

# HEREFORD WORLD

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## One Cow at a Time

Mershon Cattle LLC, Buckner, Mo., did not happen by success overnight — or by chance.

by *Diane Meyer*

**W**eaning weights, yearling weights, finishing weights, harvest weights and hanging weights. DNA and expected progeny differences (EPDs) on cows. Feed efficiency data on the horizon. At first glance, this intricate system seems to describe a progressive seedstock operation. But a commercial operation? Not likely.

Enter Mershon Cattle LLC, a diversified crop and livestock operation home to 1,600 commercial cows in west-central Missouri. Owners and operators Bruce and Tracey Mershon backgrounded local calves beginning in 1993 and a decade later bred their first set of heifers via artificial insemination (AI) to build their herd on the land Bruce's great-great-grandfather, Eli Mershon, settled in 1865. Since then, they have managed the herd under an overarching mantra — ranching one cow at a time.

At surface level, this cow-calf operation retains ownership on steers to harvest, backgrounds cattle, retains heifers and sells bred heifers at special sales. But under the surface, their unique business model, extensive data collection, recordkeeping and technology keep the operation afloat.

“It’s just like the GPS in my brother’s tractors and our combines and farming one acre at a time — we have to ranch one cow at a

time,” Bruce says. “We have to look at each cow individually and make sure we’re doing the best we can with each individual animal.”

### Focus on females

Utilizing a complementary breeding system, Angus-based, crossbred cows are bred to Hereford, Simmental and Charolais sires to produce efficient, high-performing offspring. Eighty-five percent of the cows are bred AI, and Hereford, Angus and SimAngus bulls are used for cleanup.

“We’re looking for a moderate-sized female that’s docile and also has the opportunity to be fed and bred for production,” Bruce explains. “We use AI sires to bring genetics we couldn’t afford to do on all-natural sired bulls. We believe crossbreeding gives us the heterosis to produce at the highest level and longevity — and our goals are to continue to produce a moderate animal that will grade well at harvest.”

Their breeding system is perhaps just as efficient as their calves. Before breeding season, Bruce sends out a day-by-day breakdown of the whole process so the teams know where they are working each day. Fueled by Tracey’s famous lunches, the crew makes sure

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Mershon Cattle has been a participant in the National Reference Sire Program (NRSP) for two years. This year's spring calves are the first offspring out of NRSP bulls.



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breeding day moves quickly so animals are not overstressed, which makes the success rates much better.

Then there is “herd improvement day,” as the crew likes to call it. Each replacement heifer is scanned for ribeye area (REA) and intramuscular (IMF) data, and DNA is collected to assist with selection — this system ensures they keep the best of the best.

“My suggestion to everyone would be to collect data on one point, collect your weaning weight on your calves and tie that weight back to its mother and its birth date,” Bruce says. “So you have averages of your herd and if you can cull that bottom 10% for five years, you’ve dramatically changed your herd without weighing cattle at birth or chasing carcass data. You’re going to make a difference right from the start.”

Although the Mershons were slower to cull as they built herd numbers, they have reached a point where they can be more aggressive in selecting females. A detailed database has been critical in visualizing and identifying low and high performers. Ultimately, technology for tracking individual performance figures has been a game changer in overall herd improvement.

“Embracing change and making change work to your benefit can sometimes be difficult for operations,” Tracey notes. “But I think we’ve always approached it with, ‘we can always learn, we’re never going to stop learning.’ If there’s something new out there we think fits and helps us improve and helps us to be more profitable and more productive, we’re going to take a look at it and see if there’s a way we can make it work in our operation.”

### An evolving system

It all starts with a tag and a wand. At roughly 70 to 90 days of age, calves are run through the chute for the first time, where they are vaccinated and tagged with an electronic identification tag (EID). This tag is used to reference them the rest of their lives — after weaning to collect weaning weights, after backgrounding to get yearling weights, after being fed out to get a finishing weight, and after harvest to get a harvest and a hanging weight. All of the data is tracked based on the EID number and tied back to the calf’s dam and sire.

“We want that calf every time we collect information on it,” Tracey says. “So we know all the data on that calf from every time we have put that calf in the chute.”



The Mershons rely heavily on the use of EIDs they can scan with a wand and record information via Tru-Test to ensure their data is correct and utilized appropriately for business decisions.

Information from the wands is easily downloaded to Tracey’s phone using the Tru-Test™ Data Link app, and is then uploaded to a cloud database and Excel spreadsheets. For example, master databases with detailed information are created for each breeding season.

It is a completely paperless process. “In the past, we wrote a lot of stuff down, basically on a legal pad or a big Chief tablet, and we would put it on the shelf and it never got utilized,” Bruce shares. “Now we have the data that we’re constantly downloading off Excel spreadsheets and into the systems and hopefully creating data points and useful information in a user-friendly manner.”

The Mershons retain ownership and collect carcass data and see about 98% Choice or higher in their herd — a statistic they hope to grow to 100% Choice and 30% Prime in the future. In their quest to achieve higher quality grades, Bruce and Tracey set out to capture feed efficiency data. This goal has been made possible through their participation in the American Hereford Association’s (AHA) National Reference Sire Program (NRSP).

Now into their second year of the program, the Mershons have their first set of NRSP-sired calves on the ground. Five bulls — one reference and four new, young sires — are used to breed 350 cows during spring and fall breeding cycles.

The calves are then backgrounded and sent to Gregory Feedlots in Tabor, Iowa, to be fed through a feed intake system to be feed-efficiency tested. Steers will be fed and finished and sold on a grid or by hanging weight, while females will come back to the home ranch where only the top will make the cut to make the replacement team.

“We’re excited about bringing a data point that we couldn’t do on our own, so this is going to be important to us,” Bruce says. “We’re excited about those offspring — what they’re going to bring to our herd, the improvements and seeing those young sires perform, and the information we’re going to gather from that process.”

Their management is certainly thorough, but both Bruce and Tracey emphasize the importance of starting small and establishing a foundation upon which to build.

“I would like people to know you don’t necessarily have to start out big and be overwhelmed and think you have to collect all this data and breed your heifers as fast as possible,” Tracey says. “It’s taken us a lot of time to evolve. Do something every day to sustain your farm and your cattle operation.”

### The right fit

Collectively, the Mershon herd has continued improvement each year, but the Mershons noticed a significant difference after introducing crossbreeding to the equation. About 10 years ago, they decided to opt back to crossbreeding, a time-honored tradition from which they had strayed. With regards to pursuing their philosophy of ranching one cow at a time, Hereford genetics were the ticket.

“Hereford was the first place we went to, someplace we had been back when I was a child,” Bruce says. “We’re trying to create efficient, sustainable mothers that can survive on fescue and also produce a quality end product. Hereford allows us to do that.”

Since switching from mostly straight Angus, their results have been twofold. In addition to above-average carcass data, the consistency of birth and yearling weights speaks volumes to the overall performance of their cattle.

“We’ve created better model mothers with a better stay within the herd,” Bruce observes. “What we’ve seen is that the crossbreds [are hardier] and we felt like we [have] developed better females that, in turn, produce better offspring, better steers, better feeding cattle.”



“When we sell bred heifers at sales, it’s those black baldies that bring probably \$100 more a pair than the other ones,” Tracey adds. “They’re always the most popular of those that we sell in the group.”

“I love when our black baldies go into the ring,” she continues. “Right away, people just start bidding on them.”

Baldies have also proven optimal in converting Missouri’s native grasses to pounds. Operating in prime fescue country, cattle need to be up for the challenge of combating the toxic nature of those grasses. On top of that, cows must be able to slick off and handle the heat — 98 degrees and 85% humidity is “hot no matter where you’re at” as Bruce points out.

“[Herefords] have a lot of guts to them,” he says. “They have to be able to consume vast amounts of forage and convert it in an efficient manner, and that’s probably one of the big things Herefords help bring to our program.”

### Validating the model

Sure and steady, Bruce and Tracey have built an admirable and sustainable framework — one that has been recognized by many of their peers in the beef industry. In mid-June, Bruce and Tracey found themselves in Brookings, S.D., in contention for the Commercial Producer of the Year award at the 51st annual Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Annual Meeting and Research Symposium.

Bruce and Tracey anxiously awaited the outcome as Mershon Cattle was highlighted alongside fellow finalists Blew Partnership, Hutchinson, Kan., and Larson Farms, Green, Kan. The competition was stiff — but as the lunchtime award ceremonies came to a close, Bruce and Tracey took home the honors.

“We were tremendously honored to be nominated and honored to be a finalist, especially when we take a look at the other nominees and how impressive their operations are,” Tracey says. “I think it speaks a lot to what we’ve set out to do. We’re doing something different, but it’s still meaningful and it works.”

Since the beginning, the Mershons have always been open to change as they envisioned the growth of the operation. They both agree the award confirms they are on the right track and are even more inspired to continue using emerging technologies to be better producers and better stewards.

“It validates that what we’re doing helps improve our herd and the industry understands what we’re trying to accomplish,” Bruce says. “There’s nothing better than getting an award from the experts of our industry. It’s not just a popularity contest — it’s actually about what you’re doing and what you’re achieving, and makes this a special award.”

### Built to last

The Mershons are committed to building an elite herd that will be a model for the commercial industry. In tandem with building their herd’s longevity, they both uphold a key indicator of the operation’s long-term success is sustainability. Their business model is an example of their innovative approach.

Bruce’s career as a commodity trader and working with an incentive program provided the logic in forming “pasture partners.” About half of the Mershon herd is housed on partnering pastures. These partners provide forage and care on a daily fee basis year-round, while the Mershons provide the breeding stock, AI services, minerals, vaccines and other products. The Mershons pay their partners a daily fee with weaning incentives given on a graduated scale. It is a way to make sure cattle will be high yielding, with high carcass values and, in turn, rewards pasture partners for weaning a big calf.

Still, as Tracey notes, “We’re mindful that it’s not about how much money you make or how big you are, but it’s how you sustain the business.” A big part of their operation’s success is their family’s support.

“We have to thank our family and give a lot of credit to my brother who helped manage the day-to-day operations while we worked full-time jobs,” Bruce emphasizes. “My dad still checks the heifers when they’re calving in the middle of the night, and we couldn’t accomplish what we have without everyone’s help.”

On top of sustaining the business, improving their community and the beef industry is extremely important to the Mershons. Both hold leadership positions either in agriculture or community organizations. They believe in leaving the community a better



“We are a believer in crossbreeding,” Bruce says. “We believe Hereford offered the best match to make the best females.”



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place than how they found it — the same mindset they employ with their business.

Tracey, who also co-owns a small marketing communications consulting firm which services businesses and nonprofits in the greater Kansas City area, has taken her career knowledge to transform Mershon Cattle as an advocate for the benefits of beef cattle production.

“Building on my background as a marketing communications professional, one of the goals I see for Mershon Cattle is to become more of a positive advocate for the beef industry,” she says. “Beef is an important and healthy product, and I think that is probably where an opportunity for us is going forward.”

Raised in Colorado, Tracey did not grow up on a farm but is appreciative of the lessons agriculture instills. “That’s very rewarding and a lot of people don’t have that opportunity to really incorporate their family values into what they’re doing every single day,” she says. “That’s kind of the beauty of agriculture in many ways. I appreciate that and I want to protect it and see it grow.”

The ranch has served as a strong foundation for Bruce and Tracey to instill values of leadership, family, integrity and work ethic in their three sons — Thomas, 29, Chris, 26, and David, 24. Growing up, the boys helped farm on weekends and during summers. Today, although all three are pursuing their own careers, they are paying attention to the opportunities which lie ahead. Bruce and Tracey hold an annual family meeting to update the boys and their spouses on the operation, Thomas facilitates an entrepreneurial strategic plan for Mershon Cattle and all three sons provide ideas to improve efficiencies using new technology.

“What I love about what we’re doing is that Bruce and I are getting an opportunity to work together and to grow something we both passionately believe in,” Tracey says. “I enjoy having our family involved in it — our boys involved with it, my nephew involved and all of Bruce’s family.”

Through leadership and involvement, the Mershons are dedicated to improving their operation, their land, their community and the beef industry every day, one cow at a time.

“The exciting part is to see the evolution of what we’ve done, what we’ve accomplished, and how much better we are today than we were 15 years ago,” Bruce reflects. “I’m excited each day to get out and see if we can’t be better today than we were yesterday.” **HW**



Mershon Cattle LLC was honored as the 2019 Beef Improvement Federation Commercial Producer of the Year. “We are proud of the achievements that we’ve made over the years,” Bruce says. “We feel like we are an adapter of technology and we will continue to do that.”