



These black baldie calves exemplify the type of commercial animals the MK Ranch raises.

Cattle That Make Sense

On the MK Ranch, they may be raising different cattle than they were 50 years ago, but there is no doubt they've stuck to their Hereford roots.

story by **Katrina Huffstutler**, photos by **Wade Perks**

When the late Dr. Marvin Knight purchased acreage in Cooke County in 1959, he did so with the intention of raising Hereford cattle.

An orthopedic surgeon who served as the team doctor for the Dallas Cowboys during the Landry era, Knight never considered raising anything else on his newly-acquired property.

"He loved Herefords. That's all he ever wanted to raise," says Marvin's son, Dr. Walter Knight, who now owns the ranch located

near Era, Texas, with his sister, Betty Knight Taylor.

The elder Knight practiced careful genetic selection from the beginning. The initial herd was based on Anxiety 4th bloodlines and soon included Colorado Domino and Line 1 influences. He studied and followed solid management practices, which led to larger, more efficient cattle that remained docile and easy to handle.

He hosted many production sales in an on-site facility and saw

great success. But, by the mid-1980s, Knight's health and a changing cattle industry dictated a new direction for the operation. The herd was shifted from purebred to the primarily commercial operation it is today, where the goal is to produce top breeding stock for commercial cattlemen.

Today's herd of about 150 cows is broken into two groups and two corresponding calving seasons — purebred Hereford and Brangus calves are born in the fall and crossbreds (crossed both ways) are born in the spring.

Walter and Betty believe they've adapted with time — done what they needed to keep the ranch profitable so it'll still bear the MK name generations to come — without getting away from the breed their father loved.

They also believe they are using Herefords to produce cows that will work for everyone. They believe these Hereford-Brangus black baldies offer hybrid vigor without sacrificing the gentility for which Herefords are known and enough frame size to satisfy the feeder (but not so much that feed efficiency is reduced in the cow herd). They say they have found a balance between enough ear to introduce the benefits of heterosis yet not so much that it diminishes cold tolerance or handling ease.

"These kinds of cattle just make sense," Walter says.

Dale Bell, who has worked as manager of the MK Ranch for about two years, agrees.

"These cattle are for those guys who want to make a living out of it. They're very rancher-oriented. I think these baldies are a pretty universal type of cattle for a lot of different people, whether they're in the feeder cattle market or the replacement cattle market. And [focusing on selling replacement heifers], we try to raise the kind of females that we wouldn't mind keeping for cows ourselves. There sure isn't any use keeping a bunch of average kind of animals around," he says, matter-of-factly.

Putting more in to get more out Animal health is a top priority at the MK Ranch.

Dale says the cattle are on a Bovi-Shield GOLD program, all calves are vaccinated at weaning and all heifers are vaccinated before breeding. He says they also rotate out deworming products and fly control products for maximum efficiency.

Walter adds that, thanks to hearing the woes of a fellow rancher who suffered substantial losses due to an outbreak of trichomoniasis (trich), he makes sure they do everything they can

to keep the costly venereal disease out of their herd.

He says they make an effort to trich test their bulls yearly and always test any bulls they suspect may have gotten out or been exposed to outside cattle.

In addition to preventing reproductive losses caused from disease, cattle on the MK Ranch are managed to maximize productivity. All females are bred to a low-birth-weight Angus bull for their first calf, and then matched with a complementing Hereford or Brangus bull. They also keep the cow-to-bull ratio low.

"On our commercial cows, we use a bull to no more than 25 cows. And, generally, it is 20 or less," Walter says.

"We keep some extra bulls around and we think that gives us the ability to tighten up our calving season. It means we spend a little more on bulls, but it helps us keep our conception rate up, and prevents us from getting in trouble if a bull gets injured or something."

Betty says another important component of their management program is careful record keeping.

"Pasture movement, bull exposure dates, birth dates, and weaning weights are all recorded," she explains. "We use this data extensively to influence our breeding and culling decisions."

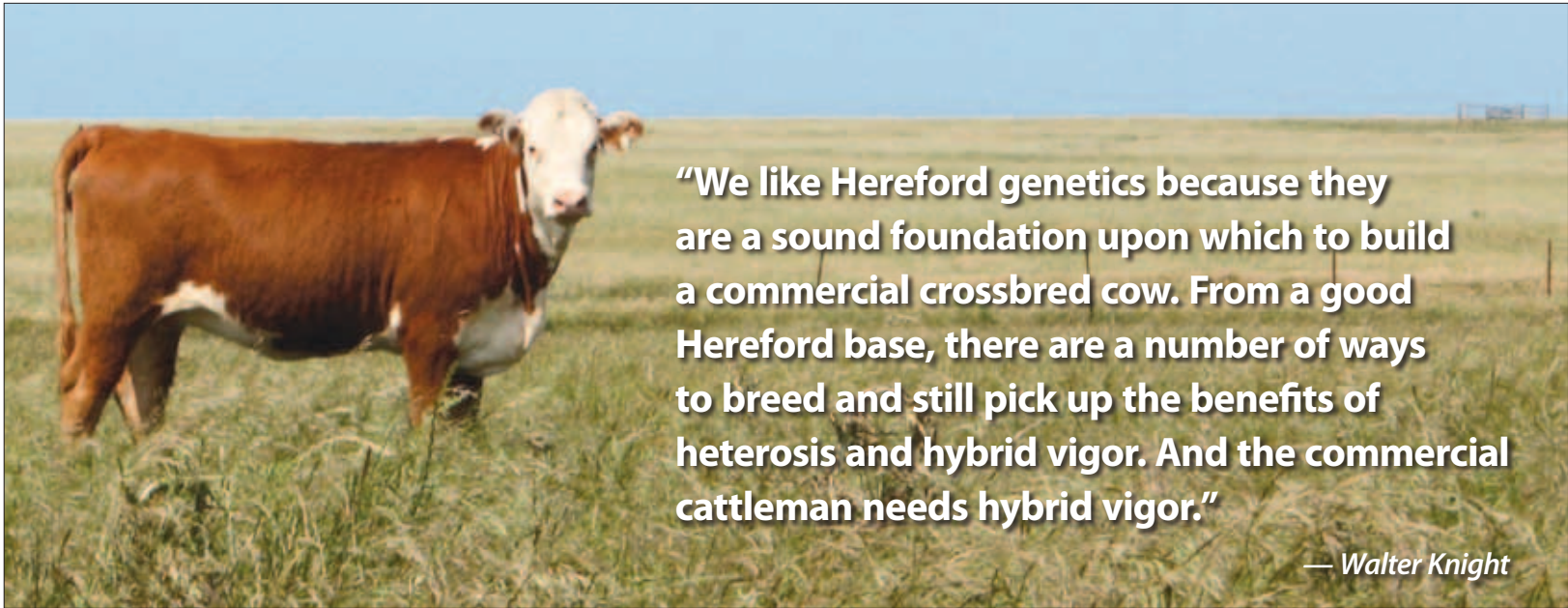
She adds the ranch is Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certified and all work is performed with BQA principles in mind.

"All vaccination dates are noted by the individual animal, so any calves missing or too young can be vaccinated at a later date. These records are very instrumental in helping us to continually improve our herd and the quality of our product," she says.

The intensive management and persistence have paid off. Dale reports that in 2009 they had almost a 95% conception rate, breeding only through natural service.

Walter is quick to credit Dale for helping the ranch remain profitable.

"Dale is a great manager and is helping us make some money," he says. "I'd like to see the cattle operation be the major support of this ranch. We're trying to build in enough profit into the cattle operation so they can. But, to do that, we have to be able to create a brand and create a demand for the premium cattle that they are. That's the only way we can get a premium price for them. And that's what Dale is really helping us do."



“We like Hereford genetics because they are a sound foundation upon which to build a commercial crossbred cow. From a good Hereford base, there are a number of ways to breed and still pick up the benefits of heterosis and hybrid vigor. And the commercial cattleman needs hybrid vigor.”

— Walter Knight

Diversification includes wildlife, radio tower

Until the cattle become the primary breadwinners on the ranch, the Knights have other entities on the property that help keep the ranch profitable.

Thanks to a habitat deer and turkeys covet, hunting rights contribute to the cash flow on the MK Ranch. Walter participates in Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s Game Management Program and credits the program to being able to better manage deer and cattle together successfully.

“We’ve found that we don’t really have much of a problem as long as we don’t go too far in one direction,” Walter says. “And as long as we don’t overgraze the cattle, the deer have plenty of habitat.”

He credits the responsible hunters who lease hunting rights every year to helping him better manage the wildlife. He adds that they also help monitor poachers by serving as extra sets of eyes on the land. He requires them to turn in all of their reports to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and strictly follow all of the agency’s guidelines.

“They help let us know what our harvest should be each year, especially with the deer, so it’s a beneficial relationship,” Walter says.

Texas’ tallest structure (coming in at 2,000 feet) also contributes to the ranch’s profitability — not to mention its uniqueness.

Walter explains the massive tower, “We leased space in the back to an FM radio station and they built a tower out here. They pay us

a lease on that space each month, helping out with cash flow.

“They actually have been a very good partner because they respected the land and they respected the fact that we didn’t want any trees destroyed. We didn’t want any marked changes in the land or wildlife habitat or anything. They really have a very small footprint. I mean, that thing is way up in the air but on the ground it doesn’t take up much space at all.”

The most important part

All enterprises aside, there is no question what aspect of ranching is most important to Walter and his family — good stewardship.

“For me, being a good land steward is probably the most important part of this. I think that is something that often gets overlooked,” Walter says.

He says on the MK Ranch, they work hard to prevent erosion.

“We try to refrain from any tillage procedures or anything

that is going to cause significant erosion to the land. We also try to control the amount of woody vegetation on the land — a lot of that is done with mowing. We do some spraying, but we find mowing works pretty well. We do some spraying, but we find mowing works pretty well. It’s more labor intensive since it requires repeated trips, but it is also more natural. We use some chemicals, but we don’t like to use them when it isn’t necessary. Other than that, we just try to prevent overgrazing and manage the land for wildlife species as well as cattle. That’s really what our program is all about,” he says.

Walter wants to see the next generation involved in the MK Ranch but knows there is more involved than keeping the ground in good condition.

“You know, that is always the hard thing — being able to keep the ranch in the family and keep it going. It’s hard not only from the estate tax side, but it’s also hard just to get the interest. There are so many opportunities for young folks in the cities and various places; there is a lot of competition for what they are interested in,” he says.

That next generation is still young, but with lots of hard work, good cattle and solid stewardship practices, Walter and Betty hope the legacy of their father and the MK Ranch lives on. **HW**

Editor’s Note: Reprint courtesy of The Cattleman magazine.



Dale Bell, left, and Dr. Walter Knight, right, stand in front of the 9-acre, horseshoe-shaped lake on the MK Ranch. The lake, which serves as a conservation lake for flood control purposes, also provides good fishing and water for cattle and wildlife.