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Herefords Through the Generations

Commercial producer Merv McDonald has been using Hereford bulls for 50 years.

by *Angie Stump Denton*

Ranching near the Marin County coast north of San Francisco Bay for 55 years, Merv McDonald has seen many changes in the cattle industry. Through the years, one thing has remained constant: his admiration of the Hereford breed.

At one time the entire McDonald herd was commercial Herefords, but through the years, the ranch transitioned to a black and baldie cow herd with Hereford bulls being used on black cows and Angus bulls on the baldie cows.

“I like Herefords,” Merv says. Hereford genetics fit his rough range country. “Hereford bulls get out and work.”

Merv likes to buy good, thick Hereford bulls with plenty of stretch. “I don’t want a compact bull,” he says. “Feeders want

calves that look big and long.”

Merv and his son Mike both agree the docile nature of Hereford is a big reason why they continue to use Hereford bulls.

“Herefords are more easy going; they are easier to handle,” says Mike. “They don’t tear things up like the Angus bulls do.”



Commercial cattleman Merv McDonald has been ranching along the Marin County coast 50 miles north of San Francisco Bay for more than 50 years. Hereford genetics have been part of the McDonald breeding program for most of that time.

The ranch

The McDonald family purchased its current ranch in 1980. Prior to that they ranched at Pierce Point in the Point Reyes National Seashore, which is along the Pacific Ocean. The family was forced to move from the point when the U.S. National Park Service wanted to increase the elk population.

The McDonald home ranch is located 14 miles west of Petaluma at the upper end of Walker Creek, a major tributary to Tomales Bay. The McDonald family also leases 4,000 acres in the Point Reyes National Seashore.

Merv and his family have worked hard to take care of the



The baldie calf is what the McDonald family strives to produce.

land. Merv says he believes, “If you don’t take care of the land, it won’t take care of you.”

Because of their improved management, the McDonalds have doubled their stocking rate and weaning weights have improved by more than 200 lb.

The cow herd

Today the McDonald herd totals 700 fall-calving cows with calves marketed in July. The average weaning weight in 2009 was 807 lb. for calves at the home ranch and 840 lb. at the Point.

“Growing up in the commercial cow business, Merv knows the benefits of Hereford-influenced calves in the marketplace,” says Jim Mickelson of Sonoma Mountain Herefords. “For years Merv has used Hereford bulls on his cows and consistently weaned calves that are desirable and sought after by feedlot buyers.”

Merv explains that for 17 years the family shipped its feeder cattle to the same feeder in Iowa. For the last couple of years, the cattle have gone to Five Rivers, now owned by JBS, in Idaho. Although the McDonald family does not retain ownership on the cattle, they communicate with Five Rivers about how the cattle perform.

The McDonald family’s management strategy and resources do not allow them to keep and develop replacement heifers. “We don’t have a place to grow and develop heifers here in our rough country,” Merv explains.

To help keep the cow herd young, the McDonald family mouths all cows in April and tags the older cows. The older cows are then bred and sold in the fall. Merv says most cows are sold at about 7 years of age. “This gives the buyer a chance to get a few more years out of the cow,” he adds.

Because of this management practice, the McDonald family purchases replacement females. The family prefers to buy first-calf heifers that are bred back safe in calf.

All about family

Merv and his late wife, Dorothy, have two sons, Mike and Bill, and a daughter, Kathy.

Growing up, all three children played an integral part in the ranch. Along with the commercial cow herd, the family also raised Suffolk lambs.

At 86 years of age, Merv is letting his family take a lead in the day-to-day activities on the ranch. Son Mike, daughter and son-in-law Kathy and Gino Lucchesi, and grandson Clay Lucchesi play an active role in the ranch today.

“If you can do it, why wait till you’re dead,” Merv says about passing on the ranch to the next generation. “I’m going to let them make mistakes while I’m alive,” he

jokes. “I keep telling my grandkids I’m going to sell this place. They say, ‘no way;’ they want it for their kids someday.”

Merv has five grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren who are all learning the value of being raised on a ranch. He says there’s no better way to raise kids than on a ranch. He especially enjoyed teaching his grandchildren to drive around the ranch in the family’s jeep.

“If environmentalists will leave us alone, we’ll be ranching for a few more years,” Merv says with determination. **HW**



When purchasing herd bulls, Merv looks for good Hereford bulls that are thick and long.