

The Right Kind

Hereford genetics are valuable to Southern cattlemen's peace of mind and bottom line.

by Sara Gugelmeyer



There's no doubt Florida and the Gulf Coast are a harsh environment for beef cattle. It's hot. It's humid. It's extremely hot and humid at least half of the year, unlike any other region in the U.S. But like the rest of the country, it's an area where the right Hereford genetics can and do thrive.

University of Florida Associate Professor of Beef Cattle Management Todd Thrift explains it well: "It's been this way for 100 years. We deal with a hot, humid climate. By what they call the temperature humidity index, we are at extreme danger for livestock a good six months out of the year."

He adds that in this sort of extreme environment, cows with some level of *Bos indicus* influence will do better in a commercial operation, but the rest of that

equation equals out nicely with Hereford added in.

The Cadillac of females

"There is no question about that," Thrift says. "There's 70-plus years of research that says the Hereford-Brahman F1 cross is the kind. She is certainly the Cadillac of females."

E.L. Strickland would agree. He has been in the cattle business for 36 years on his Circle Square Ranch near Ocala, Fla., and he won't have anything but a Hereford-Brahman cross cow on the place. He does maintain a purebred herd of about 200 head of Herefords to breed to Brahman bulls for replacement females, along with a small herd of purebred Brahmans to produce those bulls. But the majority of his 1,200 head of cattle are Hereford-Brahman cross cows, which are mated to Hereford

bulls from Debter Hereford Farms, Horton, Ala.

From a lifetime of experience, Strickland knows what works and what doesn't. He says, the Hereford-Brahman cross is ideal for this location. "Heat, rain, dry weather, they can handle all of it," he says. "They're durable and easy to raise."

And easy to sell, too. "The Braford female is probably the most popular in Florida and the Gulf Coast because of their heat tolerance and durability," Strickland says.

He keeps many of the females he raises but the rest sell quickly, he says. "I don't have to worry about marketing females, people come to me, hunting them. I have to tell them, first-come, first-serve."

Strickland says he has no trouble selling the steers either; they usually sell to the same order buyer that they have for years and years. "I'll put them up against any black calves," he says.

Father-son duo Carl and Shane Askins operate C Bar A ranch near Sarasota, Fla., and echo Strickland's appreciation of Herefords. On their roughly 500 head of commercial crossbred cows, Hereford and Braford bulls are used — just as they have been for decades. In fact, Carl says he's been buying bulls from Jonny Harris of Screven, Ga., since 1960 and has been so happy with them he's never shopped anywhere else since.

The Askinses' cow herd is comprised of a Hereford-Brahman cross cow as well. They raise all their own replacements, hand-picking each heifer for

the right mix of the two breeds. Carl says he has found if he can keep "a little ear," the cows will withstand the heat better but he appreciates the qualities the Hereford genetics bring to the cross as well, saying, "They're always gentle."

Advantage in docility

Carl adds that he had a purebred Brahman bull once, "They're hard to find with a good temperament, not saying you can't, but it's hard. With these Hereford bulls I can be in the pen with the cattle and walk through them. My old saying is, 'If you breed an idiot, you're going to get an idiot. If you breed to an idiot bull you're going to get an idiot calf. So when you've got something that's pretty gentle you save their offspring, you've got a pretty good chance of them being gentle."

"I bought a herd of cows one time and it had a Brangus in it. When she got about 6 years old, she got rank and that was enough for me."

Although Carl is 69 years old, he helps other cattlemen once in a while. He says, "I used to do a lot more day work. They've got all Angus and Brangus bulls and it seems like every time a Brangus bull gets 5 or 6 years old they get an attitude and I don't like their attitude."

Sam Albritton raises cattle near Ocala, Fla., in addition to working for Helena Chemical. He runs Hereford and Angus bulls in a two-breed rotation on Brahman-cross cows, so he especially appreciates Herefords for their docility.

"I've always liked Hereford bulls," Albritton says. "I like their temperament; I like the ability to drive them."



Thrift describes the Hereford-Brahman F1 as the "Cadillac of females."

Albritton says most of his cattle are quarter-Brahman, and he breeds Hereford bulls to the Brahman-Angus crosses and Angus bulls to the Brahman-Hereford crosses. He markets his cattle through Superior Livestock Auction by forward contract.

Adding to his knowledge of the bull-buying marketplace, Albritton is co-chairman of the Ocala Graded Bull Sale — the oldest of its kind in the nation. The sale markets all breeds of bulls, Hereford included.

He says, “I think Herefords are underrated. As far as calf-wise, I can show you some 700-lb. calves right now from Hereford bulls. And the price of the calves hasn’t hurt us a bit. Using Hereford bulls, I am selling as good or better than anyone else on Superior. And a Hereford bull won’t dig holes at your gate either.”

Likewise, Strickland doesn’t hesitate when saying his calves bring just as much or more as a black-hided calf with a lot less frustration. “We used to use Angus bulls on our heifers and I got so aggravated I got rid of them. I don’t like black bulls, won’t let one on the place. They are hole digging, fence tearing up, good for nothings.”

Choose Hereford for profitability

Despite those flaws, some are still using Angus, and Thrift explains that many producers in Florida and the Gulf Coast have Angus-cross cows. That’s part of the reason why now, more than ever, is the time for Hereford.

“I think there’s a heck of a place here for Hereford bulls,” Thrift says. “We’ve got a lot of Brangus kind of cows and on top of them, an excellent choice in my opinion is a Hereford bull. Right now, many of those are being bred to Charolais bulls for a terminal cross, or Angus bulls chasing carcass genetics.”

Thrift says, in his opinion, the push toward Angus because of carcass quality doesn’t make sense as far as profitability is concerned.

“We’ve worked against Mother Nature pretty hard trying to fit the end product. Cow traits have been forgotten. I am not saying ignore the end product. But I’ve got to have a cow that functions in my environment, and has a calf every year — which means crossbred. There are too many advantages to her. Those are the really important traits that drive profitability, not whether we get 60 or 70% Choice. If you do the math on that, the Choice-Select spread has to be large — over \$20 a hundredweight — for it to really make much of a difference. And most of the producers don’t retain ownership on cattle; they sell at weaning.”

Albritton, Strickland, Carl Askins and Thrift all agree that there needs to be more purebred Hereford breeders in the South to help satisfy the need for those genetics. But, Thrift admits that Florida has never been a seedstock-producing state because of its harsh climate.

“As you go north animals get larger, they grow better, because of better forages, better soils. As you go south things get smaller. To adapt to this hot, humid climate, cattle need to be a little more moderate in size.”

On that note, he says it’s important to consider climate when purchasing cattle to bring to the South. “They need to be slick haired, not monsters in terms of size, with acceptable birth weights, and need to have a little bit of muscle to them. They need to be able to tolerate this heat and humidity.”

Obviously, a bull bred and raised in Montana might have a harder time acclimating to the conditions in Florida, but it helps that the majority of the cows in the area are bred to calve in the fall.

Strickland says, “Our breeding season is February to June 1. We do our breeding in the wintertime so heat is no problem for bulls, then they rest all summer. During the hot months, all they have to do is lay in the shade and take it easy.”



Hereford-sired Brahman-cross calves like these are highly marketable.

It’s critical that if it does get warm, the bulls are tolerant enough to get the cows bred. “A lot of guys who turn out Angus bulls will have to follow-up with another breed after he gets heat stressed and quits working,” Thrift says.

Carl Askins says in all his years of using Hereford bulls and raising Hereford-cross cattle, he’s never lost a cow to heat. He’s lost some to alligators, sure, but not heat stress.

Although Thrift admits that hair length probably has more to do with heat tolerance than hair color, he says, in his opinion, especially where shade is scarce, a black-hided cow, calf or bull is more likely to get stressed.

That’s part of the reason why, again, Thrift says he wishes more F1 Hereford-Brahman crosses could be produced in his area. But, unfortunately, there is not a large amount of Hereford cows to use Brahman bulls on and the majority of the Brahman cows are being mated to Brahman bulls to produce purebreds.

Much-needed heterosis

All considered, Thrift says on a large scale, he sees great opportunity for Hereford bulls in the South because there are

many three-quarter Angus, one-quarter Brahman crosses needing a shot of heterosis: “I see a lot of guys straight breeding Brangus here and I think there’s a lot of merit in putting a Hereford bull on that cross.”

“Put a Hereford bull on those Brangus cows and you’ve got great options for replacement females. You can keep them or sell them, maybe to a market that needs a little less ear. That makes a really good cow. As this market builds and we see more of a value put on replacement heifers instead of steers, the females out of a Hereford-Brangus cross, those super baldies, are out of this world.”

And for those who haven’t gone black, there is a super market for the Cadillac of Southern cows, the Hereford-Brahman cross. Strickland has been producing them for decades, and his market has never been better. “I’ve been using Herefords the whole time,” he says. “I am not wishy-washy. And my female demand is great.” **HW**



Slick-haired, quality Hereford bulls work great in the South.