



HEREFORD WORLD

The voice of the American Hereford Association | February 2022

Adding Heifer Value

Hereford bulls build and fill increasing demand for black baldy replacements.

by **Wes Ishmael**

Black and white is tough to beat when it comes to logic and commercial cattle.

“A black baldy is the poster child for a cow, in my opinion. They can cross with any breed and get it done,” says Brent Wastenev of Wastenev Farms near Shannon City, in southwestern Iowa.

Hereford-built baldies are in such high demand in his part of the world that Wastenev changed his breeding program 10 years ago. He switched to Hereford bulls for the breed’s docility and what they bring to the baldy mix.

“The baldy calves stick out. If you take a set of baldy calves to a sale barn, there are normally mostly black calves or red calves. When a baldy set walks in the ring, it catches their eyes,” Wastenev says.

Before getting the dally in front of the slack, Wastenev Farms runs several hundred commercial black Angus cows, breeds them to Hereford bulls and markets all of the calves.

The operation runs both spring-calving and fall-calving cows. Wastenev backgrounds the spring calves and markets them at about 700-800 pounds through Creston Livestock Auction in Iowa. He markets his fall calves in May, just ahead of grass season, at Dunlap Livestock Auction.

Wastenev prefers the price discovery that occurs via auction trade. It also enables him to establish a personal sale of sorts. Buyers know they’ll have a crack at Wastenev’s spring calves, including his top-tier heifers sorted off as a breeding group, the first Wednesday of each year. Buyers can take as few as 10 head, but pot-load buyers usually win the bidding.

“The baldy steers always sell well, and there is usually a price break between heifers and steers, no matter what breed they are,” Wastenev explains. “Our baldy heifers have been in

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Brent Wastenev of Wastenev Farms at Shannon City, Iowa, switched to Hereford bulls a decade ago for their docility and what they bring to building black baldy replacement females.

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Understand that Wastenev steers typically sell firmly at the top of the market. Earning the same money or more than steers for his replacement heifers is a significant economic boon.

“Buyers come to these baldy replacement heifers for a reason. They could have kept their own black heifers, but they’re looking for an outcross,” Wastenev says. “Over the last 10 years the interest in the Hereford breed, I think, has picked up around here. I would like to think that we were one of the first ones to get that started in this area. It seems like a lot more baldy calves are being sold.”

Pounds plus fertility and efficiency

“Most are buying baldy females because they wean heavier calves, have a nicer disposition and because of the fertility. Compared to straight black heifers they get 3-4% higher conception rates with the baldies,” says Bill Goehring of Goehring Family Herefords at Libertyville, Iowa.

Science certainly supports the notion.

“Heterosis is the key to maximizing production efficiency through a combination of individual and maternal heterosis advantages. The combined effects of maternal and individual heterosis yields a 20-28% increase in pounds weaned per cow

exposed per year,” says Grady Ruble, former South Dakota State University (SDSU) Extension cow-calf field specialist.

“In a crossbreeding system where F1 females were mated to a terminal sire of a different breed, the observed advantage was 23.3%. In this system 8.5% of the heterosis advantage was attributed to individual traits and 14.8% was attributed to maternal heterosis from the crossbred cow. This demonstrates the importance of both maternal and individual heterosis, namely the benefit of the crossbred cow,” Ruble explains in an SDSU fact sheet. He’s referring to seminal crossbreeding research conducted at the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center.

Goehring has a unique vantage point to assess buyer demand over time. Besides being a Hereford seedstock producer, he and his family run commercial cows, which includes developing and marketing commercial replacement females. The Goehring’s also own and manage Keosauqua Sales Co. at Keosauqua, Iowa.



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It is what producers of a certain vintage would recognize as a community auction. Every Saturday they sell everything from cattle to hogs, sheep and goats, to hay, hedge posts and livestock equipment.

Over time, Goehring has seen the market gain for black baldies.



Brent Wastenev of Shannon City, Iowa, prefers big-boned, deep-ribbed, long-sided bulls. “We run cows weighing 1,300-1,400 pounds. If they can’t have a 90-pound calf, they don’t need to be here,” he says.



You see lots more black and white cattle in southern Iowa these days as more commercial producers use Hereford bulls to build black baldy females and more purchase black baldy replacements.

In his family's own Big Bend Ranch female sale — the first Wednesday every December — Goehring says the baldies typically average \$200 more than their black contemporaries. For instance, bred black baldy heifers averaged \$2,227 in their annual December sale compared to an average of \$2,028 for black bred heifers.

When you consider those prices, it helps to understand Goehring replacements are sorted hard, AI-bred to top bulls and carry sexed embryos that will be born in 20-day calving windows.

According to Goehring, most black baldy females in his area are bred back to Angus bulls. However, he and Wastenev also see more commercial producers using Hereford bulls on their black cows.

"They're looking to make F1 cows because they will wean more pounds, and they'll say they've never been in pen of black bulls that are as quiet," Goehring stresses.

Baldy users also note added efficiency.

"Hereford makes good baldies. They feed out well. We've had good luck feeding them out. It seems like our steers usually go to the same places every year so they must hang well on the rail for them," Wastenev says.

Previous and ongoing research document the specific advantages Hereford brings to the baldy mix (see Getting more with less).

Goehring adds that his commercial customers find more longevity in Hereford bulls compared to bulls of other breeds they've used.

"They don't need to turn them over for six to eight years," he explains. Depending on the operation that means they're likely getting at least one to two more years of service.

Buying and building replacements

Debate over whether it makes more sense to buy replacements or develop your own is older than Methuselah's baby teeth.

"I get both comments," Goehring says. "Some operations believe they are better off buying females, especially through the last

market cycle, selling their heifers and buying back guaranteed bred replacements. Others believe their females are best and want to keep them in their herd."

Goehring adds herd size plays a role. It's about 25 head in his area. Although every situation is different, purchasing replacements can have more benefit to smaller herds that might not have the labor necessary to develop them. Go further west where herds are counted in hundreds of head and producers likely believe there is added benefit in keeping replacements acclimated to their specific resources.

The Goehring's buy replacement-quality black Angus heifers from trusted Nebraska Sand Hills ranches. Likewise, Wastenev buys all of his replacement Angus heifers from longtime sources in South Dakota and the Sand Hills.

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Black baldy females are known to wean bigger calves and be more fertile than their straightbred peers.

So, both producers have plenty of insight to offer when it comes to considering purchased replacements.

“Understand the source, the program and the people behind it. You really need to be knowledgeable of the people breeding the cattle. Some are breeding for cash, not to make better females,” Goehring says. “You’ve got to use genetics you can trust. Find a program with a reputation. Talk to someone who has bought heifers from them before.”

Likewise, Wastenev says, “You need to look at your own operation and what works for you. Buy from someone with consistency.

We’ve always tried to have a good reputation and be honest. Represent them to the best of your ability.”

Goehring also says it is important to know about the sire used to breed the heifers. “With the data and genomics available to help mate cows, there is no excuse to make a mistake. They should be able to make these heifers 100% calving ease,” he says.

With beef cow numbers shrinking and market leverage returning to producers, Goehring anticipates bred heifers being \$200-\$400 per head higher a year from now.



Besides growing demand for black baldy replacements and Hereford bulls, Bill Goehring of Libertyville, Iowa, believes interest is growing for straightbred Hereford replacements.

If the West and Northern Plains break from the drought, he says prices could be explosive. Inflationary input costs also suggest prices need to be higher.

However prices evolve, Wastenev says, “I think there will always be a market for a Hereford bull. On a black cow, it’s unbeatable, in my opinion. Great hybrid vigor, great mothers, and on the marketing end of it, it’s hard to beat a baldy steer and the F1 replacement heifers are always in demand. Good stock sells.” **HW**

Getting more with less

“By using the crossbred female and taking advantage of lower feed intake and maintenance requirements of Hereford cattle in our crossbreeding system, we should be able to increase stocking rate or reduce the number of acres required by about one acre per cow-calf unit,” says Dave Lalman, Oklahoma State University (OSU) Extension beef cattle specialist.

Lalman is referring to results of an OSU study.

“In this experiment, we set out to determine if we could potentially reduce annual cow maintenance costs with Hereford-sired, black baldy cows compared to straightbred Angus cows,” Lalman explains.

While there is substantial older data available on the question of heterosis, Lalman says, “There is not much data available on the influence of crossing a breed known for lower feed intake — the Hereford breed — with the popular Angus breed.”

More specifically, considerable research exists indicating that a simple crossbreeding system can result in improved cow longevity and fertility compared to a purebred or straightbred system. In fact, years of crossbreeding studies conducted at the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center showed an average improvement in weaning weight per cow when a simple two-breed rotation was used with bos Taurus breeds, such as Hereford and Angus. This advantage is known as heterosis or hybrid vigor.

Another potential benefit of crossbreeding, and one often overlooked, is to select the second breed in the crossbreeding system based on inherent characteristics that might reduce costs or improve income in the operation. The idea of selecting breeds that complement one another in this way is known as breed complementarity.

OSU researchers broke their study into two phases: Maintenance energy requirements and voluntary feed intake. How well do black baldy cows retain body condition compared to Angus cows? What is the forage intake difference between the black baldy cows and the straight Angus cows?

“As cattle producers know, cow-calf operations need to have pregnant cows that are able to maintain a good body condition through the relatively harsher winter months while also providing needed nutrients to the as-yet-unborn calf inside them,” Lalman says. “If the cows can do that while consuming fewer nutrients, the reduction in input costs provides an advantage in annual cow costs.”

The OSU study showed the black baldy cows averaged a better body condition score than the straightbred Angus cows. In fact, the crossbred cows maintained better body condition throughout both phases of the experiment.

“On average, we measured just under 2 pounds per day less moderate quality forage intake in the crossbred cows,” Lalman said. “On an annual basis, the black baldy cows would be expected to consume about 725 pounds less forage.”

For perspective, some of the more productive native range in Oklahoma produces about 3,000 pounds of forage per acre. However, studies by rangeland ecologists have led to recommendations that cattle producers should aim for only about 25% consumption of available forage by livestock per acre. Doing the math: 25% of 3,000 pounds is 750 pounds.

Lalman stresses nobody is saying that raising straightbred animals is a bad thing, and there are many reasons to do so. However, he says simple, planned crossbreeding systems using breeds that complement one another can reduce the cost of maintaining a cow herd and increase ranch output through improved longevity and fertility.

“Raising livestock is not, nor has it ever been, a one-size-fits-all solution,” Lalman says. “Cow efficiency is one more important feature in the cattle producer’s toolbox, relative to the decision-making process.” **HW**



Photo courtesy of Oklahoma State University