

High Return F1s

Hereford-sired cattle grab premiums for commercial cattlemen in Big Sky Country.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

Hybrid vigor has long lined cattlemen's pockets with added profit potential. But, in eastern Montana Circle B emphasizes vigor. Circle B is a commercial cattle operation owned by the Borman family and run by just over a dozen cowboys and their families. The Bormans breed their 1,600 straightbred Angus cows to Hereford bulls, and the added hardiness of the resulting F1 calves pays off in spades.

"Six or seven years ago, we calved 550 replacements. We had 68 calves in a 24-hour period when it was 40 degrees below zero, and even in this extreme weather the calves had enough vigor to get up and nurse quickly," recalls Circle B's manager, Brent Morrison.

A once self-proclaimed "Angus man" who has cowboyled and managed ranches since he was 20, Morrison was unsure about the bald-faced bulls when he joined the operation 13 years ago. That was until he noted firsthand the added efficiency, fertility, longevity, docility and sustainability synonymous with the Hereford breed. Today, he touts the many advantages of not only Circle B's red-and-white bull battery but also the premium-grabbing F1 offspring that continue to make new marketing opportunities for the ranch.

Circle B was founded by the father-son duo Frank and Fred Borman in 1998. Patriarch Frank Borman is known as an astute businessman not afraid to shoot for the moon — literally. Borman commanded Apollo 8, the



For more than 20 years, Hereford bulls have been adding pounds and profits to Circle B's calves. The black baldy calves are hardier, healthier and better suited for their eastern Montana home than their commercial Angus dams.

first mission to fly around the moon. And when it comes to Circle B, the Borman family is equally as pioneering and progressive. For more than two decades, Circle B has served as a textbook example of a profitable cow-calf operation, mixing management, good ol' fashioned stockmanship, benchmarking metrics and complementary genetics. Fred's wife, Donna, was the one in the family first taken with the latter. She read about the power of crossbreeding in "Storey's Guide to Raise Beef Cattle" when the family first began their foray into Big Sky Country. Today, Circle B's F1 cattle reflect the family's commitment to artfully melding progressive ideas with proven tactics and business savvy with industry tradition. And the operation's use of Hereford genetics pays off in the bull pen, at feeder calf sales, for their repeat buyers and in their budding replacement female market.



Bald-faced bull battery

To see the many advantages of Circle B's use of Hereford genetics, it makes sense to start in the bull pen. For more than 20 years, Feddes Herefords, Manhattan, Mont., has served as Circle B's bull supplier. Marvin Feddes and his sons, Tim and Dan, know Circle B's operation, its cow herd and its goals. Each year, the Feddes family cuts out well-suited herd sire prospects for Circle B before Morrison makes his final selection.

Borman and Morrison like Circle B's sires to be sound, rugged, moderate, thick, deep, easy-fleshing and well-suited for the ups and downs of Montana's weather.

"Dan and Tim really focused on the traits we want, which are structure, capacity and the terminal aspect, too. They really just cater to us," Morrison says.

The long-standing working relationship between Circle B and Feddes Herefords cannot be understated. Morrison notes that the Feddes family knows their cow herd, as well as any cowboy knows their string of ranch horses, with the brothers easily being able to recall the generations of performance and pedigrees behind each bull prospect.

"If you talk to Dan and Tim, they just know everything about every cow and every bull, and they really have pushed hard on what we want our cows to be," Morrison says. "We don't want to be feeding 20 pounds of hay in the winter if we're feeding hay and a couple pounds of cake. We want that feed efficiency there. And the bulls are the same way, too. Our bulls in the winter get about 30 pounds of feed, and they hold their condition."

Morrison also appreciates the ranch-ready nature of the Feddes Hereford bulls. Calved in Montana themselves, the bulls' calves hold up better during the sometimes extreme and unforgiving calving season. Their calves come easy, at predictable weights and are up nursing so quickly that it sometimes startles first-calf heifers, Morrison laughs. But it's not just the Hereford-influenced offspring that are well suited for the West. These bald-faced bulls hold up better than their black-hided peers, according to Morrison.

"They seem to do a lot better job of taking care of themselves, and they stand up a lot better. They don't get lame," he says.

The Hereford bulls' heavy, rugged structure keeps them sound and comfortable even in the sometimes tricky terrain. On average, sires spend at least five breeding seasons at Circle B, which averages a 95-98% conception rate. As Morrison notes, thanks to their rugged structure,

added fertility and gentle dispositions, Hereford bulls are rarely culled for broken legs or broken "pieces." In fact, over the last 13 years, he has only seen one Hereford bull break a leg. From his previous experience with Angus bulls, Morrison expected two a year.

While cowboys inherently run the risk of injuries, Morrison says his crew suffer far fewer injuries due to the disposition of the Hereford and Hereford-influenced cattle. Even green cowboys can successfully gather Hereford bulls, and their disposition is passed along to their calves.

Premium grabbing feeder calves

An easy-going nature isn't all the bald face offers. The Hereford influence also adds longevity, soundness and efficiency to Circle B's F1 calves. The black baldy calf crop separates itself from neighboring straightbred, black-hided herds, with the calves being more vigorous and faster growing. Their added docility shines at branding time when the baldy calves are easily handled and sorted, but their good temperament really pays at weaning.

"I think it comes down to docility, and it comes down to feed conversion gain. They're not stressed out, so they're gaining better, they're getting less sickness. We're pulling less and less every year. The cowboys are actually getting bored because you might go 15-20 days and only pull one or two where we used to pull 70-80 a day, and we had a lot of cattle," Morrison says.

When the baldies are weaned, they're taken to the Circle B feedlot in Hysham, Mont., to be wintered and backgrounded. Since all Circle B cattle winter on the Hysham portion of the operation, the black-white-face calves are easily compared to the black-hided, straightbred commercial Angus replacements, and the inherent advantages of the baldy cattle are front and center.

"Those black calves come in; it usually takes them an extra day or two days to really come around to feed. Whereas a Hereford calf, pretty much the day you put it in there, that little bugger will go and start eating something," Morrison says. "The Hereford calves are just gaining better on our lot."

Perhaps even more impressive than the Circle B calves' quality is their consistency. Their Feddes sires and commercial Angus dams stamp out incredibly uniform calves. When riding pastures, Morrison notes the baldy calves are just cookie-cutter.

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“We usually get 70% of our cows bred in the first cycle or more. So, the baldy calves are just uniform, and the little ones are just as fancy. They’re just a couple of weeks later,” he says.

In addition to the baldy calves being uniform, fast-growing, efficient, healthy and manageable, the feeder cattle are also backed by Circle B’s progressive management. Circle B calves are enrolled in the following value-added programs: Non-Hormone Treated Cattle (NHTC), Where Food Comes From CARE Certified, Superior Verified, VAC 60, Superior Progressive Genetics, Beef Quality Assurance (BQA), IMI Global Certified and Hereford Advantage.

The Hereford Advantage program is an IMI Global verification of Hereford-sired feeder calves with superior genetics, health and management, which is supported by the American Hereford Association (AHA) staff. Hereford-sired calves eligible for the program are source and age verified, sired by bulls ranking in the top 50% of the Hereford breed for the Certified Hereford Beef® Index (CHB\$) index, have received at least two rounds of vaccinations and are raised by BQA-certified producers. The CHB\$ index measures which Hereford sires have the most potential to produce the most profitable offspring when bred to commercial Angus cows for terminal offspring. The index places emphasis on feedlot performance, efficiency and end-product merit. By using Hereford sires with the genetics needed to qualify for the Hereford Advantage program, Circle B has seen improvements in its feeder cattle. But the AHA staff support that accompanies the program has proved just as valuable.

“Trey Befort (AHA director of commercial programs) has done a great job for us, and he is there repping every Superior sale we’re at and talking to people,” Morrison says. He believes the more AHA promotes its programs, the more it helps him as a producer.

The Circle B F1 feeder calves sell in the Superior Livestock Bellringer sale at the beginning of the year; there is no shortage of interest. You could say their lots really do ring buyers’ bells. Year after year, their calves fetch premium prices. During last year’s sale, Circle B’s black baldy NHTC calves brought more than a lot of comparable weight GAP4-certified black steers from a reputable brand.

“Those steers went out the door for \$1,760 a head. I’ve never seen anything like that in my life,” Morrison says.

Although the calves fetch a premium, the number of repeat buyers underscore their value. Hagemann Farms, Five Rivers,

Beller Feedlot, and Adams Land and Cattle Company have repeatedly purchased feeder cattle from Circle B, and their continued interest serves as a great testimony.

While not all buyers offer Circle B carcass data, the figures that do roll into eastern Montana are impressive. Adam’s Land and Cattle purchased more than 400 steers and reported that the lot gained 4 pounds per day with just over 91% grading USDA Prime and Choice. These bald-faced cattle making the grade further prove the merit of the F1 cross’ profitability from gate to plate.

Making mamas

Borman, Morrison and crew have worked for more than a decade to perfect the Circle B cow herd. Selecting moderate, deep, wide, easy-doing, fertile cows with excellent mothering ability.

These traits are apparent in the 800 head of bred baldy heifers on summer grass at the ranch’s Miles City, Mont., location. This year, for the first time, Circle B retained all of their F1 black baldy females to market as bred heifers rather than sell them as feeders. Their dams are the most elite of the Circle B program.

Like all of the Hereford-influenced calves, these heifers have shown that their disposition is well suited for the commercial cattlemen — easy to ride through and move from pasture to pasture yet not so tame that they’re hard to push. They’re truly cattle made by cowboys for cowboys; cows that will get the job done with the resources at hand. Morrison knows because Circle B retained 30 head of frostbitten baldy heifers several years ago. Even among the well-sourced

commercial Angus cows, the baldies stand out — and not just for their white faces.

“The only reason they got to stay here is that they had short ears and short tails, so we kept them, and they are actually outperforming our black cows,” Morrison says. “They’re a lot thicker. They take a lot less feed than the black cows, and they just hold their condition and have a lot of milk.”

Morrison notes their bred heifers are designed to be top-notch mama cows.

“I think they’re a cow that you can take home, and they’re going to go out and work for you. You’re not going to work for them. And I’ll just almost guaranteed they’re going to be good mothers and have good thick calves,” Morrison says. **BA**



Circle B manager, Brent Morrison (left), notes that the black baldies’ good disposition makes cattle handling easier, which leads to improved gains.