

Driven

Tennessee Hereford breeder Billy Ashe makes each step count.

by *Katlin Mulvaney*



A journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step. This describes the life of a Selmer, Tenn., man known for his determination, passion for beef cattle and innovative leadership. With each step that Billy Ashe has taken throughout his life, there is evidence of his success.

One of these first steps taken was during his senior year of high school when he received the FFA's State Farmer award in beef. These valuable experiences gained through FFA allowed him to step into his education at Oklahoma State University (OSU), where he received a bachelor's degree in animal science. While in college, Billy was an elite member of the 1958 OSU livestock judging team that won the American Royal contest.

After graduating in December 1959, he was drafted, sent to Korea and spent two years serving in the military. After he returned

from the service, Billy worked for Haggard Hereford Farm, Steele, Mo., for three years. In 1963 he received the honor of Bluegrass National Hereford Show Herdsman of the Year.

From there he strived to improve the quality of his family's cattle at Ashewood Farm. The farm has been in existence for more than 56 years with an average of 175 head of cattle. Billy says his father, William C., who is now 95, is the foundation and a superior role model for work ethic and determination for the family and throughout the community.

"When you start giving ground, you start losing ground," chuckled Billy, as he explains how it took determination, passion and relationships with producers in his area to allow him to play a key role in increasing numbers in the Tennessee Hereford Marketing Program feeder calf sale to 1,250 head this year.

Influential leaders started the sale 12 years ago, including Stan Webster, past Tennessee

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Polled Hereford president, and John Woolfolk, current American Hereford Association (AHA) board member and coordinator of the Tennessee Beef Cattle Alliance. It was the concerns of many small Hereford producers who recognized that Hereford cattle were being discriminated against at the sale barns, resulting

in the producers not receiving a competitive price for their cattle. Something had to be done to allow small Hereford breeders to have a more level playing field in producing feedlot ready cattle, and that is when the sale was started.

The Certified Hereford Beef® (CHB) and Hereford Verified® eligible calves come from Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee and are sold at the Tennessee Livestock Producers' Barn in Columbia, Tenn.

Taking small steps to improve the sale's marketing strategies was Billy's goal during his term as Tennessee Hereford Association president, which ended March 2009. From starting regional planning meetings, making conference calls about the changing cattle prices and markets, requiring all consignors to make their sale cattle be electronically identified and source-verified, providing carcass data feedback to producers, to incorporating video auction technology to sell the cattle, Billy has been diligent in keeping the sale costs low and profit margins high for consignors in the sale. The sale has grown 20-30% and attracts buyers from Iowa, Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska.

With small purebred breeders working together for the sale, there has been an increased demand for Hereford bulls. The carcass data provided back to producers has shown strengths and weaknesses for each producer and allows all to remain focused on the industry's demand for quality.

Billy's personal success is attributed to several influential people who have left footprints and made a lasting impression in his

life. Some of those key influencers include the following:

• **Robert Totsuek**, OSU livestock judging coach and lifelong friend. Billy says it is the values and discipline that were instilled in him while judging under Totsuek that have stamped his life forever.

• **Neil Trask**, South Carolina resident and Hereford Hall of Fame breeder. Trask showed Billy the importance of collecting performance data on the cattle you produce, not only because it increases your marketability but also because it allows you to compare your cattle with cattle in all regions of the world.

• **Circle M Polled Hereford Ranch** in Senatobia, Miss. This was the place where

Billy spent a summer working during college. He shares how checking cattle and assisting in the breeding decisions there made him more knowledgeable in the breed while gaining real-life work experiences.

• **Earl Purdy**, manager of Double E Ranch in Mississippi. Purdy not only profoundly affected Billy's life but has also remained a lifelong mentor and friend.

With each step that Billy has taken, his passion for the Hereford breed has intensified, giving him enthusiasm to give back. Billy stays active in his county cattlemen's association and Stantonville Methodist Church. Billy and his wife, Joyce, have been married for 32 years and have two children,



In March 2009 Billy retired from his term as president of the Tennessee Polled Hereford Association.

Wesley and Patti, who were both active in the Tennessee Junior Polled Hereford Association. **HW**

Editor's note: For more on the Tennessee Hereford Marketing Program feeder calf sale, see the January 2009 and July 2006 Hereford World issues.