

# Dreams Become Reality

A humble attitude and a driven spirit define the 2019 Junior Herdsman of the Year.

by *Adrian Austin*



Jackson Neil, Northfield, Minn., was honored as the 2019 Junior Herdsman of the Year by Taylor Harris (l), Sullivan Supply/Stock Show U, and Taylor Belle Matheny (r), National Junior Hereford Association chairman.

Junior Herdsman of the Year

For the majority of National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) members, the most anticipated week of the year is the VitaFerm® Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE). With expectations of fun-filled activities, meeting new friends and showing success, juniors from across the country gather to make each JNHE better than the last.

But, for a select group of young leaders, JNHE week is full of anticipation and excitement for a slightly different reason. Each year,

four aspiring youth are chosen as Junior Herdsman of the Year finalists and anxiously await the champion owned female drives at the conclusion of the week — not necessarily because they plan to be competing in the grand drive but, rather, to hear the final announcement of who among them will represent the youth membership as Junior Herdsman.

This year was no exception, as four young Hereford enthusiasts stood on the floor of Stadium Arena in Denver, anxiously awaiting a special

announcement before the start of the grand drives. With ebbing excitement and nervous energy flowing from the crowd, the candidates stood together, nervously shifting from side to side, awaiting the final selection.

Towering a solid foot or so above the rest of the candidate pool, Jackson Neil, Northfield, Minn., could not help but stand out amongst his contemporaries. With a frame soaring well over six feet, Jackson appeared ready to dunk a basketball, not receive the Junior Herdsman of the Year belt buckle.

Yet, when Jackson's name was announced, a culmination of many years of hard work and chasing dreams in the Hereford cattle industry came to fruition for the young stockman and his family. With a slightly disbelieving grin, Jackson breathed a sigh of relief and accepted his buckle, only to turn and make a beeline for his family, where they engulfed him in a loving, and somewhat tearful, embrace.

Jackson touches on why the experience was full of emotion for him and his family. "Winning Junior Herdsman this year is by far my most proud moment and largest accomplishment throughout my NJHA career," he says. While the nomination



shocked him at first, it was an honor which truly meant everything.

### All in the family

The 21-year-old son of Steve and Keely Neil has a family history of raising Hereford cattle. With over a decade of involvement in junior Hereford programs under his belt, Jackson attended his first junior national in 2011 in Kansas City, Mo., and has not missed one since.

Jackson credits his involvement in the cattle industry to his father and reiterates the Hereford business is a family affair for the Neils. “Hereford cattle started as a 4-H project for my dad and has become a lifestyle for us ever since,” he shares. “I have been an NJHA member since I was 9 years old, when I started by going to my state field day. As I got older, I started to take on leadership roles throughout the state organization as well.”

Jackson’s involvement with Hereford cattle is also apparent at home. “We have about 100 cow-calf pairs, and we sell bulls, bred heifers and heifer calves both privately and through local sales,” he says. “We finish out market steers for local freezer meat customers.”

Jackson plans to continue developing the family herd and already holds a significant stake in the operation, owning 25 cows in partnership with his sister, Hannah. He aspires to grow his operation by raising high-quality cattle excelling both in the showing and on pasture. With his family’s help and encouragement, he feels prepared to be successful in those endeavors.

“My family has given me numerous opportunities to chase my dreams of raising Hereford cattle and working on elite Hereford cattle at Fawcett Elm Creek Ranch, even if it means being away from home for numerous months at a time. I can’t thank them enough for their willingness to let me do what I need to do to chase my dreams away from home,” he says.

His passion for red-and-white-faced cattle continues to grow, and he also credits Jason May and Dan Fawcett, Ree Heights, S.D., for developing his skills as a young stockman.

“These two men help ensure that opportunities come my way and many



Jackson’s family and peers were quick to join him in celebrating his biggest Hereford accomplishment yet.

of those opportunities allow me to become more involved with Hereford cattle,” he says.

### Setting an example

No doubt, Jackson’s humble attitude and drive are evident as he describes the positive influences in his life. Stemming from the idea that people shape the integrity of the cattle industry, Jackson says upholding a strong, upstanding character is imperative both in the cattle business and beyond. From his perspective, the legacy and the influence someone imparts on others are more important than wins or losses.

“There are many high and low moments throughout the livestock

industry and the showing, so I think no matter what it’s important to stay level headed and be a humble winner and gracious loser,” he notes. “No matter the outcome.”

As Jackson works to become the best cattleman he can be, he also works to share his positive, down-to-earth attitude with everyone around him. He attributes much of his character development and growth over the years to the NJHA, whether in or out of the barn.

“The NJHA has helped me become the person I have grown into today, and has allowed me to be more confident and outgoing,” he says.

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Beyond NJHA activities and a passion for cattle, Jackson notes the Hereford breed is pretty special when it comes to uniting people — the devotion Hereford breeders display for their livestock and each other is unmatched.

“I think the Hereford breed is unique for the way we all act as one,” he says. “We are in some way a family on all levels. My Hereford family has grown and continues to grow with time, [becoming] larger and larger with the more people I meet.

“The best part of the cattle business is the people,” he adds.

### Building a legacy

As the Junior Herdsman belt buckle was placed in his hands, Jackson was fully aware the recognition extended beyond just a year’s worth of work. The accomplishment was something he had dreamed of for as long as he can remember. Even as a young child, Neil looked up to the herdsman recipients as great representatives of what the junior association is all about and is honored to be part of that elite group.

“To be the Herdsman means to be one of the hardest working and most humble people in the barn willing to help anyone along the way,” he describes. He also embraces his status as a role model for junior exhibitors.

“I would simply tell the younger showmen to dream,” he says. “Set your mind to something, work hard and don’t stop until you achieve your goals, no matter how far away they may seem at times. Never turn down opportunities that you come across — you never know where they may take you.”

There is no doubt Jackson has lived his own life by those tidbits of advice, with the constant desire to set goals and to work continuously to achieve them. Achieving his goal of being named Herdsman is one step forward in the legacy he hopes to build. In fact, Jackson already has his sights set on the next steps.

“A major goal of mine in the future [is] to win the adult Herdsman of the Year awarded at the National Western Stock Show,” he shares.

Jackson has proven one thing for sure — he plans to be involved with the breed he loves for the long haul. “I could see many different destinations for myself in the next five years and even further down the road,” he reflects. “The one thing that I do know is that I will always be involved with Hereford cattle any way I can be.” **HW**

## Herdsman finalists



**Lucas Stumpf** is the 22-year-old son of Gene and Lori Stumpf, of Columbia, Ill. He and his family raise Hereford cattle and farm grain. He recently graduated from Western Illinois University with a major in agriculture business and a minor in animal science. Lucas has been showing Hereford cattle since he was 4 years old, becoming a National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) member four years later. Lucas attended his first Junior

National Hereford Exposition (JNHE) in Milwaukee, Wis., in 2005. He says he cannot leave home without his blower cart when he makes the trip to a JNHE. He also shares that his favorite contests at junior nationals are the fitting and showmanship competitions. Lucas believes the Junior Herdsman of the Year award embodies the hard work and dedication young people put into the Hereford breed.



**Carter St. John** is the 21-year-old son of Joy and the late Kent St. John. He is from Pell City, Ala., and has been showing Hereford cattle for 14 years. He is currently enrolled at Jefferson State Community College, working toward a degree in business. While he cannot recall his very first JNHE, Carter notes winning reserve intermediate showman at the 2014 JNHE as one of his biggest accomplishments. He also jokes that members should not

leave for the JNHE without their cow. However, on a more serious note, Carter shares he could not imagine surviving a week at junior national without the support of his family. He also mentions the fitting contest is his favorite activity at the JNHE. Carter states the Junior Herdsman of the Year award has always inspired him, as herdsman recipients exemplify the meaning of hard work and are positive role models for Hereford youth.



**Emilee Holt** is the 22-year-old daughter of Scott and Kim Holt. She is from Caldwell, Idaho, and recently graduated from Kansas State University, majoring in animal science with a business option. She bought her first show heifer when she was 7 years old and attended her first JNHE in 2007, the last time the show was held in Denver. Since then, her family has grown its operation to 30 cows. She notes she cannot leave home without jolly ranchers and her favorite showstick when the family makes the trek

to junior national. The team sales contest and livestock judging are Emilee’s favorite JNHE competitions. She believes the Junior Herdsman of the Year award recognizes kids who put in hard work behind the scenes and devote a great amount of time and effort to the Hereford breed. **HW**

Junior Herdsman of the Year