

She Makes a Hand

For the 2020 Herdsman of the Year, Robyn Kelley Samsel, cattle have never just been animals to her.



Pictured at the 2020 National Western Stock Show (l to r) are: Brett Barber, Barber Ranch; Robyn Kelley Samsel, 2020 Hereford Herdsman of the Year; Melanie Fishel, National Hereford Queen; and Shane Bedwell, AHA chief operating officer and director of breed improvement.

Hereford enthusiasts gathered in Stadium Arena Saturday afternoon, Jan. 18, as the 2020 National Western Stock Show (NWSS) came to a close for the red and white breed. Before the selection of the polled champion Hereford female, anticipation grew to hear the announcement of the Hereford Herdsman of the Year.

For this year's title holder, Robyn Kelley Samsel, the feeling was indescribable. Plus, on this day 12 years prior, her brother Mark Kelley was recognized for the same prestigious honor.

The start

"Born on the end of a halter and has never looked back" is a phrase used to describe Samsel's longtime presence in the industry. The show cattle industry has always been a staple in her family.

She grew up showing cattle alongside her brothers in tandem with her family operating Rainbow Cattle Services (RCS), which is a fitting service that started in 1985. When individuals ask Samsel to describe her family's involvement in the industry, they will receive a modest reply.

"I don't really know where to start, other than my mom and dad started a fitting service," she says. "We

started hauling Charolais and then transitioned into the Hereford deal, and that is where it kind of all started."

She would not trade her day-to-day tasks for anything.

"I can't say there is a moment or something that happened to me that made me think this is what I want to do forever. I think it's honestly just that I don't know anything else and it's all I've ever really wanted to do and all I've ever been good at," she laughs.

For Samsel, the cattle she works with are more than just cattle to her — they are more like family and something she loves and cares about being a part of.

"At the end of the day it does pay off," she says.

"Whether you do hauling something that actually does well, but more than anything it is what they become after that. I know that sounds silly but it's probably what makes me enjoy raising cattle the most."

She worked alongside her brother Mark for more than 15 years when he took over RCS. During this time, she gained many valuable lessons from him, but the most important one that has stuck with her is to always keep learning.

"I think that statement speaks to whether you are messing with cattle or honestly just life in general," she says. "You always need to be willing to learn something new or to pick up on something different because there is no one way to do something that is right."

The feeling after learning she was the Herdsman of the Year is something she will cherish.

"This whole thing is weird to me just because I'm okay with doing my own thing and not really being noticed," she says. "But to share this with my brother is amazing for the simple fact that after my dad passed away when we were young, Mark was, and still is, one of my biggest influences in my life and pretty much made me who I am. That is special from that standpoint."

Life in the barn

In addition to helping her brother with their family business, Samsel has helped prep and show cattle for KLD Show Cattle, Rockin' W Ranch, Coyote Ridge, Rocking Chair Ranch, Worrell Enterprises and numerous others in the past. Eventually she made her way to the Barber Ranch show team in Channing, Texas, and has served as the showbarn herdsman for the past four years.

"Her mom worked for us as a kid in the early '70s, so we have been close with her family for a long time," says Mary Barber, matriarch of Barber Ranch. "We needed someone to help work on the show cattle, and Robyn was looking for something. It just evolved and was natural. We appreciate how dedicated Robyn has been to us. She was ready to go out on her own and we needed somebody here from time to time and she was a perfect fit."

It is the Barbers' way of making people feel like family that appeals most to Samsel.

“They have a way of treating you like family and you don’t want to go anywhere else,” she says. “Plus, I think of the kids like my own.”

Barber says it is hard to put into words Samsel’s work ethic, but Samsel gets up early, stays late in the barn and is always a pleasure to be around.

“It’s gratifying to have someone who you can tell is thrilled for the opportunity to work and take care and love the cattle as much as you do,” Barber says. “She just does a million and one teeny tiny details that other people don’t realize she does and gives 200%. She makes us all smile and it doesn’t matter what we are doing. She makes a hand and she makes a smiley one.”

During Samsel’s time at Barber Ranch, she has helped exhibit some of the operation’s most impressive national champions, such as two-time supreme champion bull BR Belle Air 6011.

“I think that most every day is a challenge, but I’d say as much as anything, you just always want the cattle to be their best and to look their best,” Samsel says. “You are just hoping everything goes right for the most part and I don’t know how you overcome that. I think you need a lot of faith, and faith in the animals and what they can do.”

Barber says a great part of Samsel’s approach to their operation is not getting stuck in a rut and she is not afraid to think out of the box to try new ideas or methods, which could apply to exercising the cattle, feeding or prepping for a show.

Samsel adds this mentality goes back to the advice Mark gave her about constantly learning.

“There is a lot of different things you can do and a lot of different things you can try because every animal is different and everyone is going to react differently to something,” Samsel says. “It’s just a lot of trying.”

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Samsel has grown up living and breathing the cattle industry. “I don’t think cattle have ever been just animals to me,” she says. “They’ve always been more like family and something I love and care about being a part of.”



Samsel and the Barber Ranch team have raised and shown some of the operation’s most impressive champions, including BR Belle Air 6011.



Samsel is very appreciate of the Hereford Herdsman of the Year nomination and cannot thank her friends and family enough for their support. She credits those individuals to helping mold her into who she is today.

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Between her time working in the Barber showbarn and extending a hand to helping customers, Samsel and her husband, Ryan, have been running Samsel Cattle Co., Cloverdale, Ind.

“Splitting my time isn’t really that difficult, honestly,” she says. “You’re always happy you’re going home to do something else or you’re always sad because you’re leaving the place you love and kind of vice versa.” To no surprise, one challenge she sets out to achieve is making sure both operations achieve its goals.

“This is something everybody faces, obviously, but everyone has a lot of goals they want to accomplish in life,” she says. “But honestly, living a happy life is probably achieving about as much as you could possibly ever want to do in life, and I do that every day.”

Samsel says she has numerous people whom she honestly can never thank enough for just giving her a chance.

“It means so much to be given an opportunity to do something you love,” she says. “With the Barber family, I can never thank them enough for giving



As young showmen continue to grow and evolve in the industry, Samsel says there is nothing more important than taking time out of your day to help them out.

me the opportunity to work with such great cows and, most of all, be a part of their family and spend time with the kids.”

Helping the next in line

For Samsel, helping youth is something that has been an important component for her during her involvement in the livestock industry.

“Not to sound cliché, but they are the future, and I think that if years after we’re all gone, if one of those kids remembers something you said or something helps them get through a situation, whether that is cows or life, I think that is important,” Samsel says. “I look back on a lot of my life and nothing stands out more than when somebody you look up to takes the time to talk to you.”

According to Barber, Samsel’s goal is to always make sure she builds up the kids’ self-confidence and to make showing fun. She is always the first to reassure them they are doing a good job and lets them know she is proud.

“Right before they go into the ring, she boosts their confidence, and I think she tries to instill in them it isn’t about winning, it is about the journey,” Barber says. “You have [the animal] looking the best they can and enjoy the experience. It doesn’t make a difference how you place. To me it is really important kids aren’t worrying about winning. They worry about enjoying it and appreciating the experience. She works with them until they think they are the best showman out in the ring.”

Samsel feels it is important to provide a positive environment and to keep encouraging those kids whether there is a win or a loss that follows their showing experience.

“Kids, especially young kids, don’t realize whether they’re winning. All they see is the people around them and the people they look up to and whether they are happy or not. So, I think it’s always better to have a positive outlook on life and make sure they always know there is a next time.”

Samsel is thankful for the opportunity to watch the kids whom she helps grow up.

“I think if you have the opportunity to give back just a little bit of what you have been given over the years, why not take the time,” she says. “Time doesn’t cost anything.”

Her love for the livestock industry and the kids involved is evident in everything she does according to Barber.

“She is a person of incredible integrity and I trust her with anything without hesitation —cattle or kids— she is so sincere and cares so deeply,” Barber says. “We are blessed and fortunate to have her as part of our family.” **HW**