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Range Worthy Bulls; Rail Worthy Steers

Retaining ownership in their Hereford-influenced calves helps Harrell Hereford Ranch and Sierra Ranches improve their genetics and commercial customers' bottom lines.

By Katie Maupin Miller

Running cattle along the West Coast challenges ranchers. Whether it is high desert rangeland flanked by mountains or craggy foothills, Western cattle need to be rugged, sound and hardy to thrive in this sometimes unforgiving climate. This year's unprecedented drought adds an extra layer of complexity for cattlemen as water from snowpack and local reservoirs begins to run dry.

As Bob Harrell, Jr., owner of Harrell Hereford Ranch, Baker City, Ore., says, "This year will really test our resolve and the type of cattle we have."

Harrell has been testing his cattle for decades, both in their high-country home and on the rail. Now, the carcass data and pure performance backing his herd of Hereford cattle create significant returns for his commercial bull buyers.

Likewise, Sierra Ranches of Modesto, Calif., added seedstock Herefords to their own 700-head commercial cattle operation in the mid-'90s to make the perfect commercially oriented herd sires to pair with their straightbred, black-hided females. Today, the operation's commercial roots pay off in big ways for their Hereford seedstock customers.

Harrell heritage

Harrell Hereford Ranch lies sandwiched between the Elkhorn and Eagle Cap mountain ranges in eastern Oregon. Traces of the Oregon Trail can still be found on the family's third-generation ranch, which started as an 80-acre homestead.

The Harrell family's foray into the Hereford breed started with Harrell's parents, Bob and Edna. The couple purchased Line 1 and Mark Donald genetics from Harold Thompson of TT Herefords in the '70s, followed by additional cattle selected from Stone Herefords in Oregon.

Today, Harrell runs 900 cattle in the high country. The family retains ownership of their commercial calves through harvest.

For two decades, Harrell has collected carcass data on his Hereford-influenced fat cattle. This data serves as an invaluable guide for the seedstock side of their operation.

"I think running commercial cows gives you a real-world perspective when you retain ownership all the way to the finish," Harrell says.

Initially, the family fed cattle as part of Country Natural Beef (CNB), an all-natural branded beef program. Harrell received

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feedlot, carcass and profitability data on his calves and all fed cattle under the CNB brand. He took that data and compared cutability, carcass grades, growth, feed costs and profitability in a giant Excel document. CNB was not a breed-based meat program, so as Harrell poured over the numbers, he compared his Hereford-sired cattle with those of other breeds.

Harrell even created his own profitability indexes based on his findings. Deep in these spreadsheets filled with numbers, Harrell realized the most profitable cattle were not necessarily those that excelled in any single trait — be it growth or marbling. Instead, cattle that made money on the grid were good across the board.

“What we’ve found, looking at all of this data, that it wasn’t the cattle that excelled at one or two different traits. The profitable cattle were the ones that excelled at about ten different criteria,” Harrell says.

This strategy drove Harrell’s genetic selection. When he bred his Hereford seedstock, he preferred to make the front pasture kind, but they also needed genetics to hang a quality carcass. Ultimately, Harrell is known for breeding cattle capable of providing a profit regardless of their environment.

“Hereford cattle can thrive in pretty much every type of environment. They are a very thrifty breed. The fertility is there, the easy-keeping is there, and the performance is there. It goes back to what I said, ‘They do multiple things way better than average, and that’s what makes them profitable cattle,’” Harrell says. “When you add up all of those things that determine profitability, Hereford cattle excel in more of those categories than most cattle do.”

“Ultimately, a purebred guy has to sell bulls to a commercial man so that he can sell his calves at a profit. Then, those calves have to go to the grow yard and make that guy a profit. Then, they have to go to the finishing yard and make that guy a profit. When those calves make money for everyone down the chain, that is when you get return customers.”

— Bob Harrell, Jr.

Sierra’s story

Sierra Ranches owner Tim Coleman cut his teeth in the Angus business. His father started Vintage Angus then in Modesto, Calif., in the ’70s, and Coleman grew up showing and helping market high-quality Angus cattle throughout the country. Shortly before college graduation, Coleman purchased a ranch in the Sierra foothills and began a commercial cattle operation with a black-hided, Angus-influenced cow herd.

After 16 years of breeding his cows to Angus bulls, Coleman wanted to add more crossbreeding to his commercial program. Herefords seemed like the logical choice to withstand the rugged country and create the sought-after black baldy calves many feeders preferred.

Over the last several years, Coleman collected carcass data from his Hereford-influenced commercial cattle. Cattleman’s Choice Feedyard, Gauge, Okla., raves about the Coleman-bred calves’ rate of gain and overall health and hardiness. The cattle also perform on the rail. With an average of 70% choice cattle, 30% prime and no selects, Sierra Ranches’ Hereford genetics have not only proved profitable in their commercial cow herd but also in their customers’ herds.

Bull buyers purchase Sierra-bred cattle with confidence, not only in their real-world carcass numbers but also the ability for Coleman’s Hereford sires to last in rugged environments.

“A lot of our customers’ feedback is, ‘You know, I’d love to come buy another bull, but the one we bought two, three years ago is still holding up. So, we’re going to get another year out of him. We’ll see you next year,’” Coleman says. “These bulls are rugged. They were born up in the foothills. Our customers like that they’re in the environment that they’re going to be turning those bulls out on their cow herd.”

Coleman’s customers see improvement in their commercial herd beyond carcass merit, though. They report their baldy daughters thrive in the Western range. Sierra Ranches also see a significant improvement in the quality of their commercial heifers with added Hereford influence. The number of heifer calves that meet the Coleman family’s stringent selection criteria for their replacement females has increased thanks to the added hybrid vigor and maternal traits of the baldy heifers. Last year, Sierra Ranches offered baldy replacement females which demanded top dollar at their annual bull sale.

Not to mention, their Hereford cattle thrive in the foothills. Their docile, big-footed, rugged bulls capably cover country and cover cows. And, their calves prove profitable for commercial cattlemen and women regardless if they’re retaining replacement females or ownership of fed cattle.

Bald-faced, flush performance

Both Harrell and Coleman utilize similar crossbreeding programs in their commercial cow herds. Black-hided cattle are bred to Hereford sires, while the baldy females they retain are bred to black bulls. The resulting black baldy calves are consistent in both color and performance.

As Harrell says, cattle need to make money for all three sectors of the beef industry — cow-calf producers, stockers and backgrounders, and cattle feeders and packers. Hereford-influenced cattle need enough maternal merit and fertility to breed on time and easily have healthy, hardy calves that wean heavy. Then, those same baldies need to enter the stocker phase with enough feed efficiency and health to reach 900 pounds with a favorable cost of gain. Finally, the cattle in the feedlot must finish with a carcass that has both cutability and quality to garner the maximum premiums when sold on the grid.

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Photo by Heidi Anderson



Sierra Ranches’ Hereford bulls are tough, rugged and sound from their upbringing in the foothills. Bull buyers often compliment their hardiness, fertility and longevity.

Photo by Heidi Anderson



Sierra Ranches Hereford program provides owner Tim Coleman with bulls for his commercial cow herd. The resulting baldy calves have shown performance advantages over their black-hided counterparts both in the feedlot and in the pasture.



Both Harrell Hereford Ranch and Sierra Ranches use Hereford bulls on their predominately black-hided commercial cow herds. The hybrid vigor in their Hereford influenced calves pays whether they're retaining baldy females or feeder steers. The Hereford-influenced females are known for their added fertility and stayability.

to go to the grow yard and make that guy a profit. Then, they have to go to the finishing yard and make that guy a profit," Harrell says. "When those calves make money for everyone down the chain, that is when you get return customers."

In both Coleman's and Harrell's experience, their Hereford-influenced cattle have done all of the above. Their seedstock operations' commercial connections keep profitability at the forefront of their Hereford genetics.

Both men agree, Hereford genetics not only complement their predominantly black-hided commercial cow herds but improve them as well. Whether they are talking about replacement females or feeder cattle, both Sierra Ranches and Harrell Hereford Ranch

have seen progress in their commercial operations through crossbreeding with Hereford genetics. And, they have seen these improvements while their carcass data has remained on par or passed that of their straightbred, black cattle.



Tim Coleman retains ownership of his Hereford-influenced calves. He views the resulting carcass data as the true benchmark of carcass genetics and uses the information to make selections in his seedstock herd.



The two decades of carcass data Bob Harrell, Jr., collected on his Hereford-influenced fed cattle helped him improve both his Hereford seedstock operation and his bull customers' profitability.

seedstock and commercial cow herds that they're planning ways to help their bull buyers feed or market their Hereford-sired calves in the future.

"We've been having great results [feeding cattle]," Coleman says. "We're trying to see what we could do to incorporate more of our bull buyers so they can have an outlet to feed cattle as well."

With his decades of experience feeding cattle for branded beef programs, Harrell recently partnered with Agri Beef Company in the True West project, a 500-head-per-day beef plant under



Both Harrell Hereford Ranch and Sierra Ranches want to help their bull buyers feed and retain ownership of their Hereford-sired calves. Harrell recently partnered with Agri Beef Company in the True West project, a 500-head-per-day beef plant under construction in Idaho. He hopes his customers can supply the plant with fed cattle or that Harrell Hereford Ranch can offer a buy-back program for feeder cattle.

Feeding for the future

Both operations view carcass data as the most accurate benchmark of beef carcass genetics. While EPDs and genomic testing are advantageous when selecting future herd sires, the actual test always comes when their progeny is hung on the rail.

"Carcass data really allows us to benchmark where we're at, for our bull sale and to our customers, and we feel that it's a valuable tool," Coleman says. Sierra Ranches uses their carcass data to demonstrate the economic value of Hereford-sired calves to potential customers who traditionally buy black bulls.

The carcass data both operations receive on their fed cattle has been so instrumental in improving their Hereford

construction in Jerome, Idaho. Harrell and his brother-in-law, Wannie Mackenzie, will supply a certain number of fed cattle to the new plant annually. They hope it will also provide new opportunities for their commercial customers.

"Our goal is to give our customers an opportunity to either retain ownership or have a buy-back program and feed through that," Harrell says. "We want to work one-on-one to help our customers gain more information and in return be more profitable."

One such customer is Mark Rietmann of Triangle Ranches, Heppner, Ore. Rietmann has purchased Harrell bulls for three decades to cover his 500 commercial cows. Selecting genetics is serious business for Rietmann, who retains ownership of his cattle. When he purchases bulls, the potential sires need to have weaning weights greater than the top end of Triangle Ranches steer calves coupled with moderate birth weight, an ultrasound measurement of 12-14 square inches ribeye area (REA) and intramuscular fat (IMF) of at least 3.

Rietmann is also willing to pay for such genetics, usually purchasing bulls in the top 15% of the Harrell Hereford Ranch sale. However, these investments have paid off. Over the last decades, Triangle Ranches cattle have gone from a 60% choice average to today's 95% average. Rietmann attributes a lot of this progress to Harrell's data collection and genetic improvement.

"He's just interested in making his cow herd better, which makes the bulls he raises better," Rietmann says.

As Hereford breeders, like Coleman and Harrell, continue to use real-world data to improve their seedstock and support their commercial customers, baldy calves will remain the gold standard in the feedyard. And, with the data they are able to collect from Hereford-influenced cattle on the rail, Harrell Hereford Ranch and Sierra Ranches will use these beef benchmarks to improve their bull customers' bottom lines. **HW**