

# Tenure of Teamwork

**Joe Rickabaugh retires after 25 years of service.**

by **Katie Maupin Miller**

If you ask Joe Rickabaugh about the folks who have worked for him through his time at the American Hereford Association (AHA), he will quickly point out that his coworkers worked *with* him not *for* him. Joe led the AHA field staff and Hereford Publications Inc. from the trenches rather than the helm. He rowed rather than just steered the ship.

In the decades that retired AHA fieldman John Meents traveled with Joe to national shows and sales, he never beat him out of bed. The duo often shared a hotel room on the road, and even when Meents' alarm would blare at 4 a.m., he'd find Joe already wide awake, reviewing the details for the day or answering emails.

Joe expected the field and show staff to also be up and at 'em. This meant that if the show was slated to start at 8 a.m., the AHA staff reporting to Joe would be expected to roll into the barn around 6 a.m. But regardless of the time Joe told the crew to be at the barn, he would be there beside them.

Joe never asked someone to do what he wouldn't do himself. It was one of his greatest strengths in his 25 years with the Association, most of which were spent as the director of seedstock marketing. Under his tutelage, several breed- and industry-changing staff cut their teeth in the marketing business. Joe could easily advise them because he had done it himself.

"Number one, Joe sets an example," says Justin Stout, livestock auctioneer and marketer. "To oversee field staff, you have to know what makes a good fieldman, and he learned from the best. He knows what it takes to make a good publication and field staff, and between his work ethic and ability ringside working sales, he gives his team something they can aspire to."

Previous AHA fieldman and current American Angus Association director of field and member services, Levi Landers, echoes that sentiment.

"You always wanted to work hard when you were around Joe," he says. "He has a calm and honest approach to dealing with members. He treated every member the same, and he treated all his employees with fairness. He always backed up the decisions they made."

## **The beginnings**

Originally a farm kid from Greeley, Kan., Joe enjoyed 4-H and FFA. He attended Fort Scott Community College and Kansas State University, where he sorted livestock on the collegiate team



before graduating with a degree in agricultural education. Joe entered the field rather than the classroom. He joined the Kansas Livestock Association in 1982, where he spent time in the field before landing in the main office in Topeka, Kan. For 13 years, Joe helped Kansas cattlemen and women market their stock. For the next three years, Joe worked with Genetics Plus, a company specializing in marketing bred heifers.

It was this experience that he brought to the AHA when sitting

executive vice president Craig Huffhines tapped Joe to join the Association staff. When Joe officially joined the AHA on Feb. 4, 1999, he brought not only his valuable industry experience but also a relentless drive to make things better. He has a self-admitted competitive streak, and he used that to spur change. Admittedly, not every event, sale, catalog or calf can be the best, but Joe worked tirelessly for it to be better than the one before. He took notes and continuously refined and improved everything he touched.

From pulling together consignments for national sales to cooking Certified Hereford Beef® tri-tip for event attendees — heck, even growing heirloom tomatoes — Joe always did his best, and that commitment to excellence was contagious.

### **A pioneer marketer**

While his commitment to marketing Hereford cattle always shone ringside, the sales that he managed really highlighted Joe's talents as a marketer. The National Sale and Ladies of the Royal reached new heights under his watchful eye, and his eye for quality cattle set a new standard for the breeder consignment sales he was involved with. Joe made it his mission to ensure the quality of these sales from the top of the sale order through the last calf in the ring. He would go out into the field and hand-pick sale offerings for breeders to highlight the very best of their genetics and for

buyers to grab onto breeding pieces that could help them move the needle.

"Before Joe got involved, the Iowa Beef Expo was in danger of not putting on a sale anymore," recalls Stout. "They were always at the bottom of the breed sales every year, but with Joe hand picking the stock or the cattle that are in that Hereford sale, the Hereford sale has become the top-performing breed sale at the Iowa Beef Expo."

Bill Goehring, Iowa Hereford breeder and

past AHA board president, had a front-row seat to Joe's influence, not only on the Iowa Beef Expo sale and the rising demand for Hereford genetics in his state, but also Joe's impact on his own operation. Around the time Joe was tapped to help revitalize the Iowa Beef Expo's Hereford sale and its offering, he began visiting with Goehring about consigning cattle. Together, they selected one of the first pairs to be sold at the Expo, which was a novel



Joe Rickabaugh, retiring AHA director of seedstock marketing, laughs with incoming AHA director of seedstock marketing Kane Aegerter during the Cattlemen's Congress in Oklahoma City.

**“The Hereford breed is great, but the breeders are greater.” — Joe Rickabaugh**

idea at the time. Last year, nearly 20 pairs went through that sale ring, and Joe was a driving force in selecting them.

For Goehring and many breeders, Joe's influence on their operations stretches beyond buying and selling stock to driving breed improvement.

"Joe has an uncanny leadership ability," Goehring says. "It lets him lead the group and work with staff. He can work with state associations and individual breeders, too. That charisma and that ability to lead people in the direction that is beneficial to them. Gosh, he is so good at helping."

Goehring considers Joe not only a friend, but also a sounding board for ideas and an invaluable set of eyes in the field.

"Because of his ability to view cattle and have a good understanding of my program, he sees what you're trying to do, and helps you formulate a plan," he says. "If I'm looking to change genetics or a genetic emphasis, he can find an

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animal in the country or at a sale that will make it work. He is good with a checkbook and very keen with his eye.”

Connecting buyers and sellers was always one of Joe’s favorite parts of his role with AHA. He has the utmost respect for Hereford breeders, many of which rely on the breed to carve out their living full-time and all of which have worked hard through the last couple of decades to make the bald-faced breed an irrefutable genetic improvement tool for commercial cattlemen.

“That’s been a fun part; I always try to help people out and find them new buyers. A fieldman’s job is to put people together — gaining the trust of buyers — that is a huge part of the fieldman’s job to do that, but it is the responsibility of breeders to maintain that contact,” Joe says. “It is a people’s business first, as you know.”

Joe has always emphasized the people side of the field representative’s role, which was a philosophy of both AHA executive vice presidents Jack Ward and Craig Huffhines. Not only does he genuinely take an interest in the Association members he’s met along the way, but he feels honored the leadership entrusted him with serving as a ambassador for the breed. In turn, Joe was always there when he was needed. After weekends on the

road working sales, Joe would still be one of the first to arrive at the AHA office to start the week after his one-way commute of more than one hour.

“Joe always honors his commitments,” Landers says. “When Joe said he was going to be there, he would be there. That is huge these days. When somebody commits to so much, it can be easy to back out at the last minute, but Joe won’t. Whether it is in California or Canada, if Joe says he is going to be there, he will be there.”

Trying to quantify how many miles he put on Buick town cars is nearly as impossible to calculate as how many ice cream cones or bags of candy Joe handed out to junior exhibitors over the years — sometimes after a friendly coinflip ringside.

“He was a staple in the Hereford barn and sale ring because breeders across the country trusted him

with their marketing needs and knew they could count on him to get the job done,” says Amy Cowan, AHA director of youth activities and foundation. “He was a mentor and friend to many.”

#### Family ties

That type of tireless dedication can come at a price. For Joe at national shows, that often meant some sick days with the stock show crud.

“Joe, to me, was the hardest worker that AHA ever had in my two decades there,” Meents says. “He’d be the first one to the barn every day of a

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Family, coworkers and Hereford breeders celebrate Joe Rickabaugh’s 25 years with the American Hereford Association during Cattleman’s Congress.



national show, and when the final show was over, he'd immediately go to bed and be sick for a couple of days. He put everything he had into those shows and made them successful for breeders."

For Joe's family, that meant he wasn't always there for sporting events, family dinners, etc. His wife, Tracey, juggled her job as a schoolteacher and librarian while raising their three kids: Drew, Chelsey, and Cole.

"The number of family events that my wife covered while I was on the road, whether it be kids' events or family events, in addition to taking care of the home front in a great way, she had a big job too, besides taking care of the kids, their activities and the house while I was going up and down the road, and I can't thank her enough," Joe says.

The Hereford community also considered him family. Joe was a 'found' family figure for many of the AHA staff. Bailey Clanton remembers joining the Association fresh out of college, and it was Joe who often took her under his wing. He guided her in her role as AHA national shows coordinator, encouraging her to work in a steady and meticulous fashion while remembering little things like her birthday. The latter often prompted Joe to plan impromptu celebrations during the National Western, the most memorable of which included a pinata during the breeder's banquet.

"Joe was always that reassuring friend and father figure," Clanton says. "He wants everyone to do their best, and he's always there to answer any questions."

Everyone who worked with Joe felt a sense of family, from his genuine concern for his coworkers to the open and candid way he could help troubleshoot a problem to his armfuls of homegrown vegetables and preserves that were up for grabs in the break room.

### Looking ahead

His garden is one of the many places Joe hopes to spend more time after his retirement. His acreage includes nine raised beds, which will soon be filling with seedlings. Various heirloom tomato seeds have already been dispersed to local greenhouses to get their start. Outside of the garden, Joe and Tracey's responsibilities are limited to a barn cat with a self-feeder. That means the couple plans to spend a lot of time on the road. They have a list of places to travel from Wyoming and Montana to cities rich with American history like Washington D.C., Gettysburg, Pa., and Savannah, Ga.



Joe Rickabaugh and AHA national shows coordinator Bailey Clanton planned shows together for more than a decade and feel like family as much as coworkers.



Joe Rickabaugh always made time for young people in his 25 year career with AHA from lining up peewee showmen to helping ringside.

As Landers says, "I hope he gets to stop by every one of those places he drove 80 miles an hour past on his way to a sale, whether it was a national park, monument or scenic river, and said, 'Wouldn't that be a nice place to stop?'"

Joe also hopes to stop by and spend time with friends to hunt and fish. He laughs when he talks about calling in many of the invites he received as his retirement drew near to fish or hunt with Hereford breeders around the country.

Most of all, Joe looks forward to spending time with family. "I've been able to go to some wrestling events that my grandson is just starting, and that is going to become a higher priority," Joe says.

The AHA, its staff and its members are grateful for Joe being a part of their family, and Joe is grateful to have been a part of the breed's journey.

"Just thanks for the opportunity," he says. "It was a great journey, and I appreciate all those who made it possible. The Hereford breed is great, but the breeders are greater." **HW**