

Chasing Dreams

Hereford Herdsman of the Year works tirelessly to build upon budding operation.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

Melissa Grimmel Schaake fell into bed exhausted and stared at the ceiling, thinking about her and her husband's big dreams. She'd eventually drift to sleep, then wake before daybreak to chase them.

This unwavering commitment to the couple's shared vision for Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co. undoubtedly helped this petite yet formidable redhead be named the 2024 Hereford Herdsman of the Year before her 30th birthday. She and her husband, Shane Schaake, hustled quietly for years, finding a way to forge their own path while honoring their roots. After purchasing a piece of the Kansas Flint Hills in December 2021, it was time to unveil Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co. officially.

The college sweethearts met at Kansas State University, and the pair wed in 2017. Since then, the couple purchased the best maternal genetics they could afford. Often, this meant buying their potential donors on ice — in embryo form.

One such purchase was three embryos from fellow Hereford Herdsman honoree Kyle Lemmon's great donor, KLD BR 7010 Rose D32 ET. Hence, one of Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co.'s most influential females, GS Magnolia F03 ET, was born. "Mags," as Melissa affectionately calls the 2020 National Western Stock Show (NWSS) reserve grand polled female, has much in common with her owner. Both are East Coast girls building legacies in the Midwest.

East Coast roots

The fourth of five Grimmel girls, Melissa grew up on her family's fifth-generation Jarrettsville, Md., farm. While the family has deep agricultural roots, they're first-generation Hereford breeders, and Melissa could be found helping with her sisters' 4-H projects since she was old enough to hold a brush.

Family pictures and backdrop photos tell of the Grimmel family's showing rise. When her brother-in-law Jacob Wolfrey, a past Hereford Herdsman himself, joined the family, Melissa leveled up her



Melissa Grimmel Schaake (middle), of Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co., was named the 2024 Hereford Herdsman of the Year during Cattlemen's Congress. Also pictured are American Hereford Association executive vice president Jack Ward (l) and National Hereford Queen Marie Prodell (r).

show career and spent her college years competing on the national stage.

Such success was not taken for granted. Melissa fondly recalls attending national shows as an awestruck spectator with her older sister, Michelle. She was nearly as happy watching the Hereford show from the green seats on the Hill studying the NWSS entries, presentation and pedigrees, as she would be showing — nearly.

When she attended her first North American International Livestock Exhibition in 2011, she was the happiest third-place exhibitor Freedom Hall had ever seen. A lifelong learner, Melissa hasn't lost that appreciation and awe for the cattle industry and the opportunities it affords.

When it came time to select her college, that awe landed her 1,000 miles away from her hometown in Manhattan, Kan., at the alma matter of countless breed influencers nestled deep in cattle country. Melissa's parents knew when they dropped her off to become a Wildcat that her heart belonged in the Midwest. Yet, their influence echoes across the miles.

Growing up shadowing her father, she often wondered how he shouldered the hard times, like when planting was delayed due to the relentless rain. "He said, 'You can't control the weather. But when you love what you do, you just figure out a way to

handle what you're dealt. At the end of the day, if you're not enjoying what you're doing, then you're in the wrong business," Melissa recalls.

Great risk, greater reward

That philosophy helped Melissa find the courage to buy a piece of cattle country with Shane. After looking at countless properties, the Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co. headquarters fell into their lap when a friend and cowman was downsizing and willing to help a young, eager couple.

With its rolling hills and native grasses, the couple knew fate had sent them their perfect place, yet it still took a leap of faith to buy it. As ranchers know, math often doesn't tell the whole story, and frankly, the math was a little murky. The young couple emptied their savings into the place, surviving on ramen, hopes and dreams. Many of Melissa's sleepless nights revolved around their first official sale and the ever-looming land payment.

"Looking back, we sacrificed absolutely everything to make that happen. We drained our life savings to buy the land and to build a barn, all while being unsure of how our calves would sell that fall," Melissa says. "Without a doubt, it's the biggest risk we have ever taken. But it was backed by the powerful cow families that had proven themselves in the pasture and their progeny in the showring."

Bad cows don't call GS home for long. The couple culls hard to build the very best set of sound, maternally minded females bolstered by genetics from Hereford programs they admire most. The 50 cows they rotate through the Flint Hills are the most elite set of females the pair could assemble.

When Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co. moved their first set of show and sale prospects into their new barn in the fall of 2022, the couple hung their hopes and dreams on that set of matriarchs, which culminated in more than 50 families visiting Manhattan to view the inaugural GS offering.

"We knew it was a special group of females, and I was just praying that others would see their potential as well. The day we got the barn finished and functional enough to use, Shane and I hauled the calves from his parents' place, put them in their new runs and just embraced one another," Melissa recalls.

"A few weeks after that, we received an incredible response from the industry, with the sale calves bringing more than ever before."

Redheaded resilience

As the couple continues to carve out their place in the industry, they divide and conquer to balance Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co. with their personal careers and ambitions. For Melissa, this means Shane will stay home to care for the cattle when she travels to shows or pictures livestock for her marketing business. Melissa's career in livestock marketing sharpened her eye for good cattle and great presentations. From crafting stall displays to caring for their land, she demands perfection, right down to every hair and detail on GS-bred cattle.

"The devil is in the details, similar to when I'm designing a logo or print ad for my clients; those

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GS Thunderbird K06, the '23 NWSS reserve grand polled female, might be the greatest one GS Cattle Co. ever bred; her story also taught resiliency.



Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co., captured premier breeder back-to-back at the 2022 and 2023 American Royal, after officially launching the GS brand.

little extras when presenting cattle are what truly sets you apart,” Melissa says. “I absolutely love the challenge of feeding, clipping and preparing one for a major show, but I live for the process of getting them to that point in making breeding decisions, syncing cows, calving, checking health, halter breaking and marketing them.”

This non-stop push for perfection has come with a lot of highs and lows, the latter of which Melissa admittedly takes pretty hard.

She’s still emotional when she recalls GS Thunderbird K06. “Bird,” as she was affectionately known at Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co., was arguably the best GS-bred female. Purchased and shown by their invaluable barn help, K-State student and GS junior exhibitor Lauren Frederick, Bird racked up an impressive show career, being named the 2023 NWSS reserve grand polled female. The attention she garnered ringside boosted the budding operation. Yet, that all came crashing down when Bird was lost in a freak accident, a blow so devastating Melissa even questioned her place in the industry afterward.

“I learned to lean on the people next to you to help push you through the challenging times,” she says. “We had really high hopes and dreams for that heifer in propelling our program forward, and that situation was one of the hardest things I’ve ever gone through. The bad days don’t last forever, but they truly make you appreciate the good days.”

There is no small amount of resilience in this redheaded cattlegirl, so she persevered. In the first national show after losing Bird, Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co. was named premier breeder at the 2023 American Royal for the second year in a row — a boost the team didn’t realize they needed.

Help along the way

While Melissa certainly possesses the hard work, attention to detail, grit and charisma to excel, she is quick to thank those who have shared their know-how and believed in her along the way. Legendary producers, like Jimmy Linthicum, didn’t just see a girl when they looked at Melissa; they saw a

stockman — an equal. In the middle of a hard battle with cancer, Linthicum would take Melissa through his cow herd, talk nutrition, evaluate stock and even helped her sketch the plans for the Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co. headquarters. It’s countless moments like these where cattlemen met Melissa on their level to talk some good ol’ fashion shop that mean the most.

Melissa serves as a role model to young people as a tribute to those who helped her. Her humble roots helped her grow; now she’s happy to help others bloom. Melissa looks for young people, like herself, who sit ringside with a dream. “There’s nothing better or more rewarding than seeing young people succeed with our genetics, because not long ago I was in their shoes with the same dreams and am grateful for those influential people who helped me along the way,” she says. “These kids and our customers are like family. The people make this breed special.”

Melissa can still be found ringside studying cattle and pedigrees. That’s what she was doing when she was recognized as the Herdsman of the Year. As American Hereford Association national shows coordinator Bailey Clanton swung her cell phone around to reveal Shane sharing in this moment on Facetime, Melissa was overcome with emotion.

“I’m so grateful she did that since Shane was back home on calving duty. I feel like I truly share this award with him because none of it would be possible without him,” she says.

Melissa considers this honor the pinnacle of her cattle career and was incredibly humbled just to be included in the group nominees — peers she admires, respects, appreciates and is proud to call friends.

Her best friend and husband, Shane, isn’t surprised by the honor. “Melissa is a true cattlegirl whether it’s everyday work on the ranch or showing cattle to their highest potential at a livestock show. She presents our string to their greatest potential and does so at a high level. She has paved her way in what is considered a male-dominated industry, and her passion and talent are second to none,” he says.

As for the future, Melissa will undoubtedly raise Hereford cattle, and have many more nights losing sleep pondering breeding decisions, the coming calf crop and the future of Grimmel Schaake Cattle Co.

“I’m constantly thinking of our next step until I fall asleep. And you know, I wake up in the middle of the night and think about it again. And then in the morning, we wake up and go do it again,” she says. “Our entire lives, our hearts and our souls revolve around our cattle. I’ve always said, ‘They work hard for us, so it is an honor to work hard for them.’” **HW**



Attention to detail sets Hereford Herdsman Melissa Grimmel Schaake apart, whether she is designing print ads and logos for her clients or preparing GS-bred cattle to step into the showing.