

PROVEN

The Gfeller family has spent decades selecting for profitable genetics and is reaping the rewards.

by *Sara Gugelmeyer*

Dick Gfeller is 84 years young and still cares for his cattle almost completely on his own. It's nothing new to him; he's been raising horned Hereford cattle near Junction City, Kan., for 60 years. Now his son owns the larger portion of Gfeller Herefords, but the goal is still the same — continually improve the cattle through careful selection.

Raising their own

Dick Gfeller originally purchased 18 bred heifers from the Beck brothers in Parkerville, Kan., in 1957. Never have any other females been purchased, but the herd has grown to about 100 registered cows and 200 commercial cows. Dick's son, Kenny, got his start in the business right out of high school, and now he and his wife, Debby, own the majority of the cows.

It was 1974, and although his dad had given him 10 cows for a graduation present, Kenny then purchased all of his dad's heifer

calves that year to start his own herd with the family's genetics.

The Gfellers operate a nearly closed herd, raising bulls in the registered herd to use in the commercial herd and only purchasing when an outcross is needed.

"In the last 26 years, we've only bought six outside bulls," Kenny explains. "We raise our own."

About half of the registered cows are fall-calving — those are Dick's — and the rest calve in the spring. All the commercial calves are spring-born, usually in March and April, and are weaned in October or November.

After weaning, the calves are turned out on winter pasture and supplemented with alfalfa. Once the grass greens up, the yearling heifers and steers run together and are moved to summer range until they go to Gfeller's feedlot in August or September. The goal is to feed them for about 150 days, and then they are harvested at National

Beef in Dodge City for the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®) program.

Commitment to data

Although recording data is time consuming, every animal on the operation has a unique number so data can be collected on each. It starts at birth, when a weight tape is used for an approximate birth weight.

"My dad used to identify calves at birth either small, medium or large," Kenny explains. "The tape is a little more accurate. We just want to keep that birth weight moderate."

Also at birth the calf is tagged and caustic paste is applied to the horn buds. The paper trail has begun for each individual calf. It continues at weaning when the calves are run through the scale chute, and a weaning weight is recorded.

The calves are worked again coming off summer grass prior to going into the feedlot. They receive



an implant and an electronic tag for the Hereford Verified program. They are also weighed individually again, and this weight is used when Kenny figures his breakeven on the feedlot phase.

“That way I know what they gain, and what I could have sold them for at that time,” Kenny says. “I will take into account the cost of feed, even the hay I raised myself I put a value on what I could have sold it for, and figure if I am making any money feeding them.”

His heifers will average 3.5 lb. and the steers 4 lb. of gain per day in the feedlot phase. That breakdown is possible because of the individual data, as steers and heifers are all fed together.

While data collection has helped the Gfellers to improve other traits too, the carcass quality is where the change is most apparent. Because of the electronic ID system through Hereford Verified, the Gfellers will get detailed carcass data on each calf from National Beef.

For comparison, Kenny uses data from 1999, 2008 and 2016.

1999 – 33% Choice, 33% yield grade (YG) 1 & 2, no ribeye data

2008 – 54% Choice, 38% YG 1 & 2, 12.5 ribeye area (REA) average

2016 – 90% Choice and a few Prime, 60% YG 1 & 2, 13.8 REA average

Kenny notes, those data include heifers (the lower end mostly, since the best are kept for replacements) and steers. He credits the improvement, in part, by carefully selecting top quality bulls when they do buy outcross sires. They’ve purchased from Ochs Bros., Gunnison, Colo.; Ridder Hereford Ranch, Callaway, Neb.; and Van Newkirk Herefords, Oshkosh, Neb. They’ve used data received through the Hereford Verified program since its inception in 1999 to make critical culling and breeding decisions based on carcass quality.

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Kenny handles each calf at birth — measuring for weight, tagging and applying caustic paste to the horn buds.



Gfellers raise their own bulls and manage them carefully so they can do their job.



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— *Kenny Gfeller*

There’s no way they could have made that progress without the data or if calves were sold at weaning, Kenny says.

American Hereford Association Director of Commercial Programs Trey Befort commends the Gfeller family for its commitment to data-driven selection all the way through the feedlot phase.

“I realize it isn’t always feasible, but I would encourage more producers to follow the example of the Gfellers and finish a group of their own cattle,” Befort says. “What a great way to see just how your cattle perform and identify strengths and weaknesses in your genetics.”

Plus, it’s been profitable for the Gfellers. Although all the figuring isn’t complete yet, Kenny estimates he will have made about \$500 a head in 2017 just by feeding his calves out because of dismal feeder calf prices in the fall of 2016.

The improvement in marketability has mirrored his improved genetics, Kenny says. It used to be he struggled to get a

buyer to come to look at the cattle because he’s not a big commercial yard. Now, through his established relationship with National Beef and the Gfellers’ reputation for good-grading cattle, the sale involves a phone call to discuss the price and shipping date. The buyer no longer even needs to come to look at the cattle because of their reputation for grading.

Even better, there is little haggling over the market price because the buyer gives him what’s called the “practical top of the week” price.

“I am not a huge feedlot, so before, if I didn’t get called at the exact right time, I missed my chance,” Kenny says. “I am busy here and don’t have time to mess around with the markets so when all the feedlots get their cattle sold I take the practical top of the week. I know we’re getting a good price for them.”

While some people prefer to sell on a grid pricing system, Kenny explains the live price sale

has worked well; they figure a 2% shrink, and National Beef arranges and pays for all the trucking.

None of the Gfellers cattle go to the sale barn. The top end of the heifers is retained for replacements while the others are fed, and open and old cattle are sold for beef, as well. They do sell a few bulls locally after they decide how many they will need for their own use. Kenny points out they aren’t overfed, though; they are allowed to grow at their own rate.

Bulls on the ranch are managed carefully, and while the cows aren’t split into single-sire pastures, Kenny keeps brothers together so all the calves in each pasture are from the same paternal bloodline.

The difference in data-driven selection has also helped in other traits. It’s important to keep labor at a minimum because it’s just Dick, Kenny and Debby who work on the operation now. Kenny and Debby’s two children, Josh and Jamie (Breeders), are grown, and while Josh lives nearby and can help when necessary, he isn’t actively involved. Kenny’s mother, Earlene, was a big part of the operation, especially with the extensive bookkeeping, but she passed in December 2015.

Through careful selection, the Gfellers have reduced assisted births, which makes things easier on everyone during calving season.

“How are you going to improve your cow herd if you don’t know how they are doing,” Kenny asks. “With the data, you can really look at the cows and look at the bulls and figure it out.”

Befort adds, “The Gfeller family is a unique operation in which they are involved throughout every part of production. By tracking performance from start to finish, the Gfellers have been able to see their strong points and where they need to make adjustments. It is always exciting to see the high performance of the Gfeller cattle year after year — such a great testament to the Hereford breed and proof of the ability for Hereford cattle to perform.” **HW**