

Always Improving

With an entrepreneurial spirit and a dedication to data-driven selection, the Hunt family has found great success in the Hereford business and beyond.

by *Sara Gugelmeyer*

Growing beef. It's what they do. Even though Whitey and Weyman Hunt of Innisfail Farm in Madison, Ga., are in the seedstock business, they know all cattle eventually end up on someone's plate.

"We're in the Hereford business; our goal is to be profitable," Weyman says. "I am trying to make cattle that will work in a commercial setting and perform on the rail. They need to make a living out there, get bred back and be problem free. But ultimately, we are all in the beef business. We want to produce the best product we can, and that means a good eating experience. We are trying to grow the best dinner."

About 40 years ago, Whitey Hunt started the Hereford operation at Innisfail Farm and



encouraged young Weyman to show cattle.

"We really didn't know what we were doing then, but we had a good time," Weyman says.

Weyman studied animal science at the University of Georgia and judged meats and then did an internship at Pratt Feeders in Pratt, Kan., before returning to the family operation in 1999. Together Whitey and Weyman have grown the herd to about 180 females. They use artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) extensively with the help of manager Braden Roach. Mainly through private treaty, they market about 35 bulls and 70 bred females a year.



Weyman admits his area presents a challenge because there are not a lot of big commercial producers. “Most of our bull customers come to us looking for a crossbreeding option,” he says. “I think our bulls are doing a good job and present a good value.”

American Hereford Association Director of Seedstock Marketing Joe Rickabaugh commends the Hunts for the cattle they are producing.

“Innisfail Farm is a Hereford operation that pushes the envelope and is data driven,” Rickabaugh says. “They strive to produce cattle that have superior EPD (expected progeny differences) profiles and work for their customers.”

Because of the farm’s focus on carcass quality, more and more of its genetics are sought outside Georgia and even the Southeast. Because of their excellent carcass quality, embryos out of the Hunts’ top donor cows are in demand.

Dedication

Weyman admits that improving herd-wide carcass quality hasn’t happened overnight. He and his father have been carefully selecting to improve carcass traits for about 25 years.

“It slowly but surely builds on itself,” Weyman says. “The longer you do it the more of a base you build in those cattle and now we’re steadily improving each year.”

Weyman points out that they focus on marbling rather than ribeye area.

“Most of our genetics are going into crossbred situations so typically muscle is not an issue. Most people don’t want to sit down and eat a 17-inch ribeye. More like a 10- or 12-inch ribeye is what people are looking for. Typically ribeye size is not the limiting factor — it’s marbling.”



A local-grown restaurant and grocery, Farmview Market at Madison, Ga., offers Innisfail Farm beef.

Weyman continues, “Everyone wants black cattle because of the eating experience, quality and marbling. Right now I feel like if there’s a place the Hereford breed could improve it’s in marbling.”

There’s been more carcass emphasis by those in the commercial industry the last few years, Weyman points out.

“For a long time, I felt like we were treading water; customers weren’t real interested in carcass,” he says. “But now we’re shipping embryos all over the country on our top-end carcass cows.”

He attributes that demand to the rise of Hereford genetics in general.

“When Angus had genetic trouble, people turned to Hereford,” Weyman says. “Those Hereford bulls worked really good for them and now there’s more and more demand for these Hereford bulls if the resulting calves will still have adequate marbling.”

Environmental challenges

Raising cattle in the Southeast has presented new challenges as of late. Weyman says 2016 was incredibly dry. Innisfail Farm has beautiful rolling hills of Bermuda and fescue grass. However, the drought forced the Hunts to feed three times more hay than normal during 2016, and the grass may have been permanently damaged.

“We tried to isolate those cattle as much as we could and sacrifice certain pastures, but we were limited with what we could do,” Weyman says. “Our cattle were essentially drylotted from July to December of last year without any rain.”

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF INNISFAIL FARM



With careful selection, the Hunts have continually improved their product.

Typically, the area receives 50 to 55 inches of annual rainfall. Even in wet years, though, Weyman says the native Kentucky 31 fescue grass can cause problems.

“It’s not good for cattle grazing,” he says. “It has negative effects like elevating their body temperature and cattle don’t do as well on it.”

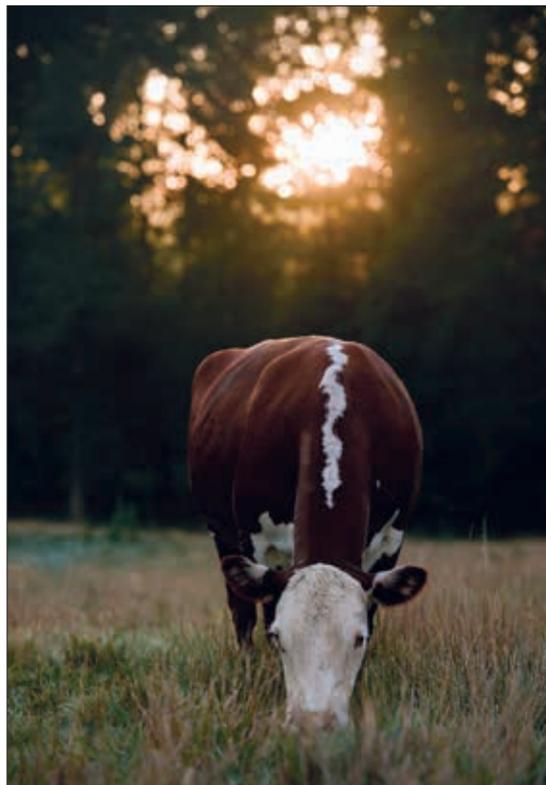
For that reason, Innisfail Farm pastures are seeded with MaxQ grass, a variety of fescue developed to improve livestock performance and to reduce the side effects of traditional fescue.

Despite these challenges, Hereford cattle thrive in the area, Weyman says.

“We raise cattle that do well here. They shed off quickly and are real feed efficient. That’s what Herefords are good at. We don’t stock real heavy and typically don’t have to supplement besides a little protein in the winter.”

Diversified

Like many Hereford families, the Hunts enjoy spending time together at cattle shows. Weyman and his wife, Ashley, have three sons, Dru, 14;



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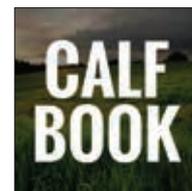
Seager, 12; and Win, 6. They will attend their first Junior National Hereford Expo in 2017 as a family, and Weyman is thrilled to involve his boys in the business.

“We are having a good time and learning a lot,” he says.

What they learn managing and showing cattle goes hand-in-hand with the family’s other business — Godfrey’s Feed. Godfrey’s Feed has been in Weyman’s family since the 1870s, originally as a cotton warehouse. Now, it’s a state-of-the-art feedmill and seed supplier that is competitively priced but offers personalized service and custom blends for small producers.

“The feed business has always been good to us,” Weyman says. “And the herd of cattle has given us almost like a research and development farm where we get hands-on experience with the products we sell. I am also at the shows with those who use our products and see what others are feeding.”

Ever the entrepreneur, last year Weyman added a new business to his already busy life — Calf Book, a calf recordkeeping app for smartphones. The app was his idea, as he needed a better way to keep calf records and to be able to access them in the pasture.



Downloadable in the App Store and on Google Play, Calfbook is a \$15 annual subscription and organizes calf data by calving year. It houses information about each calf — from birth, weaning and yearling data



Godfrey's Feed, owned by Weyman (left) and Whitey Hunt, has been an integral part of the family's success for generations.

to pedigree and more — plus it allows the user to sort by any of those easily. It syncs between multiple users and downloads everything so a person can access it even without cellular service. Once it is hooked up to the computer, data can be exported to Excel or MyHerd. It even offers a 30-day free trial.

"I've been using it now for three years, but it's only been out since January 2016. We've had an 85% renewal rate, so I think it's working well for folks," Weyman says. "Most all the reviews are real positive."

Whether it's with the app, at the feedmill or in the pasture, Weyman uses his business savvy to help customers in the beef business.

Rickabaugh describes Whitey and Weyman Hunt as visionaries.

"They are always planning for the future," Rickabaugh says. "They reach for new technologies which will improve their cattle and businesses. They ask good solid questions and are dedicated and enthusiastic." **HW**



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Showing Herefords is a family affair for the Hunts.

