosophy is similar to yours and whose management environment is similar to yours. And if you agree with what he's doing, you try to buy the best that he has with the money you have to spend," he says.

By doing this it allows Frederickson to bring in genetics that best match his breeding and management schemes. It's also important to do the homework and find out what's behind a straw of semen. He says this can be done by talking with other producers who have daughters from the sire and have seen them in production.

"When AI came along it made it so much easier and convenient

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to use genetics without having to research them that hard," Frederickson continues. "Basically what it came down to is you could choose a bull, but it was based on a picture and some data that was printed under the picture."

Ward shares a similar philosophy. They have a few of their own herd sires collected and know how important it is to have collection facilities put up only the best quality semen. He also emphasizes the importance of taking the time to make breeding selections.

"If you make a mistake, it's going to be three years down the road before you see that by using that bull those daughters do not milk and don't raise you a big calf at weaning time. You've sold the progeny out of that bull to your commercial men thinking that they were going to give

them daughters that are going to produce big stout calves and rear calves that are going to be good," Ward says. "It's costing you in your own herd, and it's costing you in your reputation. So when you make a decision you've got to take in big consideration who you are buying the semen from, their program, their integrity and their honesty."

AI has allowed Ward to utilize home-raised bulls to get additional calves that could be covered under natural service. But no matter how good you are at using AI, Ward says there's still going to be animals that won't get bred AI. So, he says it's just as important to have a high-quality cleanup bull as it is to pick quality semen.

And just because there is some expense put forth in using AI, it doesn't mean that what's produced is necessarily going to be worth more. That's something Yowell says he's learned as time has gone by.

"I tell people it took me a long time to realize you can get a damn sorry cull calf out of a straw of semen. The tendency is to think, my gosh if I buy a straw of semen he's going to be really good," Yowell points out. "You have a tendency to pass over some of his faults and weaknesses and keep him or her in the herd. But we make no excuses. We cull a \$40 straw of semen just as quick as we would the cleanup bull."

With all the decisions cattlemen make to help their programs run smoothly and efficiently, AI can certainly be one tool to help achieve success. "AI is a very good tool, but there are so many variables to having success," Ward says, "but the success of AI can benefit your herd rather greatly." **HW**