



**Retiring 2019 AHA President
Pete Atkins, Tea, S.D., shares
his view of the field as the
captain behind home plate.**

by Diane Meyer

He was the American League's Most Valuable Player, a seven-time All Star and Rookie of the Year. As team captain, he led the New York Yankees from behind the plate to back-to-back World Series championships in '77 and '78. He was considered the team's heart and soul.

Munson was also named champion junior bull calf in Denver.

The beloved New York Yankees catcher, Thurman Munson, once told a reporter, "The catcher is the most important man in the game. ... He directs the pitchers and calls the game for them. He must know the capabilities and weaknesses of each batter who comes to the plate. He also acts as kind of a field general because from his position he can oversee the entire field. Even more, he has the important duty of protecting home plate as the runner comes tearing in to try to score."

Amidst a sea of cowboy hats, an unmistakable tanned ball cap with "NY" stitched in blue across the front and a gold "No. 15" pendant pinned on the right has stood out at Hereford events across the country and noticeably more so since 2015. The brimming smile beneath the hat bill unmistakably belongs to respected Hereford breeder, Pete Atkins.

With a passion for the Hereford breed rivaled only by his love for his family, the Yankees and Thurman Munson, Pete has led Team Hereford as the 2019 American Hereford Association (AHA) president, representing South Dakota, the Northwest region and breeders across the country. Much like Munson's responsibilities behind home plate, Pete has spent his tenure on the Board overseeing the AHA and doing his best to make sure the breed is positioned for longevity in the decades to come.

"It doesn't matter if you're somebody with 1,000 cows or you're a breeder with 20 cows, everybody's important," Pete says. "Everyone can play a role and can have a positive impact on the breed and on the perception of the breed in their area by being involved, raising good cattle, standing behind your cattle and representing the breed."

Munson 15

Growing up in Tea, S.D., Pete watched his childhood hero, Thurman Munson, and raised Hereford cattle alongside his father, Alvin. Naturally, those two passions had a way of overlapping over the years.

For those that know Pete, it came as no surprise when he named a few animals after his favorite professional baseball team. It started with a bull named Yankee, a son of Violet, who is also the dam of Cracker Jack, sire of numerous national champions and the most famous bull bred by Atkins Herefords to date. At the time, Yankee was one of Atkins Herefords best bulls, winning his class at the 2007 National Western Stock Show, the first year the family showed in Denver with their partner Delaney Herefords. Then,



Pete and Laura raised their three sons — Scott, Craig (pictured) and Paul — in this farmhouse in Tea, S.D., where his mother was born in 1922. Today, this piece of farmland is home to Atkins Herefords, a registered seedstock operation with a base herd of 30 cows.

a few years ago, Pete found himself with a bull calf worthy of the name he held in highest regard.

“I gave him the number 15, because that was Munson’s number,” Pete says. “So he was Munson 15. We get him to Denver and I’m all excited because people who know me know I’m a Yankee fan and know who Munson was.

“One of the first guys to come up to me says, ‘Best name ever. I love that movie.’ I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ He said, ‘Well, that’s Munson from the Kingpin movie — the bowler, right?’”

Although disappointed the reference was not understood, Pete was not disappointed with his bull’s performance in Denver. Munson went on to win champion junior bull calf and sold as Lot 8 in the Mile High Night Sale.

Pete has always had a soft spot for showing in Denver since 1973 when he walked through the “Yards” for the first time with his dad. A year later, the father-son team were back and bought a herd bull private treaty from Clarence Busse & Sons from Kansas.

A few years before that memorable purchase, the Atkins family had moved back to the farm Pete still calls home, where his mother’s family had lived since the early 1900s, and bought their first set of registered Hereford heifers for a 4-H project. In the coming years, they purchased cattle from Bar JZ Polled Herefords, Chester Gullickson and other area breeders, laying the genetic foundation for a 100-head cow herd.

From the get-go, Pete and Alvin utilized performance testing and tracked performance trends. In his home office, Pete still has graphs of weaning weights dating back to ’75. “I’ve always liked the idea of thinking about breeding plans, looking at genetics and analyzing matings, looking at what if we bred this to this,” Pete says.

Looking back at trends over the last 40 plus years, Pete notes how rewarding it is to see breeders who stuck out the hard years making progress and finding success in their breeding programs. “If you raised Herefords in the ’70s and still have them



Pete and his father, Alvin, purchased their first set of registered Hereford heifers in 1971 for a 4-H project, marking the start of his lifetime devotion to the breed.



Named after legendary New York Yankees catcher, Thurman Munson, AH JDH Munson 15E ET earned champion junior bull calf honors at the 2018 National Western Stock Show.

now, you were passionate about the breed” he says. “Like many others, we had Herefords through some tough years when it wasn’t the cool thing to do. In college I was known as the Hereford guy and it was not always said complimentary.”

A lot has changed since he first started in the Hereford business; breeders have access to more tools and information than ever. But when making breeding decisions, Pete still reverts to guidelines his dad taught him in the ’70s. “First they have to have the basics,” he explains. “When I say basics I

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Both Pete and Laura's favorite memories from Pete's time on the AHA Board are the opportunities to meet Hereford breeders from across the country and getting to know the other Board members and their families.

mean feet and legs, mobility and udder are at the top. Part of that goes back to my dad, he milked cows for years. He would say, 'We don't milk our stock cows. We don't trim feet on stock cows.'

Shortly after college, Pete married his wife, Laura and they lived in Huron, S.D., where Pete started his first job in banking. One day, Pete received a visit from American Polled Hereford Association (APHA) fieldman Dennis Schock. Pete

recalls, "[Dennis] said, 'I'm taking a job to manage a ranch in Texas and they're going to be looking for somebody. Would you be interested?'"

For four years, Pete traveled across the Dakotas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, eastern Montana, Manitoba and Saskatchewan as an APHA fieldman. "Back then we would get a paper printout of who registered calves in our area. I would go through the road atlas and mark the location of breeders in my area to plan herd visits."

With two young boys at the time, 175 nights a year in a hotel soon became hard to justify. Pete resumed work for an agricultural finance company, and the family relocated to Spencer, Iowa. Back home, his dad was transitioning to retirement, which led to the start of a 30-years-and-counting partnership with Jack and Jerry Delaney from Lake Benton, Minn. The Atkins' ran cows on shares with the Delaney herd in Minnesota beginning in 1987, and in 1991 Pete and Laura bought the Atkins' family farm from his parents and moved home. "At the time there was no buildings here except the house. So we put up the barn and got the cows back home in '93," Pete recalls. They started their first embryo transfer (ET) work in 2006 with the Delaneys, and now have an annual online sale in the fall and a bull and female sale at the end of January hosted at the Delaneys Minnesota ranch.

Although Pete admits no partnership is "rosy" all the time, the Atkins-Delaney partnership has stood the test of time, and for good reason. "A good partnership has got to work for everybody," he affirms. "When people talk about doing something together, it's easy to get self-centered. But it's got to work for everybody, and both partners have to understand that."

"Not only that, you have to have a partner you complement," Laura adds. "Jerry and Pete have



different personalities and different skills and complement each other well.”

Nodding in agreement, Pete continues, “Again, whether you’re large or small, working together with people to leverage talents, resources, genetics and ability is vital. Working with somebody like the Delaneys has allowed us to do things we never would have, and I like to think that us working with them has given them some opportunities as well.”

When Pete decided to run for the AHA Board of Directors, his perspective on compatible partnerships influenced his leadership style and vision for the future of the breed.

2015

The first time Pete ran for a spot on the Board in 2014, he came home to Tea empty-handed. As he fondly recounts, his mom, Marguerite, was quick to point out, “Well, those people, they obviously don’t know a thing.” After telling that story in his 2015 election speech, Pete found himself on the Board alongside Jim Bellis, Aurora, Mo., and Kyle Pérez, Nara Visa, N.M. — moms know best, after all.

Knowing the importance of making decisions for the betterment of the team, Pete offered suggestions he felt would benefit the entire membership on each committee where he served. “You have to run for the Board for the right reason,” he emphasizes. “It’s not for self-advancement or to promote yourself or to try to express your personal ideals. It’s to try to use your judgment to do what you think is best for the breed and for all of the breeders.”

Pete was appointed vice president and assumed his role as president in 2019 to mark his final year on the Board. As the AHA president, Pete says one of his biggest responsibilities is listening to feedback from breeders and staying informed by the AHA staff. “The one thing that has really stuck with being on the Board these four years is how much there is going on with our association,” he says. “Whether it’s the editorial staff, record staff, or any department, it’s very busy. Unless you’re involved in it, it’s hard to appreciate how many things are going on every day.”

Despite all of the meetings, phone calls and traveling, both Pete and Laura have thoroughly enjoyed their experience and are thankful for the new friendships and the opportunities they had to meet great people from all over the country. As for his favorite part of being on the Board, Pete says, “That’s easy — it’s getting to know the other board members,” adding, “I wish I had more time to get to more places.”

Although Pete’s time as president came to an end in late October, his vision for the breed is unwavering. He feels strongly about opportunities



Pete and Laura have two sons who live in Twin Cities, Minn. Pictured (l, top to bottom) are Paul, Theodore and Sarah; and (r, top to bottom) Scott, George, Sarah and Isla.

on which Team Hereford needs to capitalize in the near future to remain strong and to grow.

Protecting home plate

If there is one thing Pete has learned from his lifetime raising Herefords and spending 22 years in agricultural finance, it is to have a goal.

“Know what your end game is,” he says. “Have a plan for what you’re going to do. Visit customers. Talk to breeders. Talk about the cattle, listen, learn and have a goal.”

As for his goal for the breed, he points to the black cows making up the majority of cow herds across the country.

“That’s where our biggest opportunity is,” he says. “We have begun to make progress and I see many more Hereford bulls running with black cows than I did in the past but we have barely scratched the surface of an enormous opportunity.

“We can continue to grow this opportunity if we produce the right cattle, if we service our customers, if we’re providing those customers what they need for bulls,” he continues. “I believe that with all my heart.”

Seizing that opportunity will take a collaborative effort from the entire membership. With so many newcomers to the breed, Pete emphasizes it is important to continue to be welcoming and to not look at other Hereford breeders as competitors but as part of the team.

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“I have been talking about Team Hereford for a long time,” he says. “A vital cog in Team Hereford is the staff. But Team Hereford is everybody. We all represent the breed. As breeders we are the face of the breed. The support the Hereford Association staff can give us is phenomenal, but that doesn’t amount to anything if as breeders we aren’t Team Hereford and we aren’t out there promoting our product, standing behind it and doing our job.”

As Hereford breeders, Pete says the job starts with spreading the word. Strengths he hears all the time are how easy it is to work with Hereford cattle and how their whitefaced calves are the heaviest. Often times, these comments come from individuals whose grandpa used to run Herefords, and they are reintroducing Hereford genetics into their herds because of the breed’s efficiency, quality and disposition.

To maintain progress in the breed, Pete mentions a lesson he learned from some top breeders during his time as an APHA fieldman. “The one thing they had in common was they were very unforgiving of their cattle,” he says. “They were their own worst critics and never made excuses for their cattle, that’s always stuck with me. Breeders today have more tools and technology than ever to help them evaluate their cattle. But they still need to be stockmen, they still need to look at their cattle. I feel very strongly about that.”



Pete may have retired from the Board Oct. 26., but he will always focus on improving the breed. “I have a passion for the breed and the people in the breed, and I hope I can contribute in a small way to keep our momentum going.”

“I’d like to be remembered as somebody who raises good cattle and to show other people that regardless of the size of your herd you can have success.”

— Pete Atkins

Retiring 15

Newsday writer Mark Herrmann once described Thurman Munson as “the bridge from the old Yankees and refurbished Stadium to the new.” Similar to his idol’s legacy, Pete hopes his time on the Board has helped unite the AHA membership to advance the breed as a team.

“I wanted to use my best judgment to make decisions and provide input for what I thought was best for the breed,” he reflects. “That’s how I’ve approached it and tried to do it, I’ve always done what I thought was for the best for the breed overall.”

While the NY Yankees hat with the No. 15 pendant will not be making as many appearances at Hereford events as it has the past four years, it is not getting hung up anytime soon.

“I’m honored and extremely, extremely humbled to have been on the Board,” Pete pauses and takes a deep breath. “In 1973 my Dad took me to the stock show in Denver to see the Herefords. We were at the Hereford sale and I was in awe, and he said, ‘You keep it up. You work hard and you could be in here someday. You could show cattle here and sell cattle here.’”

“I’d like to thank him for letting me have the reins, and say he was right,” Pete says. “If you are determined and you work hard and you work smart, you can do it.”

Over the years Pete’s wife, Laura, and their three sons, Scott, Craig, and Paul, have always been there to help on the farm and to provide support wherever needed. Pete also thanks his mom for encouraging him to pursue his dreams.

“Why am I proud to be a Hereford breeder?” he reiterates with a brimming smile. “That’s the simplest question ever: It’s the greatest breed there is and I am proud and blessed to be a part of it. I’d like to be remembered as somebody who raises good cattle and to show other people that regardless of the size of your herd you can have success.” **HW**