



A Performance Legacy Lives On

Crooked Lake Ranch, a polled Hereford cattle operation based in Frostproof, Fla., is known for its use of the Victor Domino bloodline and a strict breeding program.

by *Shelby Oesterreicher*

The legacy began in Deland, Fla., where Peyton Turner Wilson (Pat) first fell in love with his wife, Patricia, and the white-faced, red-bodied beauties. Pat purchased his first set of Hereford cows from a lawyer by the name of Francis P. Whitehair. In 1956 he began his operation by using CMR Mischief Domino 113, a son of CMR Rollo Domino 12, just one of the first great bulls used at Crooked Lake Ranch.

Pat later made a connection which influenced his legacy at the Coastal Plains Experiment Station in Tifton, Ga., where he met R.W. Jones and discovered the Victor Domino bloodline. The start of the bloodline throughout Crooked Lake Ranch began with the performance bull Victor Domino A14. Later, in 1971, Pat purchased 69 cows from Jones, the last cow purchase of the ranch, making it a closed herd. Of the four major purchases of the Jones herd, which dispersed in 1975, Pat's herd is the only one remaining in operation.

Now managed by David McCullers, Crooked Lake Ranch, a combined 1,700 acres, continues to exhibit loyalty to the Victor Domino bloodline in Pat's honor with strict breeding and selection practices.

Branching out

About 15 years ago, David convinced Pat to sell some bulls publicly. Pat's initial response to David was if they are good enough for others, then they are good enough to keep. However, once Pat was convinced, the sales went to Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Iowa and Nebraska, to name a few. Through these connections, David has been able to share the Crooked Lake Ranch program and to improve the Hereford industry.

Scarlett Jackson, one of David's daughters, says not only does Crooked Lake Ranch have outside state interest in bulls, but the local Florida market is successful as well.



The late Pat Wilson left a legacy of high quality Hereford cattle for seedstock and commercial producers to reap the benefits for years to come.

“We have some that stay here in Florida that we sell to local producers looking to add some English back into these Brahman influenced commercial herds, and they have been great assets to a lot of the commercial cattlemen here in Florida,” Scarlett notes. “They bring a lot of good maternal traits to that.”

Shayla McCullers, David’s wife, says the success of their bulls locally is growing and they have many customers who come early to pick their next herd sire.

“He’s gotten buyers that are coming in, and they’re wanting to look at the calves long before we do fertility soundness exams,” she explains. “They want to put their names on the calves.”

David believes in the legacy his predecessor built and strives to continue improving Hereford genetics through his cattle selection and customer base. Shayla describes how other breeders are using Crooked Lake bulls to take advantage of the American Hereford Association’s (AHA) Maternal Advantage program.

“His bulls are popular with the Brahman breeders because fertility can be an issue in Brahman [cattle],” Shayla says. “A lot of customers will get the bulls to cross with Brahman cows because [Herefords] can tolerate the heat in Florida.”

According to David, Hereford genetics can maximize the value of a cow herd by bettering fertility, feed efficiency and docility. He notes the Maternal Advantage program has an appeal for Florida producers because the marriage of genetics between the Brahman and the Hereford breeds can make cattle more adaptable to the environment.

“The Brahman breeders are artificially inseminating their mature cow herd, and they’re using Crooked Lake Ranch bulls to follow up because the American Hereford Association has the Brahman-Hereford connection with the two papered animals making a certified Braford,” David explains.

He says making cattle adaptable to the environment was, and is, a major priority. Florida has a humid climate and can be constantly wet – difficult conditions for any breed of cattle to reproduce in. However, Scarlett says she has observed their herd’s ability to adapt to various climates and to thrive.

“This bloodline seems to be able to handle the different climate environments,” she comments. “Obviously here in the heat and humidity of Florida, but then in those other states and environment, as well.”

David points out Hereford genetics work well for commercial operations, especially in the Southeast, because of the opportunity heterosis presents as a performance advantage.

“They bring that real foraging base, fleshing ability and heterosis and hybrid vigor,” he says. “You’re going to gain that much without affecting one iota of the input cost because it’s going to be a natural gift.”

David has seen the proof of the strength of Hereford genetics through his customers’ success and the seedstock they are using on their cattle herds over time. He also made mention of the docility of the Hereford breed being an advantage when crossbreeding – even in his own commercial “black” herd.

“If you can’t perform Hereford to Hereford and hit marks that I continue to hold standards to, I can always flip you to the black herd and you can come right back and hit those marks, just with a heterosis kick,” he says.

Trial and error are a part of the cattle game, and Crooked Lake Ranch is no different. David had to work with various genetic families in order to build the right herd for the environment of the southern part of Florida.

“There were some genetic families I tried to move down here that absolutely train wrecked,” he reflects. “It’s a very tough move when you leave Marion County heading south. You have to be very, very true genetically. If you have any flaws they will come flying out in this environment.”

Breeding for longevity

David puts strict pressure on Crooked Lake’s cattle in order to enhance their genetic fertility and to make them better for the industry overall. Fertility is the number one factor to play into his decisions to keep or to cull cattle from the herd. David says, just by being a female, heifers have earned a right to compete for a spot in the herd.

“The only thing required for a cow to make a herd here is, first, she’s going to get bred every 365 days, she’s going to hit a mark I set for weaning weights, and then she’s going to maintain



The strict protocol for cattle in the Crooked Lake Ranch herd ensures uniformity and longevity in Florida’s harsh climate.

a fleshing ability,” he explains. “Finally, she’s going to have to be something that can sustain for a long period of time.”

Longevity is another predominant factor David considers when assessing females. Cows receive little assistance when it comes to raising calves. The calves are not creep fed and must grow to an acceptable weight for their mothers to be retained. Over time David has been able to move the cattle in a direction he would like to see and one he believes will better the industry.

“Anything that falls off the mark gets flipped to the commercial herd and if they start lagging in the commercial herd, they get flipped to the sale pen and they’re gone,” he says.

At Crooked Lake Ranch, only the top performers make the cut. David will work for these cows as long as they will work for him and continue to produce. In the event a female does not reproduce or calve on her own or gets too aggressive, she is moved to the commercial herd, where she could be culled. Once cows have been flipped to the commercial herd, they are scrutinized a little less but are still held to a high standard.

“My animals are moderate, I don’t strive for extremes,” he says. “Extremes won’t reproduce themselves, so my philosophy is to maintain that moderation.”

Once a heifer or cow gets bred, only half the battle is won, as calving ease is another facet David considers to be of utmost importance. David’s goal is to have momma cows which can get pregnant, have a calf, raise a good calf and get bred again without assistance.

“If you are pregnant you have the right to lay down and have a calf unassisted,” he notes. “I don’t pull calves. The only time I will is if [there is] an abnormal presentation and that is a part of the management program. I believe all females should be able to birth naturally and that’s a requirement that should be genetically passed on.”

As a result, when riding through a herd of these white-faced ladies, uniformity is the obvious look of the pairs.

“The biggest comment he gets is ‘they’re so uniform’ all of the calves look like little clones of each other because of the criteria,” Shayla remarks.

For more than 50 years, Crooked Lake Ranch has been in the registered Hereford industry and continues to stay true to the Victor Domino bloodline, a tradition beneficial to the progress of the performance cattle industry. In addition to receiving the Beef Improvement Federation Commercial Producer of the Year award in 1973, Pat was also celebrated for his longstanding work as a Hereford breeder in 2008 when he was posthumously inducted into the AHA Hall of Fame, less than a month after his death on Oct. 14, 2008. When Pat fell ill, he set up a trust under David’s oversight in order to maintain the Victor genetics built from the Jones herd.

“The main thing I am continuing with Mr. Wilson’s legacy is continuing the Victor cattle breed in house, and we are going to continue to breed those cows to improve the genetic base,” David explains. “We are going to apply pressure from all directions and make that cow a little bit better each time we turn a bull out. We are going to try to get a little more meat, a little more muscle, a little more quality out of her. At the same time never lose site of the mothering side and her ability to be fertile and milky. As long as I’m still here that will be our philosophy and our goal – to create the best momma cow that can harvest grass and turn it into meat and milk.” **HW**

