

Herd Renewal

Merritt Ranch increases cow productivity with Hereford bulls and heterosis.

by *Wes Ishmael*

“**M**other cows are probably worth more now, historically, than they’ve ever been worth. So, having a really solid mother cow herd that lasts a long time is as good as money in the bank,” says Joseph Merritt of Merritt Ranch, Porterville, Calif.

Merritt and his family were aiming for tougher, more productive mother cows when they reintroduced Hereford bulls to their program about five years ago. Merritt’s grandfather had a Hereford herd when he began the family’s ranch in the early 1970s. However, like many commercial producers, the Merritts followed industry trends toward heavier, leaner carcasses, using a lot of Simmental, and then making the herd black in the name of carcass quality and marketability.

As the herd became more straightbred black, Merritt says fertility declined and cow costs increased. Keep in mind, the Merritt Ranch covers some sprawling, unforgiving geography with cows running from about 500 feet in elevation to nearly 6,000 feet, with the associated variation in topography and moisture.

“We needed more hybrid vigor in our mother cow herd,” Merritt says. “We just needed tougher cows.”

More fertility and longevity

Merritt explains their Hereford-sired F1 black baldy females are accomplishing numerous goals with improved fertility and mothering ability. They breed back on time and consistently wean a calf.

“Just how long they last,” Merritt says. “We put a number iron on our mother cows to know when they’re giving us their first calf and those black baldy cows just seem to really last a long, long time. So that’s why we want to retain as many of those heifers as we can.”

Merritt emphasizes all of these things to the seedstock producers who supply him Hereford bulls. As well, he explains, “The three major traits that I look for and ask for are polled, eye pigment and low birth weight.”



Joseph Merritt (above) and his family continue to build the cattle operation begun by his grandfather in the early 1970s. Cattle at Merritt Ranch, near Porterville, Calif., cover lots of diverse topography and moisture, running from about 500 feet in elevation to nearly 6,000 feet in the Sierra Nevada mountains. The Merritts reintroduced Hereford bulls to toughen up their cow herd with hybrid vigor and increased productivity. Except for replacement heifers, the Merritts retain ownership in all of their calves through the feedlot. These photos were taken last spring.

Merritt explains his Hereford-sired black baldy heifers retain their body condition and breed back easier than their straightbred black counterparts.

“In the past, we’ve had lots of heifers that have kind of gone the other direction but these Hereford-influenced crossbred females seem to just hold up better, staying in the right body condition for a better breed back while still producing a very strong, healthy calf,” Merritt explains.

“We’ve got a lot of replacement heifers that are now black baldies that just have amazing udder structure. They’re great milkers,” Merritt says. “I think Herefords typically used to be thought as not having enough milk. You can definitely tell these cows are great moderate milkers, not too heavy, not too light; the proof is in the calves they wean.”

Plus, Merritt explains the Hereford-influenced cattle are gentler and easier to manage.

“In the past, we’ve had a herd of cows that you wouldn’t dare bring the kids out to come help gather, and that has changed a lot in the past few years, especially with the influence of the Hereford genetics,” Merritt says. “Now it’s fairly safe for the family to be able to come out and for the kids to be able to enjoy gathering and working the cattle. We’ve definitely seen the docility change with the Hereford influence, as well as in implementing different handling techniques.”

Range-tough bulls

Hereford bulls themselves are an added benefit on the cost side of the ledger at Merritt Ranch.

“The Hereford bulls have done really well. They stay sound and have plenty of libido. They’re out really covering country and chasing cows. They do a good job. They’ve held up well in terms of structure, fertility and everything,” Merritt says. “We use our bulls four to five years just to keep away from any venereal diseases. Even if they’re still a 100% sound, we usually sell them and try to keep bringing in some new genetics.” **BA**

Hereford-influenced Cattle Make the Grade

Merritt Ranch added the advantages of heterosis to its black herd with Hereford bulls without sacrificing feedlot and carcass performance.

“Ultimately, we’re still able to go back to a black calf crop for marketing purposes but getting our F1 cross on our mother cows,” says Joseph Merritt, Merritt Ranch.

The Merritts retain ownership in all of their calves through the feedlot. Today that means everything but the replacements.

Feedlot performance is impressive.

“In the last few years, 98% of our cattle have graded Choice, and in a number of batches of cattle we’ve been 20%-plus grading Prime,” Merritt says. He notes carcass performance is also a priority in his bull selection, both Angus and Hereford.

“You absolutely have a feed efficiency advantage when you put Hereford-influenced cattle on feed,” says Lee Mayo, general manager of HRC Feed Yards LLC, Scott City, Kan. “With feed costs the way they’ve been the last two or three years, there’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that the most profitable cattle have been the cattle that have gained and converted as cheaply and as efficiently as possible.”

HRC Feed Yards is a custom-feeding operation with a onetime capacity of 60,000 head.

“If you just gain a half a pound a day better, your cost of gain goes down about 20 cents per pound when corn costs \$6 per bushel. That’s a multiple. It multiplies over the 700 pounds that we put on them, and that ends up being real serious dollars by the time we’re done,” Mayo says.

While he says Herefords are the most feed efficient breed, Mayo also notes the hybrid vigor that comes with crossbreds always offers added production and economic advantages.

At the same time, Mayo explains, “There are darned sure some Hereford genetics out there that’ll make the upper two-thirds of Choice and qualify for Certified Hereford Beef®. We appreciate those, and we’re trying to identify more through the programs that we’re using. But especially if you crossbreed them, with the advantages of heterosis, the Hereford-influenced cattle will qualify. We sell a lot of Hereford-based steers through *Certified Hereford Beef*, *Certified Angus Beef*® as well as *Black Canyon*® *Angus Beef* and a lot of the premium programs.” **BA**