

Baldies in the Bighorn



Yellowhorn Farms is experiencing the value in Hereford genetics firsthand.

by *Kayla Jennings*

A river winding through a rolling landscape, with rocky hills and pines standing tall on the horizon, is the view from almost any vantage point. As U.S. Army Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer approached the Little Bighorn River in eastern Montana on a late June morning in 1876, his vantage point provided the same crystal-clear, vast view. Custer and his soldiers were set to subjugate the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians that day, but he had little foresight to realize those rolling hills would soon mark the location of his last stand. The history books reveal the outcome of that historic battle, but, needless to say, the area is much different than it was then.

Even so, the vast landscape around the river has not changed much, aside from a few small towns that now inhabit the area. Custer, Mont., is not easily seen from the blacktop; however, the grassland dotted with cattle can be seen for miles.

Amongst the many cattle, sheep or row-crop operations in the area, Yellowhorn Farms has been a mainstay for many years. Scott and Annett Ruff own and operate a commercial cow-calf operation in conjunction with growing malting barley, spring wheat, corn and alfalfa crops. All of their malting barley is grown for the nearby Coors grain elevator. Because malting barley is a cool season crop intended for arid climates, it thrives in the dry environments in Montana, Idaho and Colorado. The Ruffs' spring wheat and corn are reserved for silage to feed their cattle each year. Additionally, their alfalfa is grown primarily for their cow herd — selling some from time to time.

Between all of their leased and owned land, the operation spans 4,800 acres — 1,200 of which are irrigated. Along with their trusty dog, Clyde, the Ruffs run roughly 365 Black and Red Angus cows with 65 retained baldy females from past calf crops. Calving takes place exclusively in the spring, and steer calves are sold at weaning each November through marketing consultant Scotty Anderson. They retain some females and sell the others private treaty or through Anderson.



Using Hereford genetics in its Angus-based cow operation propelled the profitability of Yellowhorn Farms dramatically.

The Ruffs are no rookies to the agriculture business. Both Scott and Annett's families farmed and raised cattle in the area since approximately 1927 — four and five generations back. In fact, they were recently able to purchase back some of the land where Annett grew up. They hope the family business will continue to a sixth generation with their two sons and grandkids — Brady and Brenna Ruff with their children, Teagen and Tryan; and Troy and Torie Ruff with their expected son in December, Kason.

"We have been in agriculture forever," Scott says. "We love the lifestyle. My wife works fulltime out here with me, and I could not do it without her. I think we make a good team."

While bliss to many may be relaxing on a sandy beach in a faraway place, the Ruffs have a different idea of paradise. "To look out and see that green grass with those cows out there is what it is all about," Scott says.

Game changer

For the last eight or nine years, the view from any vantage point also includes

baldy calves grazing the rolling countryside. The Ruffs have always had Angus-based cows, but they say the introduction of Hereford bulls has elevated their program in a number of ways. Since Scott's family raised some registered Herefords when he was growing up, in addition to their sugar beet farm, he was somewhat familiar with Herefords going in.

One of the main attractions to the breed at first was docility. "We aren't one of the big cowboy ranches," Scott explains. "We do a lot of stuff on foot because it is the way our set up works, so they have to be gentle." Having cattle greet them at the gate, rather than shy away, is a small detail that goes a long way in making their operation run more efficiently.

Incorporating Hereford genetics into their herd starts with selecting reliable bulls. Scott and Annett purchase their bulls solely through Mohican West in Laurel, Mont. Structure, disposition and the ability to pass maternal and growth traits to their offspring dictate their selection. Because some pastures may have only one bull per 20 cows, it is imperative the bulls are structurally and reproductively sound.

Once bulls arrive at Yellowhorn Farms, the Ruffs utilize a vaccination protocol to keep bulls healthy. Additionally, they have a veterinarian visit for semen testing yearly.

"It is a little bit expensive, but you get them in to take a good look at them," Scott explains. "The vet gets a good look at them, too, and you are making sure they are reproductively sound." However, nutrition and vaccination protocol is not reserved for just the bulls. Immunization and nutrition are viewed as an insurance policy for the herd.

"We try to keep our cattle healthy," Scott explains. "You have got to give that calf every opportunity to have a healthy immune system because you can pick out the calves that had been sick when you go to wean that fall."

In 2017-18, Montana experienced one of the toughest winters it had seen in years. In fact, many cattlemen lost a bulk of their calf crop because of extreme temperatures, snowstorms and resulting illnesses. Fortunately, the Ruffs' forward thinking and focus on proper management kept the Yellowhorn cattle in good shape.

"We always budget 1,200 hay bales, 500 straw bales and about 85 acres of corn silage to get through winter," Annett says. Numerous producers ran out of feed and straw completely. While the Ruffs did not run out of feed or straw for bedding, they had different concerns of their own.

As storms cause cattle to lie down for hours at a time, calves will often get up afterward and tank up on milk — putting them at risk for overeating. "We are really conscious about how we feed our cows for that reason," Scott says. They switch from alfalfa to corn silage during calving because it brings down the richness of the milk slightly, so calves are at a lower risk of overeating.

Their management practices and selection protocol in tandem have paid dividends in the end. Since their first Hereford bull, they have experienced the direct benefits of hybrid vigor. "When you crossbreed like that [with a Hereford bull] they weigh about 75 lb. more per calf," Annett notes.

Scott adds, "Hereford bulls also have a lot of longevity to them compared to some other breeds. They perform and do what we need them to do for us."

Yellowhorn Farms breeds everything natural service and leaves the bulls in with its females 50 to 55 days. Due to the Ruffs' diligence in maintaining bulls, they average 75 percent conception on the first cycle.

The first calf will hit the ground in early March. "But we wean a 650-lb steer calf the first of November," Scott says, "And to start calving that late in March and achieve that weight when we wean is huge."

At the end of the day, the disposition and growth potential of Hereford bulls is critical to the operation's success. "I love the Hereford bull," Scott says. "That is where it is all at for me. That is what made these cows."

Belief in the baldy

While the Ruffs still have some Black and Red Angus cows, they will actually be 100 percent baldy females within the next few years. They used to sell all female calves at weaning with their steer calves until they saw the value in the genetic makeup of a baldy female.

"In the past, we have sent some of our baldy heifers clear to Missouri because they were going into a bred heifer program," Scott recalls. "We finally decided, why should we sell them to



Pictured (l to r) are three generations of the Ruff family: Brady, Brenna, Annett, Scott, Torie and Troy, with Tryan and Teagen in front.

someone else when we can keep them for ourselves, have a better cow and not have to worry about finding replacement females?"

Annett adds, "We keep back our baldy females because they are gentle, and they are good. Those are two huge qualities for us."

In addition to those traits, the family has observed that their baldy cows experience less dystocia at parturition and raise heavier weaned calves — resulting in fewer headaches during calving and a larger paycheck at weaning. "The calves perform better," Scott says. "I know our weaning weights have gone up since we started with baldies, and that is what it is all about. That is where the rubber meets the road."

The numbers talk when it comes to female selection. Scott and Annett are taking advantage of the genetic merit in the baldy female but not without a critical eye. This year, they kept 50 females of the 180 they had.

"A big thing for us in keeping back females is knowing their mothers because of the corresponding ear tag," Scott says. "If you were going to look for an ideal one, though, you would look for one that had pigment on her eyes and udders, and again, disposition is huge. Good phenotype with body capacity is also critical."

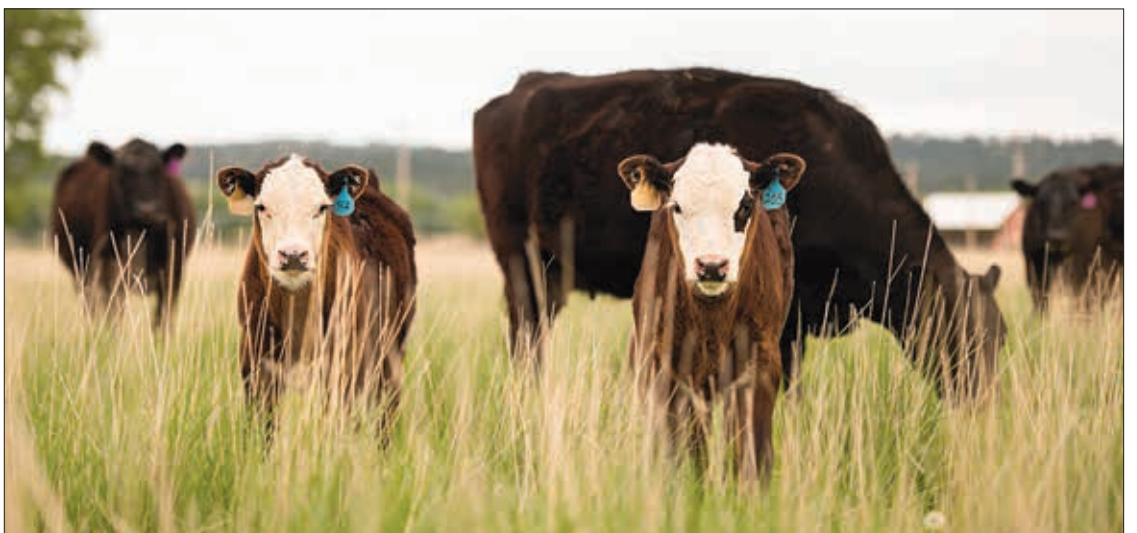
By holding true to those criteria and using the pedigree to determine the value of their females, the Ruffs are experiencing more success than ever. Looking ahead, they hope to continue growing the cow herd and taking advantage of Hereford genetics across the board.

As the herd grows, there are more opportunities for their two sons and their families to help on the farm in a variety of capacities as well. "We couldn't do it if we didn't have them," Annett says. "So hopefully one day the kids will be able to move back to the farm and take it over when we are done," Scott adds.

Until then, the family will continue pursuing their passion for the livestock industry one baldy calf at a time. Although not always glamorous, the livestock lifestyle is addictive.

"This last winter was tough," Scott reflects. "And to tell you the truth, I would do it all again next year just because I love the livestock industry. I really do. It is where our passion is."

The river still winds through a rolling landscape now dotted with baldy calves, with the rocky hills and pines still standing tall on the horizon. From their vantage point, the Ruffs have a clear view of the future that lies before them. Yes, they have small battles to fight — harsh winters, sick calves and fluctuating feed reserves — but they are prepared for any challenge that could attack at either flank. From their vantage point, they see the advantage of Hereford genetics. **HW**



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