

Heart *of the* Ozarks

Young couple overcomes obstacles to build Hereford operation.



Travis and Sarah McConaughy along with sons, Jett (l) and Watson (r), work to produce high quality Hereford genetics and carry on Travis' grandparents' legacy in the Missouri Ozarks.

by **Adrian Austin**

Travis and Sarah McConaughy of WMC Cattle Co. (WMC), Wasola, Mo., have grown his grandfather's small Hereford herd to a notable seedstock operation with its own production sale in a decade. Yet, it didn't come easily. Along the way, the couple faced unpredictable hardships, while learning how to balance family tradition with a modern vision. Perhaps that is why their family motto has been, "Work like it is all up to us and pray like it is all up to Him."

The powerful moment when their hard work came to fruition is one they'll likely never forget.

"When I stepped up on the auction block for the first time, I thought, 'Holy cow... everything we've worked for during the last 10 years is fixing to happen right now,'" Travis says.

Trials and tradition

Travis met his future wife, Sarah, at a team roping. The rodeo sweethearts grew closer after an unexpected tragedy in July 2009, which neither Travis nor Sarah could have predicted. Travis was in a motorcycle wreck, resulting in the amputation of one of his legs at the knee. Sarah, a Michigan native, moved to the heart of cow-calf country in the Missouri Ozarks after the accident.

Growing up, Sarah roped and showed pigs, horses and a few steers, but she did not come from an extensive cattle background.

“I would consider my upbringing around livestock to be that of a hobby farm, not like the lifestyle that Travis was immersed in,” Sarah says.

Travis was raised on the ranch in Wasola and found a love for cattle and a best friend in his grandpa, Calvin Watson. Calvin taught Travis to produce easy-fleshing, maternal cows that generate high-performing calves with minimal inputs. The Hereford genetics Travis’ grandparents built a half century ago are the foundation of WMC today.

“My grandfather was my hero, and we spent a lot of time together,” Travis says.

That’s likely why Travis recalls watching on crutches from the sidelines as Sarah helped an 85-year-old Calvin tag new Hereford babies and knowing she would become an integral part of the operation’s future.

However, standing on the sidelines was not for Travis.

“They said a lot of people it takes three weeks to finish (rehab),” he says. “So, on the second day in rehab, I had the staff make a list of what I had to do to be able to leave, and by the sixth day I was through the entire list. I told them, ‘I’ve got to go home.’ On the seventh day I got in the car, and I was headed out.”

He says his accident defined his approach to life and cattle ranching. Travis doesn’t worry about

continued on page 38...



Most WMC pedigrees can be traced back to Calvin Watson’s herd, who liked easy-fleshing cattle that performed with minimal inputs.



Sarah didn’t grow up on a cattle operation, but when her husband, Travis, watched her tag calves with his grandpa for the first time, he knew she would play a large role in the operation’s success.





Travis focuses on EPDs and market demands to build upon the easy-fleshing, high-performing females his grandfather raised.

the things he can't change and recognizes the importance of embracing the life he has been dealt and working to make the most of it.

Sarah agrees with her husband's outlook and says the couple is constantly working toward the future. "You've always got to be prepared for what's to come," she says. "When we started out together, we had a vision of where we wanted to go. We told each other, 'This isn't going to be easy. We're going to have to sacrifice.' But the excitement that I feel each time a calf is born, and we've been waiting for that calf, waiting for that mating, is the same excitement I felt when I committed to being a part of this family and this farm years ago."

Travis and Sarah married in April 2011, following the passing of Travis' grandmother in February of the same year. Calvin later passed in August 2012, and the younger couple was left with the task of running WMC.



The McConnaughys sold cattle to 13 states and Canada during their inaugural Ladies of the Ozarks production sale. The sale was a culmination of a decade of hard work.

Both Travis and Sarah felt it was their responsibility to step-up and take over the cattle operation to preserve his grandparents' work and the easy-fleshing, high-performance Hereford genetics they produced.

"We had such a huge respect for his grandparents that we knew we had this kind of silver platter in front of us and felt we had to continue the WMC legacy," Sarah says.

Travis felt he could build upon his grandpa's legacy by breeding Herefords to increase the operation's expected progeny differences (EPDs) and selecting them for new market demands.

Today, WMC has grown from Calvin's 66 cows to roughly 300, most of which are direct descendants from the original herd. Travis' philosophy is to increase quality versus quantity and to make the bottom-end of the cow herd better.

"Raising good cattle is our number one priority in order to make our living doing this," he says.

Alongside their sons, Jett, 7, and Watson, 5, Travis and Sarah have stuck with this philosophy and it gave them the courage to start having production sales.

Taking it to the block

"The first Ladies of the Ozarks sale was a goal we had for several years," Travis says. "We're both kind of perfectionists, so we worked really hard to get ready for it and that took several years to get to that point."

Sarah felt having the sale was also representative of a fulfilled promise to Travis' grandparents, although there were naysayers along the way.

"There were times that we were told, 'You're not ready.' There were times that we were told, 'You can't have it out in the middle of nowhere,' or, 'You can't do it here on your farm because nobody's going to come out here,'" she says. "So, it was not always easy, but I feel like it was a huge, huge accomplishment."

There were lots of discussions about where to host the first sale. Several people wanted the sale in Springfield, Mo. But, in the end, Travis wanted the location to be at the home farm for the inaugural Ladies of the Ozarks sale held May 18, 2019. Ultimately, the couple's commitment paid off.

"When we started seeing vehicles come down the road, I literally just wanted to cry, as I was thinking that all of this work that we've put into this is finally going to pay off," Sarah recalls.

Several people asked how the sale attracted so many attendees, and Travis says it was fairly simple — they worked

at it by making calls, posting on Facebook and building a reliable customer base.

“The first sale was such a surreal experience. It was so humbling to be able to look around and think, ‘Okay, all of those sales that we went to, or all of the phone calls that we made ... and all of these people came here because of us and their belief in the quality of cattle that would be offered,’” he says.

At the end of the inaugural Ladies of the Ozarks sale, WMC sold cattle to 13 states and Canada, with 62 live lots averaging \$5,148.

“I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry... I was just in just complete awe. I was speechless,” Sarah says.

Building their own legacy

After a successful inaugural sale, Travis and Sarah admitted to being nervous about a second one. At the time, they were unsure of their potential to improve, and then the pandemic hit.

“We were trying to do all the right things to replicate our first sale,” Travis says. “Then, with the uncertainty of COVID-19, we didn’t know if anyone would even show up.”

But, the McConnaughy family continued to work hard, and in the end, they prevailed. The second Ladies of the Ozarks sale, held Sept. 28, 2020, was standing-room-only. Travis’ long-term goal of a bull sale seemed in reach given their previous sales’ successes, so on Nov. 1, 2020, WMC rented out the Springfield

Livestock Marketing Center in Springfield, Mo., to sell herd sires.

“We ended up selling 46 bulls to average \$3,888,” Travis shares. “We are truly blessed at the amount of interest we had for our first bull sale, and we plan to make this an annual event.”

Travis and Sarah still have big goals and big dreams to chase but raising their family in the Hereford business will always be the couple’s main focus.

“I feel like it goes back to granddad and grandma — we have a promise to keep, that they gave us this and that we will continue to make it better,” Sarah says. “I’m going to do my best every single day to fulfill that, and that’s a goal big enough for me to know that every day I wake up, and I do my best to raise a family that loves each other and loves raising cattle.”



Travis and Sarah love the Hereford breed and business. They are grateful to raise their children in the industry.

The couple’s love for the breed, Travis’ family tradition and the trials which only strengthened their will have all helped Travis and Sarah create a family operation set to make a lasting mark in southern Missouri.

“I love the Hereford breed. I love the people in the business, and I wouldn’t want to raise our boys anywhere else than alongside Hereford cows in the heart of the Ozarks,” Travis says. **HW**

