

Red Baldies in the Black Hills



Hereford influence proves profitable in rugged country.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

There is some flat ground on the 21 Ranch Inc. but not much. When the ranch's 800 mama cows calve, they begin the trek to higher ground, climbing the steep Black Hills painted with pine trees to get enough forage to maintain their condition, raise a good calf and breed back on time. Each year, the 21 Ranch cow herd travels a loop of about 100 miles through private pastures deep into BLM forests, according to Bill Wilhelm of 21 Ranch.

While this nomadic and demanding lifestyle is seemingly a tall order, the ranch's red baldy cow herd does so with ease. An efficient and hardy cow herd has long been active owner Doug Watson's goal, and part of the legacy his late father, Ron, and his mother, Phyllis, created when they founded 21 Ranch. For 30 years, the Sundance, Wyo., operation consisted primarily of Red Angus genetics, running purebred Red Angus sires on red commercial cows. But, in 2015, 21 Ranch added Hereford bulls to the docket, which resulted in bald-faced performance and docility.

“The baldy cows, whether red or black, have been the cows that have kept this country going for a long, long, long time. And it's going to continue to be so because they're cattle that fit this environment.”

— **Bill Wilhelm, 21 Ranch**

Trailed not trailered

Wilhelm is unabashedly a feet and leg man when it comes to selecting cattle. This makes sense considering the 21 Ranch crew considers themselves to be a forage operation, and it's the cows' job to harvest their forage and convert it to profit. Every two months, the herd is trailed, not trailered, to a new pasture. As Wilhelm notes, any cattleman who has trailed cattle will know the frustration of a handful of sore-footed stragglers.

“If they can't travel, can't move and have bad feet or bad legs, it isn't going to work,” he says.

Hereford genetics improved the cow herd's soundness and stayability on the rugged terrain. While Wilhelm is quick to note that a single breed doesn't magically fix structure, and a cowman should always keep a keen eye on conformation, the Hereford-

influenced cattle make the annual trek in good shape, and better than some of their straightbred peers. The breed's disposition also helps the 21 Ranch cow herd's annual grazing circuit through the Black Hills.



“The Hereford cattle are famous for not necessarily moving fast,” says Wilhelm. “But they do move, and they will get up and cover these high hills. You will see them grazing on some of the highest portions of the hills without any trouble ... They maintain their body condition much better, and you make better use of the grass.”

In addition to their easy-going nature, Hereford genetics add efficiency, thanks in part to the breed’s good disposition. Whether on horseback, on foot or with the help of cattle dogs, the baldy cows are simply easier to work — a trait appreciated by the entire 21 Ranch crew.

“I think the Hereford temperament is pretty much unmatched in the commercial cow world,” Wilhelm says.

Predictable performance on unpredictable terrain

While the 21 Ranch’s cowhands can bet on the red baldies’ docility, no one can predict the weather in the Black Hills. Sometimes, the region resembles a desert with little precipitation to bolster the grasses, but other years, there will be snow still covering the steep pine forests where the cow herd

is exposed to selected sires. But regardless of the weather, 21 Ranch expects its cows to perform.

As Wilhelm explains, any females at 21 Ranch — yearling heifers, first-calf heifers and experienced cows — found open are culled. To ensure the operation selects the most fertile replacements, heifers are exposed naturally over a 30-day window, and any potential replacement not bred during that time will be deferred to the feeder calf backgrounding program.

“We found those cattle to be fertile under these conditions, to milk well, raise their calves and maintain their condition for us,” he says. “In this area, breed-back is always about the most important thing that occurs with our cattle, and if they don’t breed back, they’re gone.”

The same goes for the bulls.

“We’ve got to have bulls that go out, cover the country, have a high libido and settle the cows. The cows themselves have to be fertile, not just under great conditions but also under any conditions that they’re exposed to,” Wilhelm says. “The cattle must be fertile under any conditions with minimum feed. If they come in here, and they need to be supplemental-fed, they won’t be here very long.”

Sire selection

The 21 Ranch bull battery is stacked with half-brothers of their respective breeds, helping them achieve their goals of a fertile, uniform and predictable herd.

When it comes to Hereford sires, Wilhelm says 21 Ranch prefers good-footed, sound herd bulls with pedigrees noted for added performance and udder quality. Consequently, the ranch discovered that Line 1 (L1) cattle tend to work best in their region, so the majority of their Hereford bulls boast L1 pedigrees.

“We like lots of performance in the cattle,” Wilhelm says. “We went with largely Line 1 cattle because of their general hardiness.”

The 21 Ranch bull battery is rotated every three years to ensure the most progressive and uniform genetics. But Wilhelm notes the Hereford bulls stay sound, fertile and vigorous.

“The bulls are good at covering the country. They are pretty well dispositioned even though they are bulls,” he says.

Red baldy breadwinners

Unlike many commercial cattlemen who cash the biggest checks from fed or feeder cattle, Wilhelm says that 21 Ranch’s females are the operation’s bread and butter. The ranch sells red replacements privately to other cattlemen seeking high-performing, docile cattle that thrive in the rugged environment. They also offer 6- and 7-year-old cows to other ranchers, capturing added value for both 21 Ranch and their new owners.



The Hereford influence really shines when the 21 Ranch crew moves the cow herd every two months to make the best use of the pasture. The cattle are trailed, not trailered, so soundness and a good disposition are imperative.

continued on page 8...



Breed-back is non-negotiable on 21 Ranch. Any cow that comes up open is culled.

“(The cows) have a lot of value to us and whoever buys them,” Wilhelm says, “It’s the steers that are kind of the afterthought around here.”

The ranch’s red baldy steers are backgrounded until they’re yearlings. Then, they’re sold privately when they weigh around 1,100 pounds. Buyers say these Hereford-influenced steers settle in and gain well.

“One of the biggest reports we’ve gotten back on the calves is not only are they efficient, good gaining cattle, but the most impressive thing about the feeders was that they came off the truck and immediately went to the feed bunk. They weren’t running and hitting the other side of the corral. They just immediately went to eating and took off,” Wilhelm says.

A fresh look at Herefords

Bill Wilhelm, in addition to working with 21 Ranch, operates his own registered Hereford operation, Wilhelm Cattle, in Sundance, Wyo. Wilhelm has deep roots in the purebred cattle industry, but when he stepped away from raising seedstock for several years to pursue other ventures, he returned with a fresh perspective. He visited various stock shows to evaluate the cattle and was surprised with his findings.

“I thought I would land with Angus or Simmental, and I was pleasantly surprised with the progress that the Hereford breed had made in the time that I had been away,” he says. “I thought that they were the most useful-looking cattle out there.”

Much like 21 Ranch, Wilhelm found that Line 1 genetics work well in the Black Hills; therefore, many of his genetics are L1-centric. He specializes in lining up Hereford pedigrees that are functional and sound without sacrificing growth and maternal traits, and Wilhelm challenges producers to take a fresh look at the bald-faced breed.

“Some of the people that join the black revolution, I really advise them to go out and look with a fresh eye at the Hereford cattle. The Hereford breed has really made more progress than any breed out there. The tough times really caused people to dig in and raise the good ones,” he says.

And as Wilhelm notes the unique hybrid advantages that Herefords offer to commercial cattlemen will help the industry meet the ever-challenging task of feeding the world. (See *Shifting Attitudes* Page 48). **BA**

Regardless of gender, Hereford heterosis pays for 21 Ranch. As Wilhelm points out, the breed’s influence stretches beyond the bald face.

“The F1 baldies have some added dimension to them,” he says. “They’re a little bigger framed compared to the Red Angus, but still moderate. The bigger advantage is the Hereford-influenced cattle are very capacious, big-middled, soft-middled and easy-doing. They just have a lot more body dimension; they’re wider based.”

And while the cattle industry has tended to lean toward black-hided cattle, Wilhelm encourages cattlemen to re-evaluate their beef cattle. “I really advise them to go out and look with a fresh eye at the Hereford cattle. The Hereford breed has really made more progress than any breed out there,” he says.

Regardless of the color, Hereford-influenced cattle bring bald-faced fertility, efficiency and docility with the famous Hereford heterosis.

“I don’t think any of us can dispute heterosis and the value that it brings. I think you’re taking a couple of breeds that both have their strengths, and you’re combining them, making them into the best possible cow for this part of the country,” Wilhelm says. “The baldy cows, whether red or black, have been the cows that have kept this country going for a long, long, long time. And it’s going to continue to be so because they’re cattle that fit this environment.” **BA**



Weather in the Black Hills can be unpredictable. Some years the area resembles a desert and others the cattle are wading through steep, snow-covered pine forests. Yet, the baldy cows still perform.

