

# Hard Work Beats Talent

**Whether on the diamond or in the ring, Major League Baseball pitcher Locke St. John says success on game day comes from following one simple rule.**

by *Christy Couch Lee*

**H**e made his way to the pitcher's mound as the stadium erupted with deafening cheers around him.

The pressure built; his legs lost feeling.

He focused on the mission at hand, and his first two batters returned to their dugout empty handed.

On that memorable day in late June, Locke St. John joined the ranks of just over 19,000 men to ever play for a Major League Baseball (MLB) team.

A Hereford cattleman and professional baseball player, Locke combined his two passions into the life of his dreams. It has not been without hard work and dedication, but, he says, the youth of the Hereford industry can capture their dreams, too, if they never quit.

## **Making the cut**

Born and raised in Pell City, Ala., with his parents, Kent and Joy, and younger brother,



PHOTO BY KELLY GAVIN

Locke St. John made his big-league pitching debut with the Texas Rangers June 25, 2019. "He was always very responsible, amiable, easy going and laid back," says his mom, Joy. "But he was also teachable and took instruction well."

Carter, Locke developed his two passions at a young age — playing baseball at 5 and showing his first Hereford at 7.

"I grew up watching the Atlanta Braves — my hometown team — and my main goal was to make it to the major leagues," Locke says. "My parents were always really positive and let me play the game. They held me to a standard, and they knew I was capable of being good. But it wasn't something I just woke up with. I knew I had the ability, but I would also need to work at it if I wanted to be where I am today."

Joy says Locke was a focused child and, even as a young little league player, was dedicated to the game. "Since he started playing baseball at 5, he was all or nothing," she says. "He wasn't out there playing in the grass and watching airplanes go by. He's been serious since Day 1."

Locke was on his local all-stars team and played travel ball through junior high and high school before venturing to Southern Union

Community College and, from there, to the University of South Alabama.

After filling out multiple questionnaires from interested MLB scouts, Locke finally received the call that he had been selected in the 2014 draft.

“It was one of the most overwhelming and exiting times of my life,” he describes. “That hard work I had put in since I was 12 all the way through college had paid off. Having the opportunity to play professional ball was a big deal to me.”

Two days later he was headed to the spring training facility for the Detroit Tigers system. He stayed in the Tigers’ system for three years, playing for the GCL Tigers, the Connecticut Tigers, the West Michigan Whitecaps and the Lakeland Flying Tigers.

During the 2017 season, Locke converted from a conventional over-the-top pitcher to a side-arm pitcher, and at that point his career took an even bigger turn for the better. “That’s when things clicked for me, and everything started working like I wanted it to,” he says.

### The call to the big leagues

In the 2017 Triple-A phase of the Rule 5 draft Locke was selected by the Texas Rangers. He spent the 2018 season with the Down East Wood Ducks and the Frisco RoughRiders and was then promoted to the Nashville Sounds on June 6. Just 14 days later, Locke received a call he says is the greatest moment of his life.

“It was an off day, and my fiancé, Sydney Johnson, and I had just gotten back from the farm in Pell City,” Locke recalls. “I got back home and heard my phone vibrating. I had missed the call. I saw that it was our vice president of player relations, and thought it could be the call I had been waiting on all my life. Instantly, I called him back. He asked if I was asleep, and I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘You’re going to pitch in Dallas tomorrow.’”

“Frisco is a suburb of Dallas and at first, I thought he meant I was going back to a Double A team,” Locke continues. “He could hear the disappointment and made sure I understood. ‘You’re going to pitch for the big leagues,’ he said. And my heart dropped. That’s the call I had been dreaming of my whole life. It was happening.”

Locke had put the phone on speaker so that Sydney could hear the call, too. “We started crying, and as soon as I got off the phone, I called my mom,” Locke says. “Mom was asleep, and she said, ‘Locke, quit messing with me.’ It just wasn’t registering with her. I called my grandparents and more family and close friends. It was just crazy.”



The Boatman family of Perks Ranch, Rockford, Ill., are longtime friends of the St. John family. While initially not a baseball fan, Tammy Boatman downloaded the MLB app to see Locke’s progress. The night he took the mound, the Boatman family sat around her phone in the showbarn and cheered on their friend. Pictured (l to r) with Locke St. John are: Tammy, Kade, Kendall and Tom Boatman.

Joy remembers that phone call well.

“It was so surreal,” she says. “We had traveled and put so much into our boys. He worked so hard and has been so determined, and he has gone through so many ditches to get there. Of course, I’m extra proud of him. It’s not an easy road.”

She had always told him she would be there the moment he was called up to the big leagues. And be there, she was.

“I had always said, ‘Come hell or high water — it doesn’t matter what I have going on — I’m going to be there,’” Joy says. “Carter and I stayed up all night packing, and we made it there for the first game. It was an awesome experience, and we were so proud.”

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Locke's first JNHE was in 2002 in Sioux Falls, S.D., and he did not miss a single one until he was drafted by the Detroit Tigers in the 32nd round of the 2014 draft.



Locke officially made his big-league pitching debut against the Detroit Tigers June 25 — five years to the day after he made his first professional appearance.

"I was told I wouldn't be able to feel my legs as I walked to the mound at that first game — that it would be a feeling I would never have felt before," Locke says. "And they were right. I absolutely couldn't feel my legs. I got to the infield, and I start breathing. Finally, I got some feeling back. It's a feeling I'll never be able to describe."

### A team effort

As much as baseball is his passion, Locke is also passionate about Hereford cattle.

When Locke and Carter were young, the St. John family raised Texas Longhorns on their 20-acre farm.

"Our county extension agent ... said something about 4-H and getting some Herefords," Locke says. "We bought our first few heifers from Tennessee River Music, and then began to develop our herd as Dry Creek Farms."

The St. Johns soon began a friendship with Tom and Tammy Boatman, Perks Ranch, Rockford, Ill., who at the time were living in Alabama. Tammy's mom, Margarete Riffel, also worked with them to build their Hereford herd.

Locke says their relationship with the Boatman family has been a positive experience from the start. "We had our first JNHE [Junior National Hereford Expo] class winner in 2004 with a heifer we purchased from Margarete, and that's also the year I won champion peewee showman," he says.

Through the years, the St. John family's success in the industry has grown. They now run 30 registered Herefords and about 25 recipients on about 250 acres with the goal to raise the best show heifers and cows possible. They held their first online sale in the spring of 2018 and now plan to host a spring and fall online sale each year.

Together, Locke and Carter manage the operations of their Hereford business. Carter

handles all of the day-to-day activities, and Locke manages the computer work and marketing.

"When I'm on the road, I call to see how everything is going on a daily basis, and I don't know that Carter always likes it," Locke says with a laugh. "We work together on matings and putting our sales together. He had to take on a lot when he was 19, with my dad passing away in July 2017. There aren't

many 21-year-olds who run their own farm and do as well as he does."

Joy says her boys have figured out a system that works for their situation and skills.

"Even when Locke is away, they talk every day. They're very close," she says. "They both have their own opinion about cows. They absolutely love the genetics. Locke really wants to be involved, but there's only so much you can do when you're 1,000 miles away. But they've made it work.

"That's been really good to see as a mother," she continues. "We've invested time and money; blood, sweat and tears. You want to see them love it as much as I do. And they do."

Beyond family, the friendships Locke has developed while showing Herefords have lasted a lifetime. And the support he's seen through his MLB career has been incredible.

"[Friends] call to check on me, and I call to check up on them," he says. "I call them to talk cows, and it helps me more than they probably realize — more than I've ever been able to express to them. But I'm on the road six or seven months of the year, not able to see cows. In minor league baseball, we play 142 games in five months. In major league, it's 163 games in six months. Being able to talk cows and attend sales in my off season really helps me mentally."

His baseball career has given him the opportunity to visit renowned operations across the country — through Michigan and Texas and many points in between.

“[Hereford breeders] are a family, and they’re more than supportive of me,” Locke says. “Yes, at the shows, we want to win. But at the end of the day, it’s all about building relationships and having fun.”

### **Dream the big dreams. Then work for them.**

For others who dream those big dreams as he did? Locke says it is simple. Never give up.

“Work as hard as you can, and never give up on your dreams,” he says. “Multiple times when I was younger on the mound, I thought I might never be able to reach my goal. But I never gave up. I never gave in. And I never quit working hard.”

Whether it’s in the showbarn or on the ballfield, Locke says the values and work ethic required for success are the same.

“Both have taught me responsibility and the value of hard work,” he says. “It was always embedded in me by my parents — if you want it bad, you have to work for it. In either baseball or showing cattle, if you don’t want it, you won’t do well. And 75% of your success happens at home.”

He recalls many days in high school when he would feed cattle in early mornings before morning baseball practices, go to after-school baseball practices, then rinse and feed cattle late at night before crashing in bed, only to repeat it all the next day.

Tom says he’s seen an incredible work ethic carry over from baseball to cattle within the St. John family.

“You have to want it to get it,” he says. “It’s a dream. And practice makes perfect. You don’t get good at showing, clipping or fitting if you don’t practice, and the same applies to baseball.”

Joy says as a parent, if your child has big dreams, be patient, be encouraging and maintain discipline.

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— Locke St. John



“I could have easily folded to one or the other, but I didn’t — and Carter is the same way,” Locke says. “As we’ve grown, he likes cattle more than baseball. And for him to be as successful as he’s been in that makes me proud.”

“Be there for them, but they also need to have some accountability and responsibility,” she says. “And as they get older, you can’t tell them what to do. But you can be there for them, and stay positive yet realistic for them. And then you simply must have faith that you’ve taught them all they need, and they’ll go back to their roots and remember where they came from.”

With strong values and a dream that was born at a young age, Locke St. John has seen his greatest dreams come to life. It’s simply been a matter of working hard and never, ever giving up. **HW**