

On a Mission

Breck Debnam named 2026 Hereford Herdsman of the Year.

by *Wes Ishmael*

Breck Debnam, Madison, Ga., is one of those people you always look forward to seeing again. He's positive, quick to smile, eager to help and insightful. He also works hard to excel at managing, presenting and marketing the cattle in his care. All of this helps explain why his peers voted him the 2026 Hereford Herdsman of the Year.

"To me, being named Herdsman of the Year is the highest honor someone in my position can receive," Debnam says. "To be recognized by your peers is truly meaningful. When I look at the list of those who have won in the past, it is full of names that I have looked up to for the last 13 years of my career."

Debnam is a Hereford lifer and breed champion to the core.

"The people in the Hereford breed are family to me, and I can't imagine life without what the Hereford cow has done for me," he says.

It started when his brother purchased the family's first Hereford heifer calf from Kyle Lemmon, a previous Hereford Herdsman of the Year. This was when Debnam was growing up in Maryland with a family that showed cattle, and he began his journey as a member of the National Junior Hereford Association.

"The summer after I graduated high school, I moved to Macomb, Ill., to work at Lowderman Cattle Company (LCC). While going to school and participating in the livestock judging

programs at Black Hawk East and Western Illinois University, I continued to work at LCC part time," Debnam explains. "The Lowderman family, as well as the managers while I was there, Bill Widerman and Jae Van Horn, have been huge mentors for me in my career."

Ultimately, Debnam moved to Madison to become herdsman for Innisfail Farms, owned by Whitey and Weyman Hunt. Whether or not the milder weather helped sway Debnam's decision to head south, as Whitey reckons with a chuckle, there was no questioning the philosophical fit.

"At Innisfail, our mission is to take a holistic approach to the beef cow business," Debnam explains. "The Hereford mother cow is an amazing animal. She is able to wean a large percentage of her mature weight while simultaneously getting pregnant at a rapid pace. We retain ownership in the feedyard, both of our own Hereford steers and customer cattle. These cattle need to be profitable in the feedyard.

"By identifying the cattle that work well on the maternal and terminal sides, we are finding the animals with the greatest profit potential for our commercial clientele. I am a firm believer that the cattle we make with the greatest profit potential for the commercial sector are the cattle we market to seedstock producers. If the customers of the seedstock producers who make an investment in our program have success, then our purebred customers ultimately have success."



Lessons learned

Among his many duties, Debnam oversees the farm's C-Lock system, which provides individual feed intake and conversion data. Whitey began considering the value of collecting and using such data years earlier.

"We cannot change what we do not measure. Phenotype collection is the backbone of any progressive operation," Debnam says. "We have made a large investment in the future of our bull customers by investing in technology like the C-Lock system. We have always been able to measure gain. It is very easy to get excited about cattle with the largest weight per day of age. Figuring out the cost of that pound of gain brings a whole new perspective to it."

Debnam uses the simple example of two bulls gaining the same weight per day, but one does so by consuming significantly less feed. All else being equal, he says it's an easy decision to propagate genetics of the more feed-efficient bull.

Likewise, Debnam explains that retaining ownership in feeder cattle sired by their genetics has helped shape Innisfail Farm's identity for more than five decades.

"Owning cattle through the feeding phase is an eye-opening experience. These cattle that stretch the profit margin beyond the mean have a huge place in the industry," Debnam explains. "Even if our commercial customers are not retaining ownership, the technology is out there for their feeder cattle buyers to know what cattle work the best. In a basic sense, I want the same person to pay more for their calves every year because they have the genetic ability to turn a profit in the feedyard and on the rail. At the end of the day, this ensures our customers increase cash flow. Retaining ownership in our steers, as well as owning customer cattle, gives us the data necessary to know that Innisfail genetics work in this environment."

Building momentum

Along with enabling genetic progress, documenting genetic performance is a cornerstone of building customer trust at Innisfail Farms.

"I believe that this is the most important part of my career. There are unprecedented opportunities for commercial cattlemen to optimize revenue in today's market. The most important thing that I can do, in my position, is make sure that we offer them these opportunities," Debnam says. "If they are investing in genetics that will convert and grade, it is my job to make sure that they have the ability to capitalize on this investment."

"Many of our customers do not have the critical mass necessary to put together a load-lot as an individual operation. I believe it is vital to our relevance as a seedstock producer to assist them in

the logistics to ensure that they can own those cattle during the feeding phase if that is what they desire. On the other hand, if they decide to purchase genetics with a more maternal angle, and wish to market commercial replacement females, then I want to make sure that they capture the maximum amount of value that these cattle can hold in the marketplace."



Breck Debnam, making a point as a member of the American Hereford Association's first Seedstock Academy in 2023.

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Bob Bethel, Rocky Rill Ranch of northwestern Georgia, serves as a prime example of building partnerships with customers. Bethel began his commercial herd with Red Angus cows and then added Hereford bulls to create F1 red baldies.

"The scientific data behind heterosis is second to none," Debnam says. "There is no other breed that will provide such breed purity to give the added heterosis within a gene pool."

The baldy heifers at Rocky Rill make efficient mama cows when they're retained or marketed to others who want reproductive efficiency. Steer mates to these heifers also prove their worth in the feedlot and on the rail. For instance, steers Bethel fed at HRC Feed Yards LLC in Scott City, Kan., as part of the Hereford Feedout Program all graded Choice and Prime, gaining an average of 3.6 pounds per day.

continued on page 50...

...continued from page 49

Bethel's search for Hereford bulls led him to Innisfail Farm, where Debnam helped him identify herd-building genetics suitable to his goals. In turn, Bethel has provided commercial red baldy heifers that Innisfail Farm makes available to other commercial producers.

"Bob Bethel is as good of a commercial operator as you will find and a loyal bull customer," Debnam says. "He keeps a sharp pencil and knows the kind of cattle it takes to increase your margin."

Presenting opportunity

At the same time, Innisfail Farm understands the value of showcasing their genetic values on a national stage.

"National shows and events are key to our annual marketing plan," Debnam explains. In fact, receiving Herdsman of the Year honors at the Cattlemen's Congress in Oklahoma City came with the added sparkle of Innisfail showing the reserve grand champion pen-of-three bulls with sons of Innisfail Endorse 4021 1838 ET, Innisfail Trademark 1939 ET and Churchill Broadway 858F.

Likewise, Innisfail is an advocate for testing their genetics head-to-head with those of other breeders via the National Reference Sire Program (NRSP).

"The NRSP has played a pivotal role in our program at Innisfail Farm. The data that can be collected in the contemporary groups found at Olsen Ranches in Nebraska

is not found anywhere else. It is an amazing opportunity to put our bulls to test among some of the best in the country, under the same environmental conditions," Debnam explains. "Beyond testing our own genetics, the NRSP offers a tremendous amount of insight toward seeking animals that can benefit our vision of creating a value-added seedstock product. There is nowhere else that we can acquire the conversion and harvest data that we demand to create genetics that ensure profitability for our customers in the terminal sector."

Debnam sees proof of his belief with each bull sold and each repeat customer.

"The acceptance of the Hereford bull the past few years has been second to none. People are really opening their eyes to the functionality and longevity of a black baldy, red baldy or tiger stripe female, and the adaptability of these cattle — the Hereford bull plays a major role and people are really starting to notice," Debnam says. "I definitely believe in the Hereford breed, and I think there is a bright future for all of us."

"I don't think there is any other breed really putting together all of the fundamentals and really staying true to our roots and what made the Hereford bull so special, while continuing to use these new technologies to advance feedlot performance and profitability. I think there is certainly a world of opportunity out there and we're all on the same page." **HW**

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Whether showing cattle to prospective customers or explaining to Certified Hereford Beef® partners the care producers put into beef production, Breck Debnam focuses on building relationships.



(From left): Jack Ward, American Hereford Association executive vice president and National Hereford Queen, Laura Wingler, congratulate Breck Debnam, the Hereford Herdsman of the Year.