

HEREFORD

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WORLD

From the Land Up

A powerful cross and intentional stewardship clear the way for high stocking rates and high weaning weights at Buford Ranches LLC, Hominy, Okla.

by *Diane Meyer*

No signs are needed to distinguish Buford Ranches pastures from the surrounding countryside in northeastern Oklahoma's Osage County. Native big bluestem, little bluestem, switchgrass, gamagrass and grama grass flourish in this southernmost region of the Flint Hills at the operation's Bledsoe-Steakley and Dunkin divisions, due west of Hominy.

Distinct as the Tallgrass Prairie grasses they graze, uniform groups of cattle gather in color-coordinated pastures of black baldies, red baldies, Hereford cows and black cows with baldy calves at side. It is a sight to behold, many neighbors and passersby have praised.

"It's your duty to treat the land well, to leave it better for the next generation," says third-generation manager, Sam Buford.

"I love the cattle, and you couldn't work without the cattle, but I spend most of my time cleaning up the land."

The Buford crew has found the foragers best suited for this Oklahoma oasis are Hereford and Angus cross cattle. Baldy calves raised on these nutrient-dense limestone soils will weigh 15 to 20 pounds heavier than their straightbred counterparts.

"Heterosis and weed sprayer are two things that pay for themselves more than any other thing in the cattle business," Buford says. "Through heterosis, you get a stronger, more viable calf at birth. You get a bigger calf at weaning, you get a bigger calf at yearling."

His firm belief in cultivating the domestic habitat supports the longevity of the operation's three-pronged program of commercial cattle and registered Hereford and Angus herds.

Bedrock

On a fateful day in December 1941, Buford's relatives signed the papers for their first ranch the day of the Pearl Harbor bombing. For the first couple decades, the Dunkin Ranch — as it was called then — ran straightbred Hereford cattle until a neighbor's Angus bull got into a heifer pen. Surely, the family thought, the outcome was going to be a disaster.

"At that point, we realized what crossbreeding could do for our cow-calf operation," Buford shares. "...The calves ended up

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weighing off heavier than the purebred calves, so we decided to buy a set of Angus bulls for our Hereford cows. The weaning weight steadily climbed as we began crossbreeding.”

Rapid expansion began in 1997, when the Buford family bought out the Dunkin side to become the overarching operating company, Buford Ranches LLC. Buford became partners with his sister, Sharon Linsenmeyer, and brother, Stephen, and hopefully, he hints, the fourth generation will be named operators in the future.

Now, on any given day, 6,000 to 7,000 commercial cows roam the seven ranches under the Buford umbrella. Close to 400 registered Herefords call Osage County home and 1,200 to 1,500 registered Angus are pastured near Welch. The role of Hereford and Angus genetics have since reversed from the olden days. Black cows are mated to Hereford bulls and black baldy cows to Angus bulls.

“That’s the cross we like,” Buford says. “If you want a premium dollar for your feeder calf and you want a cow that can work in your pasture, I think the Hereford-Angus is the best cross out there.”

And work it does. He recalls in the ’70s, his family raised 450- to 500-pound calves. Last August, calves weighed in over eight and a quarter without creep feed.

“The backbone of this whole operation is the black baldy female,” says Hereford purebred manager Doug Branch, who has worked on this location since 1998. “We’re trying to build a cow herd around her and we market those calves accordingly.”



The added boost of heterosis from Hereford genetics paired with high-quality grasses result in baldy calves that weigh more than 800 pounds come shipment time.



Buford Ranches Manager Sam Buford says Hereford genetics complement their primarily black cow herd best. “That’s a good combination of a cow in the pasture producing a product that can do well in a feedlot and then on somebody’s plate,” he says.

The ranch favorite, though, is the red baldy female. These sought-after crosses are bred back to Angus bulls and their offspring are second to none.

“The red baldies around this place are more coveted than anything else we have,” Buford says. “I think a lot of people think black is better, but that doesn’t mean it is better. The red baldies, when they’re heifers, probably get scrutinized a little more, subconsciously.”

An unofficial competition amongst the cowboys is who can wean the biggest calves. Branch describes how everybody fights for the red baldy females.

“The cowboys take pride in who has the biggest calves every year, and that red baldy female will help them do that,” Branch says. “Because she is so scrutinized, there is a lot of consistency in what she produces. She is a pretty special animal.”

Two sets of calves are sold yearly — a spring set, born the tail-end of January through late-April are sold in October, close to nine months old. Fall-born calves arrive mid-September through mid-December and are sold at 10 to 11 months old in summer. Steers are sold directly off the cow and heifers are weaned for 45 days, at which point replacements are selected off the top end and the balance are sold as feeder heifers.

Branch spends a lot of time monitoring the body condition score (BCS) of each cow, aiming to have each bred back in time to have 90-95% calved out in a 45-day window. This means cows



Careful management of northeastern Oklahoma’s native rangeland has increased stocking rates and weaning rates.

have no less than a BCS 4.5 to a 5 through winter and calving. He explains shortening the calving interval is another way to get uniformity in those calves beyond genetics and pasture management. Uniformity sells, and his goal is to shorten the spring-calving window to mid-March and earlier to combat the lower April weights that hinder shipping averages. Recently, he has given Multimin® a shot to see if the trace mineral supplement helps close that gap.

Raising a premium end-product requires premium inputs, and in 2013 the operation ventured into the registered Hereford business to meet the demands of the commercial herd, a move that brought both the ranch and Branch back to their purebred Hereford roots.

Bottom to top

The first move was purchasing two cowherds out of the Cheyenne, Wyo., area. Recently, Line 1 bulls were added to the mix, and eventually enough high-end, Buford-raised bulls became available to use on the commercial side and to be sold private treaty. Thousands of cattle have been fed to provide input for sire selection decisions.

Bulls that make the cut have a certain look: they travel well, have moderate muscling and are deep bodied, soggy, pigmented, short-marked and red to the ground. Less attention is given to marbling and ribeye measurements, and Branch points out Hereford-Angus cross calves naturally have plenty of carcass.

He explains, “The Hereford bull in our program will help us out on those high-percentage Angus cows by adding more product, foot size and bone to those cattle and gives them extra power.”

Buford agrees, echoing, “What Hereford brings to our equation is a stouter, thicker animal with more red meat muscle than a straight Angus.”

Udder quality is another big player, and a bull has to be backed by a cow with good udders and high milk production. This feeds back to developing a stronger cow herd.

“For a long time I looked at the top side of the pedigree, which was the sire side,” Buford shares. “Over time I realized the bottom side was probably more important than the top side. That’s when we started paying attention to cow families and we tried to translate that into our registered Hereford herd.”

Since then, Buford says they have made leaps and bounds in teat size and the balance of the udder.

“I think other Hereford breeders are putting an emphasis on that udder quality, too,” he registers. “I think the main thing you can do is once you pick a replacement heifer and she goes into the herd, that’s not the end of the deal. She’s got to have that good udder at two, three, four, five, six, and she’s got to breed that into her daughters.

“Now we’re looking at that animal and we’re saying, ‘Where’s she from? Have we actually kept bulls out of this cow? Has she been in the herd four years? Do we keep selling steers instead of bulls? Do we keep selling feeder heifers instead of having replacement heifers?’”

As the registered cowherd and bullpen grew, it was obvious the only way to retain efficiencies was through rigorous genetic selection and forage management. “If you ever stop and think you’re where you want to be, you’ll probably be behind,” Branch says. “I think we can get 85% of where we want to be, but we always need to be reaching for that extra 10 or 15%... our goal is to be able to raise the best cattle we can possibly raise.”

Gaining ground

Without healthy forage, there is no home for cattle or cattlemen. Long before settlers arrived in Oklahoma, Native Americans pioneered big burns to drive buffalo from the river. When the area began to populate 150 years ago, the burns quit and invasive plants like scrub bushes and post oak and blackjack oak trees took over.

A map of the original Dunkin Ranch, drawn in the ’50s, shows the property at 70% woodland. In a matter of decades, brush largely overtook the southern part of the county. Prescribed burns and aerial spraying have transformed the landscape to be 90% open. In Osage County, the eastern and western Buford ranches are burned consistently every other year, totaling roughly 15,000 acres annually. (Or a few thousand more, if a fire decides it has some extra steam.)

The plants that grow post-burn are more tender, making it easier to eliminate stalwart species, like the evasive *Sericea lespedeza*. Stocking rates shoot up as the native grasses reclaim their turf. Those stocking rates, once one cow per 10 acres, have improved to one cow per 6 or 7 acres.



The red baldy female is a prized commodity on the ranch because of the consistent calf crop she produces each year.

“It’s evident when you take care of your grass... that cow’s going to do her job and raise a big calf,” Buford says. “As we’ve increased our stocking rates, we’ve seen our weaning weights climb way up as well.”

According to Branch, the cattle running on those rejuvenated grasses gain up to an extra 50 pounds. The additional weight is insured by a vaccination program that includes two rounds of modified live vaccines to fight respiratory infections. The first shot is given within 30 days post-calving season and the second usually within another eight weeks when calves are shipped. “If we don’t have that modified live shot in them, it’s hard for us to market those calves,” Branch says.

Also benefitting from the open prairie are horses that have found their niche at Buford Ranches. Longtime ranch hand John (Kojack) Holloway has taken the reins to the Osage divisions’ registered herd of Quarter Horses, which includes 50 Quarter Horse mares with foundation bloodlines. These are crossed with newer bloodlines to develop a horse that withstands everyday ranch use yet still has a good mind to compete in the rodeo arena. Another 2,600 head of mustangs are housed on the ranch through the Bureau of the Land Management’s Wild Horse and Burro Program. Together, the land, cattle and horses create a diversified network to strengthen the operation’s roots for future generations.

Stronger together

Like the ground they depend on, the faithful crew at Buford Ranches sticks together through thick and thin.

“It’s a family operation, from the cowboys all the way up to the management,” Branch says proudly. “We all treat each other as family and for people to stay at a job — especially in the ranching business — that long, it tells you what kind of family you’re working for.”

“My father always instilled to my brother and sister and I that we would be stronger together,” Buford says of the role of family in the operation’s success. It is a philosophy his predecessors planted, and one he hopes the next generation will nourish, should they choose this lifestyle.

“As cowboys and ranchers, we’ve got the greatest job in the world,” Branch preaches. “We’re caretakers of God’s creation and whether it’s the land, the water, the cattle. If we just stay humble doing that — wow, what a blessing it is.” **HW**



All hands on the Buford team consider each other family and they all share one dream: the next generation will pick up and run with the legacy left behind.