HEREFORD'S QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

Tom Field shares a compelling perspective and challenge.

by ***Wes Ishmael***

"The Hereford quest for excellence. That's what unites all of us in this room. And it is an odyssey. It is a quest. It is a journey. It is a game that cannot be won, a game that can only be played," explained Tom Field, the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Field captivated the crowd, as he opened the American Hereford Association (AHA) Educational Forum with an inspiring description of the breed's past and potential.

"My job today is to do a simple thing, and that is to remind us of the stories that comprise the path that got all of us here. Stories about your families, about your ancestors, about your neighbors, about your own vision," Field said. "Sue Monk Kidd said, 'Stories have to be told or they die. And when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.'

"What I've learned over some 50 years I've been active in this business, not only here but around the world, is that all of us who are stockman are tied together by a very common thread. It matters not where we live. It matters who we are and what drives us."

Field shared some of his family's rich heritage in the U.S. cattle business and Hereford breed. He is a fifth-generation cattleman. His children are the sixth generation.

"My great-great-grandfather came to Colorado following the Civil War and began ranching in about 1867. I was at our ranch the last five days doing our fall work before coming here," Field said. "And indeed that story has driven us as a family and as individuals over and over again when things are both good and difficult. We remember the stories of our ancestors."

Field borrowed from Alvin Sanders, author of the iconic 1914 book, *The Story of Herefords,* in describing the importance of understanding heritage:

> *"Nothing that any man has ever done to further the cause of the Hereford cattle, whether it be set forth in written page or not, can never really be lost. The Herefords of today are the sum total of all the effort that has been put upon them, from the days of Ben Tompkins and his predecessors up to now.*
>
> *"The mark of every owner, for good or for evil, is on the breed as it stands, whether public acknowledgement is ever made or not. The impress of even the least of those who have assumed the responsibility of handling these good cattle has been left upon them."*

Table 1: Hereford Progress Across Three Generations

Trait	1950-1970		1970-1990		1950-1990	
	Actual	EPD	Actual	EPD	Actual	EPD
Birth Weight	+4	+6	+5	+4	+9	+10
Weaning Weight	+35	+32	+26	+25	+61	+57
Yearling Weight	+30	+54	+46	+50	+76	+104

Source: Tom Field, 1996 WHC

"It's the beautiful thing about breeding cattle," Field explained. "We get to leave a mark on the world. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we miss, but we get a chance to leave a mark, a legacy. And that's important. It matters."

Hereford's enduring fit

Field also provided broader perspective, describing the history of beef cattle production in the United States, from capturing underutilized forage by improving the native cattle population to building the infrastructure that enabled moving beef to the nation's population centers.

"The beef industry is a story that is as remarkable and epic as any industry on the planet, and we've played a role in it," Field said. "And the goal has always been, how do we make better cattle, better beef than our forefathers did?"

One of the many reasons Field was an apt choice to set the stage for the Educational Forum and 19th World Hereford Conference (WHC) is that he played a key role in developing the educational program for the WHC when it was last hosted by the AHA in 1996 at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo. Central to the program was demonstrating Hereford's genetic progress.

Specifically, the goal was to demonstrate real-time genetic change by recreating three generations of Hereford cattle, which was no small task. Single-source, contemporary Hereford commercial cows were bred to sires representing the 1950s, 1970s and 1990s. Progeny provided both live and carcass differences over time. It clearly demonstrated the power of selection decisions aided by genetic evaluation (Table 1).

"You couldn't leave that conference without saying, maybe we should follow the science. It looks pretty good. You just couldn't walk away and say, well, those things (EPDs) don't work," Field said. "… We can change tomorrow through using the tools that we can harness in the way of genetic evaluation. And back to Alvin Sanders' words, 'The Herefords of today are what they are by reason only of the skill or lack of skill of those who have received as

> "That quest for Hereford excellence is driven by the capacity to create an appealing version of the future."
>
> **— Tom Field**

continued on page 30...

...Hereford's Quest for Excellence continued from page 29

> "It's the beautiful thing about breeding cattle. We get to leave a mark on the world. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we miss, but we get a chance to leave a mark, a legacy. And that's important. It matters."
>
> **— Tom Field**

"… All of us who are stockman are tied together by a very common thread. It matters not where we live. It matters who we are and what drives us," explained Tom Field during the AHA Educational Forum.

an inheritance from the generations gone before.'

"And that's our stewardship, to take what has been given to us from the breeders of the past and to do something good with that."

You choose

Field believes choosing the way forward in both business and life has to do with deciding to play a finite game or an infinite one.

"In the finite game, we think in quarters, or if you're a hockey fan, in periods; if you're a baseball fan, in innings. There are known players; we know who they are. The rules are set. There's a definite ending of the game. The goal is to win. And the question, really, that drives us in the finite game is what's best for me?" Field explained. "Then there's the infinite game. We think in generations. There are known and unknown players. The rules are in flux. There's no endpoint, there's no end to the game. The goal is to stay in the game. And what drives us is what's best for others. We get to pick.

"As a family ranch, I had a period of time trying to play the finite game, and we made a lot of mistakes. When we got our minds back to playing the infinite game, we got better, our cattle got better, our family got better, we changed our mindset. And I think Hereford excellence, that quest for Hereford excellence, is driven by the capacity to create an appealing version of the future."

Fittingly, Field left the Forum audience with these insights from Alvin Sanders:

> *"But, after all, the most appealing note developed by this narrative is that which records the courage and the bravery of the Hereford wherever there has been peril to be faced on cattle ranges.*
>
> *"Throughout all the world, wherever, in order to improve upon a native stock, there has been a forlorn hope to be led – whether or not on the ice-bound banks of the Saskatchewan, in the desolation of dusty desert, under equatorial sun, in Australian bush or upon African veld – there has the lion-hearted Hereford practically walked alone.*
>
> *"Over-lord of the grazing world! Pathfinder of the sands and snow! Filler of feedlots and generous provider of beef! From the grassroots of the plains and prairie that have known the touch of thy hardy hoof more gold has sprung that has ever yet been wrested from all the rocks and rivers of thy vast western kingdom."* HW