



The Star Lake Hereford bull with Star Lake 21st century Hereford genetics is the “new Hereford.” He’s designed to add pounds of muscle and extra weight in a quality package that is problem free.

# Follow the Brand

*A look at what’s behind the Star Lake brand: the team, the cattle and the program.*

by *Angie Stump Denton*

Home of “21st Century Hereford Genetics,” Star Lake Cattle Ranch is committed to raising and selling high-quality Herefords that contribute to the beef industry.

Since 2003 Star Lake Cattle Ranch, Skiatook, Okla., has been owned by the father-son team of Jim and Randy Blin. “When we purchased the cattle and ranch, we realized the Star Lake team was one of the best in the Hereford business and this played a major factor in our decision,” Jim

says. “It was our goal to provide them the resources they needed to continue to develop the best Hereford cattle for the industry.”

### The team

The current Star Lake team has more than 150 years of combined experience on the ranch.

Leading the team is Montie Soules, ranch manager, who has worked building the Star Lake program for 33 years (see “Looking back”). Montie is one of the most respected and

trusted cattlemen and Hereford enthusiasts in the industry.

Star Lake team members include Operations and Show Cattle Manager Todd Herman, who has been part of the operation for 29 years. Max Stotz heads up the embryo transplant (ET) program and has recently moved



into the office to work in customer service. He has been a part of the organization for 30 years and uses this expertise to help customers with their own operations.

Other team members include: Brad Prather, who is in charge of the cow herd and has been with Star Lake for 16 years; Josh Taylor, who works with bull development and show and sale cattle and is a 12-year Star Lake veteran; Dustin Dillman, who leads the maintenance effort and assists with the cow herd; Jon Blin, who coordinates the website and Internet marketing; and Karen Beeghly, who works in the office looking after records and semen sales.

“Throughout the year you can see various members of the ranch family

— children, wives, husbands and friends — involved in getting the job done,” Randy says. “This operation, like every other cattle operation, runs seven days a week. It’s a lifestyle that couldn’t be done without the help and support of our families.”

### The cattle

The goal at Star Lake is not just to breed showing champions. “We love showing, but our ultimate accomplishment is raising good Hereford cows and bulls that will make a contribution to the breed and our customers’ programs,” Montie says.

At Star Lake 400 calves are born annually, with 60% being ET calves. Of the natural calves, roughly 100

will sell with their mothers in the ranch’s May sale each year.

The Star Lake team works to breed cattle with extra growth while keeping all expected progeny difference (EPD) traits balanced. This allows the animals to not require extra nutrition or special attention to function while performing more efficiently. “We demand that balanced genetics be above the breed average to consistently produce high-performing and fast-gaining cattle,” Montie says. “The cattle are bred and designed to be problem-free.”

Brad says the cow herd has improved dramatically during his tenure with the ranch. “In the last

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Star Lake was named the polled premier breeder and exhibitor at the 2011 National Western Stock Show. “Our team is comprised of tremendous specialists, but can also cover for each other,” Randy says. Team members pictured (l to r) are: Max Stotz, Randy Blin, Montie Soules, Jim Blin, National Hereford Queen Bethany Nolan, Brad Prather, Josh Taylor, Robbie Duis, Jon Blin and Todd Herman. Team members not pictured are Dustin Dillman and Karen Beeghly.



The Star Lake crew and their families at the Friday night gathering prior to the May sale.



Josh Taylor educates Star Lake customers about the value of daily hair care.

eight years we've improved udder quality, calving ease and efficiency."

Josh agrees, adding, "Hereford cattle today are much more sound and structurally correct than they were 10 years ago. They are making better, more productive mothers."

Star Lake is a performance-oriented program utilizing the latest advancements and tools.

"Today we make less mistakes using EPDs," Montie explains. "No they are not fool proof, but EPDs are the best tool to use today to help you not make the mistakes of the past."

Star Lake utilizes ET to replenish the herd and to produce a robust, performing, productive and fertile line of cattle for today's industry. The ranch flushes about 35 cows per year and implants about 300 embryos per year. The ranch's complete lab allows all ET work to be done on site.

Star Lake also uses sexed female semen, EID (electronic identification) tags, cloning and in vitro fertilization (IVF). The ranch has its own ultrasound machine used for sexing pregnancies. It also uses DNA for finding and managing genetic defects and is committed to selling only genetic defect free (GDF™) cattle.

### The program

"Raising the next great show bull or heifer is not our top priority when we make breeding decisions," Todd says. "We want to raise Hereford cattle that will make a contribution to the industry."

Many breeders would be surprised to learn that when a bull gets home from a show he goes to work in a 100-200 acre pasture breeding cows; he's not pampered in the show barn 12 months a year.

What makes the Star Lake program so strong is its attention

to detail, customer satisfaction and brand marketing.

Each year Star Lake hosts two production sales. On the third Saturday of May, the Seedstock Source Sale features first-calf heifers with calves at side, donor cows, embryos and show heifer prospects. The October sale is two sales in one day — the Fall Celebration Female Sale includes show heifers, cow-calf pairs, donors and embryos and the Ranch Ready Bull Sale features breeding-age ranch ready bulls and embryo transfer bull calves. The ranch ready bulls program was established six years ago. See "Defining a ranch ready 21st century Hereford bull" for information on the program.

Star Lake has adapted to today's busy lifestyles and has taken steps to make it easier for customers to actively participate in its sales while offsite. The ranch started utilizing Superior Livestock broadcasts on RFD-TV in early 2005 for customers who



Randy and Debbie Blin with their children and their fiancés. Pictured (l to r) are: Jason Barber; Jaci, Randy, Debbie and Jon Blin; and Crystal Young.

Star Lake has been listed in the top 10 for Hereford registrations six of the last eight years. In fiscal year 2010, the ranch registered 338 head.





Star Lake awarded 13 exhibitors more than \$12,500 in cash and sale credits at the junior heifer futurity.



Exhibiting the champion heifer at the 2011 Star Lake Cattle Ranch Junior Heifer Futurity Show were Cory, Lucas and Logan Stumpf, Columbia, Ill.



Futurity exhibitors are provided show shirts.

couldn't be in Skiatook on sale day.

Online bidding was added with *LiveAuctions.tv* in 2007, and the Superior Click-to-Bid Internet option was added this past year. It was determined that videos of the cattle gave buyers the best insight to the offering and they have been an important part of the marketing program.

Along with the traditional May and October production sales, Star Lake has hosted a monthly Internet auction since August 2008. These monthly sales predominately feature embryos and a few live animal lots. Packages of semen, baskets of embryos, original artwork, Hereford memorabilia and holiday gift baskets have also appeared.

With Jon's leadership, online marketing and social networking initiatives have been added to the Star Lake program. He manages the Star Lake website — *starlakeherefords.com* — and the ranch's Facebook page.

This year the website is averaging more than 6,000 visitors a month, who in turn have generated more than 41,000 monthly page views. The Facebook page is constantly growing and currently has 2,350 "likes."

"Both of these venues provide a great way to communicate to customers and the industry," Randy says. "One of the many strengths of our 'virtual' presence is it is constantly changing, Jon works to keep it current making sure there's always something new."

Another unique marketing outlet utilized by Star Lake is "The American Rancher," a series produced by Superior Productions and broadcast on RFD-TV. Star Lake was showcased in the program's inaugural season in 2004 and has been one of the series weekly sponsors since 2005. The Star Lake

operation is featured twice a year on the program in a half-hour segment that promotes the spring and fall production sales.

Also tied to a successful marketing program is customer service.

"Because the Blins were a customer first, as Harter Creek Farms, they understand the needs of Star Lake customers," Montie says.

This firsthand experience has led to the operation devoting more time and resources to assist customers. "It is our responsibility as a seedstock producer to stand behind our product," Jim says. "We feel our customers appreciate the time and attention."

In 2008 Max transitioned to customer service after more than 25 years as cow herd manager, a change which allowed Star Lake to devote more time to helping customers. These efforts include trying to determine what a customer's goals are and help him find the Star Lake genetics to achieve those goals.

### Giving back

The Star Lake team values youth and through the years has developed programs to aid the upcoming leaders of the Hereford breed.

"Jim and Randy are very youth oriented and want children to have fun with valuable experiences and build their college funds with Star Lake genetics," Montie says.

This year Star Lake hosted its 18th Junior Heifer Futurity. Youth who purchased heifers in 2010 were invited back to the ranch to participate in the futurity show on Friday prior to the May sale. Thirteen youth won \$12,500 in cash, Star Lake credits and other awards. To date nearly \$250,000 in cash, credits and awards have been won by Star Lake junior customers participating in the futurity.

Another program established in 2008 to help youth is Star Lake University.

"Before purchasing the ranch, the most valued service we received as a Star Lake Cattle Co. customer

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Montie Soules has helped owners host six sales that grossed more than a million dollars through the years.

## Looking back

The Star Lake herd and team originates back to ACE Polled Herefords of Milbrook, N.Y. Montie Soules went to work for ACE in July 1978. Max Stotz joined the ACE staff in 1981 and Todd Herman in 1982.

In 1985 a satellite operation in Collinsville, Okla., was purchased followed by the ranch in Skiatook in 1988. In 1992 the ACE herd was dispersed, and Star Lake Cattle Co. from New Hampshire purchased the ranch.

Then in April 2003, Jim and Randy Blin purchased the operation and changed the name to Star Lake Cattle Ranch. Prior to buying Star Lake, the Blin family had built its Harter Creek Farms herd with Star Lake genetics, first purchasing heifers for Randy and Debbie's children — Jon and Jaci.

As owners of Star Lake, the Blins have doubled the number of calves born annually while maintaining the goal of breeding the best Herefords possible. **HW**



Jim and Judy Blin

was help,” Randy says. “When my children, Jon and Jaci, first started showing, the Star Lake team helped us by offering feeding, grooming and showmanship tips. That help to customers and especially juniors is so valuable. It is the basis for formalizing Star Lake University.”

The day before both the fall and spring sales, Josh Taylor leads a clinic for juniors and parents alike. Topics discussed have been daily hair care, proper use of the blower, hoof trimming, fitting techniques and feed programs.

In 2008 Star Lake and the Blin family also donated the Foundation Heifer to the Hereford Youth Foundation of America (HYFA). The female sold for \$100,000 and was purchased by Jim and Judy Blin and Randy and Debbie Blin in partnership with Ken and Carolyn Larson from DeSoto, Texas. Star Lake continues to manage the foundation female, and through her progeny, she continues to generate revenue for the HYFA. To date a gross total of \$35,000 has been generated from her offspring.

**“The real success of the ranch is whether we have helped make the breed better and developed Hereford cattle that will contribute to the industry going forward.”**

— Jim Blin

“It was our way to give back,” Jim says. “As leaders in the industry we wanted to establish something that would be perpetual and we hoped other breeders would join the program.”

### Winning tradition

Walk into the Star Lake office and sale ring and you are welcomed by banners, trophies and bronzes representing years of success for the Star Lake program. Although Star Lake doesn't necessarily raise cattle to be show winners, the owners and staff are proud that the cattle from the Star Lake program produce seedstock for today's industry and are also the kind to bring home numerous accolades.

For 12 consecutive years, Star Lake has won grand champion Hereford carload at the National Western Stock Show. According to Randy, this is a special achievement to the ranch organization because all these bulls have been raised at Star Lake. It is also thought to be a record among all breeds since the start of the carload show in Denver.

Another highlight in 2011 was that STAR TCF Shock & Awe 158W was the first Hereford to be back-to-back supreme champion Hereford

at the National Western Stock Show. Star Lake has also won numerous premier breeder and exhibitor banners through the years, including premier breeder at the Junior National Hereford Expo 11 times.

### A leader

“What we try to do is stay ahead of the curves,” Jim says. “We try to constantly improve utilizing technology.”

The ranch is managed as a business with budgets and a business plan. “This isn't a hobby, it is a business,” Randy says. “Every cow has to earn its keep.”

The Star Lake team utilizes the GEM System for record keeping. GEM has added efficiency and made it easier to get the cattle information into the system to generate more useful reports.

Along with being a leader in the seedstock business, the Star Lake team realizes the importance of taking care of the land. They have initiated and developed a long-term range and pasture management program, partnering with industry specialists. Animal welfare is also a priority on the ranch, and they believe all producers should be proactively implementing low-stress handling programs. All Star Lake staff members have been educated on low-stress handling techniques and have been through beef quality assurance (BQA) training.

With the goal to be a superior seedstock producer, Max summarized the Star Lake plan. “We strive to do the best we can to produce superior genetics that will work for our customers.”

Randy says, “When people think Hereford we want them to think about a Star Lake Hereford. We want people to recognize the Star Lake brand — STR — as standing for quality.”

Montie adds, “It's an exciting time to be in the Hereford business and we are proud to be a Hereford breeder.” **HW**

## Defining a ranch ready 21st century Hereford bull

All ranch ready bulls selected are from the top end of their performance groups and have parameters of less than a 90 lb. actual birth weight and less than a 6.0 BW expected progeny difference (EPD). They are selected at weaning and placed in development pens according to EPD performance records.

Bulls are sorted by growth (WW and YW EPDs), with lower BW (high WW and YW with a moderate to low BW EPD or actual birth weight), by REA (bulls with above 0.30 REA with growth) and by lower birth weight (actual birth weights 80 lb. or less and BW EPDs below the breed average, while maintaining growth traits).

All bulls over a year of age are scanned for carcass data, which is turned in to the American Hereford Association to be reflected in their EPDs. The bulls are developed in groups of around 20 bulls per pasture. They are fed for optimum yearling weights and carcass information at one year of age. They are grown out with a growing ration and kept in good condition until sale day. They are then ready for heavy service.

The average EPDs of all the bulls and bull groups featured are compared to the Hereford breed averages. **HW**