

Collegiate Cross

Texas A&M University-Commerce's Super Baldy crossbreeding program captures the value of Hereford's hybrid vigor and hands-on learning.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, Texas, grew exponentially over the last eight years. But, the commercial cow herd maintained by its College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources had dwindled to 50 head in 2016, following the drought five years earlier.

Simultaneously, Kilgore College was dispersing its 100 Angus-Brahman cross cows. After striking a deal with the school, A&M-Commerce staff knew they'd pair Hereford bulls with their new F1 and F2 females.

Hybrid vigor

Herefords proved to be the perfect cross on an Angus-Brahman cow herd. By adding a third, unrelated breed to their females, A&M-Commerce maximized heterosis (hybrid vigor). Their Hereford-influenced weaned calves weighed more, yet their baldy replacement heifers proved to be more moderately sized, efficient females than their Brangus peers.

"I try to teach my students in animal breeding, there are two reasons why we crossbreed," says Douglas Eborn, A&M-Commerce assistant professor of animal science. "One is for hybrid vigor, and the hybrid vigor we get from the Hereford-Angus-Brangus cross is really a benefit and a strength in this breeding program. And then, the second reason that we're crossbreeding is for breed complementarity — to take the strengths of the different breeds and complement them. I think with the Brahman breed and its role here in this part of Texas, the maternal and carcass qualities that we get from the Angus, and all the added benefits that we're getting from the Hereford, just seem to really do well."

Not only does their unique gene pool maximize hybrid vigor, but Hereford genetics are also diverse enough to find the perfect sires to complement their current cow herd — calving ease, high growth, curve benders, maternal traits. If a herd needs to improve a specific trait, there is likely a Hereford bull with the genetics to help.

"There was a Hereford bull that fit any cow that we had," says Ryan Doerner, A&M-Commerce farm manager. "Some bigger framed F1s, we put with the higher growth bulls; some of the replacements and heifers, we put the low birth-weight bull on them."

The A&M-Commerce team has built a diverse Hereford bull battery from Hereford breeders in their region, including Iron Lake



Ranch, Cox Ranch, Barber Ranch, Rader Hereford Genetics and GKB Cattle. Furthermore, female additions have been added from Six Mile Creek and Stewart Herefords.

A&M-Commerce improved udder quality and milking ability with their Hereford sires. The staff was easily able to select for these traits using the American Hereford Association's expected progeny differences (EPDs) for Udder Suspension (UDDR) and Teat Size (TEAT). Unsurprisingly, their baldy replacement females had improved udder quality compared to their peers.

Perhaps one of the most notable improvements in the Hereford-influenced calves was their docility and disposition. As a university that prides itself in hands-on agricultural experience for students, the easy-going nature the Hereford genetics lent to the crossbreeding program made classwork and research much easier.

"From my standpoint, we're all about utilizing real-world situations for academic teaching and research programs, for curriculum, for experiences and for hands-on learning," says Randy Harp, dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at A&M-Commerce.

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assistant professor of animal science



The value of the Hereford influence is recognized outside of the classroom, though. Their baldy calves fetch top dollar at market — often Oklahoma City, Sulphur Springs, Texas or Paris, Texas — before thriving in a West Texas feedlot. These cattle also work as replacement females in the real world.

“The little bit of Brahman influence works well for East Texas’s humidity, and the Angus-Hereford cross has always been a good foundation to get that feedlot performance,” Harp says.

The university has termed this successful crossbreeding program the Super Baldy program.

Super Baldy

While Super Baldy may sound like a comic book hero, it’s a common term in Northeast Texas for a Hereford-Angus cross calf with a bit of ear. Super Baldies have a reputation of having the favorable carcass and maternal traits coveted by feeders and breeders alike, along with extra heat tolerance and hardiness, which serves them well in hot, humid climates. These attributes combine to make the cross a great choice to graze A&M-Commerce’s 1,300 acres of East Texas rangeland.

“The Super Baldy program here is just extremely functional. It works with what we need at the farm, as far as research and hands-on experience for our students, but it also works as far as marketing and cattle sales,” Doerner says “Driving to work every morning and being able to see the college’s cows from the highway is very appealing. And to me, it shows that if another producer drives down the road and sees our cows — sees Hereford bulls, sees Ultrablack bulls, sees black white-face calves, sees red white-face calves — that this program is really trying to do something and not just having numbers to have numbers. It really shows that we have a direction — a functional direction.”

As the university continues to grow its Super Baldy crossbreeding program, staff members hope to continue to increase the numbers and uniformity of their cattle. Currently, Super Baldy females account for between a quarter to a third of the A&M-Commerce’s mature cowherd, and Hereford sires and Cavender-bred Ultrablack Brangus bulls are used in rotation to optimize the heterosis in their commercial cow herd.

One day, the university hopes to have enough Super Baldy replacement females to market them to area producers. The school also has goals for students on the A&M-Commerce show team to exhibit a uniform set of Super Baldies in Fort Worth Stock Show’s commercial show.

Already the program has helped animal science students learn with a hands-on approach to beef cattle production. Plus, the additional cattle have enabled the university to have appropriate sample sizes for beef research projects.

Real-world application

The influence of Super Baldies reaches outside the classroom, too, as A&M-Commerce’s beef production program shows the tangible results of Hereford-influenced cattle.

“Our Super Baldy program is a real-world, working ranch and farm that utilizes cows made to suit our area and forces us to work on a budget,” Doerner says. “That sort of hands-on experience really helps our students. In this program, they learn very similar to the way ranchers do it just down the road and all over the country.”

Today, A&M-Commerce runs about 120-150 cows depending on the forage available at the college’s research ranch, including their Super Baldy program, F1 and F2 Angus-Brahman cross females and a small herd of registered Hereford cattle. As the college’s faculty and staff look to the future, they hope to continue to refine their East Texas Super Baldies to add value to their academic curriculum and offer these efficient, consistent genetics to other cow-calf producers in their region. **HW**