

For the Love of the Breed

Faith, family and wisdom are the rules of the game for the outgoing 2018 AHA president Kevin Schultz.

by *Diane Meyer*

With a 19-game winning streak on the line, Oakland Athletics first baseman Scott Hatteberg choked up on his bat. Just moments ago he had been summoned to replace the on-deck batter as a last resort to save the game. He wielded a couple of warm-up swings as Kansas City Royals pitcher Jason Grimsley set his feet and delivered the 1-0 pitch, a hanging slider. At the unmistakable crack of the bat, all 55,528 heads in Oakland's sold-out Coliseum followed the ball as it skyrocketed into deep right field. *Going, going ...*

Hatteberg was dubbed a "catcher who couldn't catch" after suffering a nerve injury in his throwing arm the previous season, ending his career with the Boston Red Sox and, as most believed, his career in Major League Baseball. Most catchers can't hit in their prime, let alone after an injury. Yet Hatteberg's "genotype" contradicted his "phenotype," and his batting average stats caught the eye of Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane.

Beane's data-driven approach to selecting the 2002 Oakland A's roster arguably changed the game of baseball. In fact, employing Beane's strategy, the Boston Red Sox fielded a team that went on to win the 2013 World Series. It took the major

leagues by storm, challenging the decades-old norm of scouting out the next "great one."

Ahead of the curve

What came as a shock to the baseball world was simply an affirmation of a long-standing business approach for sixth-generation Hereford breeder Kevin Schultz and his wife, Vera, of Haviland, Kan. On the land his family homesteaded in 1869, the two Kansas State University (K-State) alumni

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The fifth, sixth and seventh generations of the Schultz family (from l to r): Arnita, Ron, Vera, Kevin, Hannah and Tyler.

own and operate a diversified dryland and irrigated farming operation and a purebred cattle program. “We trust that God is guiding us in the direction we’re going,” Kevin says. “In Proverbs it is quoted, ‘Above all, get wisdom.’ Well, wisdom is data. We just have to have it.”

Capturing and applying data is the home run that turned this pioneering performance breeder into an award-winning seedstock producer. Knowing and interpreting data guides Kevin’s decision-making, both as a breeder and as the president of the American Hereford Association (AHA) Board of Directors. Along with the other fellow directors of the 2014 cohort, Jim Mickelson and Bob Thompson, Kevin has dedicated the past four years to providing service to Hereford breeders and has been committed to keeping the AHA at the forefront of the industry.

“I had the intention of helping make [the AHA] bigger and better, supporting the programs that have helped us become better,” he says. He is very proud to have been involved in the decision to adopt the new, single-step expected progeny difference (EPD) program, which he sees as “the best tool to genetically predict a young animal’s value.”

During his tenure, Kevin witnessed firsthand the progress that comes from detailed reporting, justifying his data-driven mindset. “It solidified the importance of data,” he reflects. “It solidified the breed has traits the rest of the cattle industry needs. It solidified the importance of understanding the strengths and weaknesses and addressing both.”

Over the past few years, the AHA has launched the Hereford Advantage Program, the Maternal Advantage Program and the Premium Red Baldy Program – a joint effort with the Red Angus Association of America – to capitalize on Hereford’s documented strengths. As a British breed, Hereford is unique in enhancing maternal traits like fertility and calving ease without sacrificing end-product merit and growth.

“We have to tell our story of the strengths of the breed and what we can do to contribute to a profitable cattle business,” Kevin says. “We are a viable

option with strengths that we can offer to profit all segments of the industry.”

To create a story worth sharing, he stands by whole-herd reporting, tipping his hat to the Board members and AHA staff who started the Whole Herd Total Performance Records (TPR™) program. Combined with external performance programs like the National Reference Sire Program (NRSP), the Circle A Ranch heterosis project, Harris and Simplot, the breed has identified industry-envious outliers.

“There’s no breed that has more correct data than we do,” Kevin says proudly. “In order to truly know the good ones from the bad ones, you have to report everything.”

“We have universities and research scientists asking to use our data because we’ve got the biggest, most complete, whole-herd-reporting set of data in the world,” he continues. “We have the largest, whole-herd database in the world, and that data is what’s going to help this breed identify traits to make us thrive.”

The road to the big leagues

Sandhill Farms has certainly thrived on data. Since his 4-H days, Kevin has kept his eyes and ears open while letting the numbers speak for themselves. In high school he ventured into the registered business, introducing a registered cow herd to the family’s then commercial cow-calf operation.

Kevin’s grandfather, Roy, first purchased a registered polled Hereford bull to use on the commercial cow herd in the 1940s, but it was not until Kevin finished college in 1986 that Sandhill Farms would make the transition to a predominately registered cow-calf operation.

The K-State animal science graduate started buying a few cattle from Alfalfa Lawn Farm in Kansas and Ogeechee Farms in Oklahoma, even stopping to purchase cows with Vera on the way home from their honeymoon. To help sustain the program, Kevin also incorporated corn, soybeans and wheat into the mix.



Shultz’s start in the seedstock business dates back to his high school years when he first introduced registered cattle into his family’s commercial cow-calf operation.

He is appreciative of his family's wholehearted efforts in keeping the entire outfit running smoothly. Kevin's parents, Ron and Arnita, still provide input, while the seventh generation — son, Tyler, and his wife, Hannah — is taking on more of a management role. Daughters Brooke and Courtney, who are both involved in the cattle industry with their families, still help out at the ranch from time to time.

Today, about two-thirds of the Schultz's 400-head cow herd is registered. Their spring calf crop is a product of a breeding program consisting of artificial insemination (AI), embryo transfer (ET) and proven cleanup bulls. Ron's commercial cows and Kevin's bottom-end registered cows are used for the ET recipients, as decades of selection have made the biological makeup of those cows able to withstand the region's sandy and windy environment.

"We have a goal of producing cattle that enhance the genetic value of all segments of our business. I have always felt, as a seedstock producer, we are at the very bottom of that food chain. It's our responsibility to provide genetic traits that make each segment profitable." Just as the cattle industry is sustained from the ground up, Kevin advances his operation by strengthening the bottom of the pile.

"Two things I enjoy most are selling bulls and culling our cows," Kevin says. "Our goals are to continue to make the bottom-end of our bulls better. How many bulls we end up marketing is not as important as making the quality better."

It has taken "a business lifetime" to build the quality and the demand for Sandhill Farms cattle. To identify outliers that will ensure longevity, the outfit has participated in several data-collecting programs including the NRSP and the Circle A Ranch heterosis project. Sandhill Farms has participated in the AHA TPR program from the start and has been recognized as a Gold TPR breeder on a consistent basis.

"If you know accurately how a bull is going to breed and what traits he's going to put into his progeny, then you can tell your customers and they can decide if that's the right fit for them," Kevin explains. "You have to have eye appeal and structural correctness, but the EPDs — the data — those are how we make selections."

The data delivered. In 2010 the family behind Sandhill Farms was honored as the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Seedstock Producer of the Year for showing dedication and innovation as a performance breeder. Receiving the award was a validation of their test of faith in building a performance Hereford herd during a time when the breed was not as highly



Sandhill Farms boasts seven generations of cattle producers to provide insight on the operation.

respected. Further testament to the Schultz's success and, they kid, another test of faith is their decade-old, high-ranking, spring bull sale.

"I always joke there are four important things for us to sell bulls. And it's calving ease, calving ease, calving ease and I forgot the fourth one. That is a fundamental beginning," he notes.

Planning a wedding pales in comparison to planning a bull sale if you ask Vera, who says, "If you have a preacher and two people that want to get married, you have a successful wedding. With an auction, if you just have an auctioneer and two people then you won't have a successful auction."

The family has found the tried-and-true key to marketing is selling genetics that fulfill the needs of their customers. "The best advertisement for your program is when somebody has used your product and comes back and tells their neighbors or other people," Vera upholds. "You can say all these things, but you have to back it up."

Team captain

Indeed, Sandhill Farms genetics have withstood the test of time, and Kevin's thoroughness has earned the respect of many in the industry. Just as Hatteberg was called upon in the last inning against the Royals, Kevin was asked by his peers to step up to the plate as a leader within the AHA.

"It's an honor to be on the Board and serve, and it's an honor to call the meeting to order," he reflects. "It's very humbling. There's no agenda that I had — it was just an opportunity to serve and try to improve the breed."

Kevin is confident the AHA is in great hands with the current leadership on the Board, noting, "This is a 12-person Board, and I feel their dedication and belief in the breed are just as noteworthy as anything I have to say."

As a final piece of advice to upcoming Board members, Kevin counsels, "Continue to maintain the integrity the Association has always stood by — the

integrity of open, honest records and the integrity of the staff and the Board to have the same passion for the breed I've witnessed.

"The greatest part of being on the Board is witnessing the passion and the commitment of the members and the staff to the different aspects of bettering the breed," he adds.

At the end of the day, it takes sincere and approachable leadership and input from the membership to uphold a winning record. Great leaders will stand up for their beliefs while respectfully understanding and working with those who have a different opinion.

"My passion is breeding performance cattle. Even though this is my area of interest, I greatly respect other philosophies," he says. "I hope the membership understands that I tried to advance all interests of the breed.

"The Association's job is not to say you're doing it right or wrong," Kevin explains. "The Association's job is to provide the tools so that everybody can succeed at what they have for a goal."

He notes the profit drivers for cow-calf producers, the growth sector, the packing industry and the consumer are all different, sometimes antagonistic. Regardless of individual goals, there is one goal that unites the entire industry: "We have to add value to the end product. We have to provide genetics that allow every segment to be successful and profitable," he says.

As consumers continue to demand more high-quality, choice products, the Hereford breed needs to rise to the challenge. Kevin played a role in constructing the latest AHA Strategic Plan, which is set up with the flexibility to adapt to future changes outside the breed to ensure the AHA stands strong.

What's his preferred lineup for facing upcoming challenges? Let's just say "data" would be his leadoff batter — and the cleanup.

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— Kevin Schultz

"I think who holds the data is going to be the one that holds the cards," he predicts. "In the cattle business, who holds the wisdom and the knowledge is those that hold the data."

He begs the questions, "Private industry, DNA companies, how do they affect the data? Who owns the data?" The answers

to these questions will play out in shaping the role of breed associations in the future, and Kevin upholds that the AHA needs to remain proactive in collecting and securing data from all segments of the industry.

"Right now when you send in a set of cattle out of the feedlot, the buyer of those cattle probably knows more about what they're doing than you do," he points out. "The breed associations have got to know as much of that as they can in order to help their customers or their members. Again, I think the point about us having the most accurate, whole-herd, largest database in the world is just extremely powerful and we have to protect it. We have to protect it."

The bottom of the 9th

...Gone. Hatteberg's pinch-hit, walk-off homer won the game for the 2002 Oakland A's, securing a then record-breaking, 20-game, regular-season winning streak in the American League (AL). Hatteberg delivered. The A's delivered. The data delivered.

The A's would go on to become the AL West Champions that season but succumbed to the Minnesota Twins in the division playoffs. Despite defying the odds, Beane did not consider his team triumphant. In his mind the A's had failed to win the only game that truly mattered in measuring success.

Likewise, Kevin is far from content with his cattle, noting "they're not even close" to where he aims to be. Regardless of his countless leadership roles, a

BIF Seedstock Producer of the Year recognition, and a term as the AHA Board president, in addition to now being elected to the board for the BIF, this Kansas Hereford breeder will keep mining the data, knowing there is no limit to how far it can take Sandhill Farms. Like all the great ones, the end of his term on the Board only signifies the beginning of another era he and his family will soon undertake.

After a strong seven innings, Kevin heads to the dugout as his reliever takes to the mound. The numbers don't lie — the past four years have brought growth and progress to the AHA, surely earning him a "W" in the Association's stat book. It has been a winning streak he'll never forget. **HW**



During his time as the AHA Board President, Schultz notes his passion for providing the correct tools for producers to reach their operational goals.