

Forthright Direction

Retiring AHA president Austin Snedden champions commercial principles.

by ***Wes Ishmael***

Complex as the cattle business is, cow-calf economics have always been straightforward for Austin Snedden and his family's Snedden Ranch south of Maricopa, Calif.

"Fertility is the No. 1 economic driver of a commercial cow-calf operation," Austin explains. "There is no premium that can make up for a quality cow. A quality cow is always going to return more to an operation than anything."

That's one reason Hereford cattle have always been the core of Snedden Ranch and why the retiring American Hereford Association (AHA) president sees such a bright future for the breed.

"You drive around the country and see all of the black-hided cattle; there is a ton of opportunity to market Hereford genetics. The challenge will be making cattle good enough to create the pull-through demand to capture that market share," Austin says. "It means low-maintenance cows and calves that perform all the way through the supply chain. That balance is so critical for us, as seedstock producers, and for the Association as a whole. A lot of times, these things can be antagonistic."

From the start

Austin's great-great grandfather, Samuel Snedden, went to California in the early-1850s for the Gold Rush. He met and eventually married Anna O'Keefe. She realized gold miners weren't rich, but feeding them could make a good living. So, she bought a herd of cows with $300 and began selling beef to the miners.

Drought pushed the Snedden family southwest to their current location. Herefords came soon after and have been integral to the operation since the 20th century began.

In 1972, Austin's dad, Richard, and grandpa, Bertram, were running commercial Hereford cows and finding it difficult to find bulls that could acclimate to the rugged environment. So, they decided to start raising bulls for their own use. They bought their first registered Hereford cows for that purpose in 1972. By 1982, they were selling a few bulls to folks who saw how they worked in the environment. Today, they sell about 45 bulls each year in their annual bull sale.

For perspective, this is steep country, ranging in elevation from 1,000 to 5,000 feet with the San Andreas fault running through it. Cows run on dry feed — 30 acres per cow — for about seven

months out of the year. They have to travel, forage and be able to store some body condition.

Although the climate here in the southwestern San Joaquin Valley is Mediterranean, temperatures can drop to single digits in the winter, though not for long. Yet, the wet, cloudy winters can take a lot out of cows.

Grasses are mostly annuals, and include brome and filaree, which provides the most production.

Matching nutritional needs to forage resources, the Sneddens turn bulls out Jan. 1 and calve across 60 days in October and November, with calves ready to take advantage of good feed Jan. 1. If there's rain, there will be green-up by then, Austin says.

Cattle receive a protein supplement on a limited basis from August through November, if needed. While pastures look like seas of straw at that time of year, they still possess an amazing amount of grub, which the cows know how to utilize. That's especially true when it comes to Hereford and Hereford-influenced cattle.

Staying the course

"This ranch was bought and paid for by productive Hereford cattle with values that are ingrained in the breed, like docility, efficiency, hide thickness and maternal ability that make for cattle that can perform in every environment, raise calves, protect calves and milk, so that the cows are working for you instead of you working for the cows," Austin says. "I like to think of making a cow low maintenance enough that a rancher has the time to attend his kids' school and sports activities."

While the mentioned traits are inherent to Hereford, Austin notes how breeders' concentrated efforts have improved the breed over time.

Phenotypically, he points to udder and teat improvement, calving ease, eye pigment and maintenance issues, all of which contribute to less labor for commercial producers. He emphasizes improvement has been aided by selection tools available today.

"Breed improvement in practical traits during my lifetime has been astounding," Austin says.

"The cost of labor has been one of the biggest issues in making cattle more practical, and that's something seedstock producers need to keep in mind." He adds that an ongoing challenge for the Association will be continuing to provide breeders with new tools for further progress while maintaining balance and the breed's strengths.

All of that helped encourage Austin and his family to invest their time in him serving on the AHA Board.

"The commercial focus was very important to me. It seemed like the timing for my thoughts on things lined up perfectly with the commercial focus of the Association's *Long-Range Strategic Plan*. I ran for the Board with a strong commercial focus," he says.

One of the things he's most proud of during his time on the Board is being part of the effort to make genetic testing more affordable for members. He also points to ongoing cooperative research demonstrating the breed's commercial value.

"The AHA is such a member-first, grassroots-focused organization. I've been involved in politics, local volunteer groups and other organizations, and it's really easy to lose sight of the grassroots," Austin says. "I'm constantly amazed by the quality of the AHA staff and the level of customer service, compared to anywhere else — the quick and personal service. The AHA is people first. It starts with the members and is reflected by the staff.

"The members of this Association are so impressive. I've been really humbled to have the chance to help, and I'm constantly humbled that they would let a cowman from the mountains help run the ship."

Lead by example

Belief in volunteer leadership also stems from Austin's family's culture.

"I'm an opinionated person, and I feel a sense of responsibility. I've seen when someone will complain about something but not want to do anything about it. If I'm going to have opinions about things, then I'd better be willing to do something about it," Austin says.

He is a living definition of forthrightness, with strong convictions and a respectful matter-of-fact attitude, more interested in facts than wishful thinking. Hang around his family just a little while,

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>
> **— Austin Snedden**



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Snedden Ranch runs their commercial cows alongside their purebred herd, and their commercial program serves as testing grounds for their seedstock genetics.



Austin Snedden's parents, Richard and Susan (center), work on the ranch alongside his wife, Sarah, and their four children: Ezra, Sonora, Rainey and Ryah.

and it's easy to see he came by it honestly from his parents, Richard and Susan, who are partners in the ranch with Austin, and his wife, Sarah, and their four children.

Ezra, 14, is a freshman in high school; Sonora, 16, is a junior in high school; Rainey, 19, attends Questa College in San Louis Obispo, where she also plays volleyball; Ryah, 21, is a junior at Colorado State University, completing her degree in business administration online while working full time at the ranch and coaching volleyball.

Sarah homeschooled the kids and coached volleyball.

Continuous improvement

"I was very blessed when I got involved with management of the ranch. My dad and grandpa were very patient with the genetics they were making. They were very disciplined in only keeping the good ones. They had already built a productive cow herd with good udders," Austin says.

The Sneddens run about 400 commercial cows and 150 registered cows all managed the same way with the same resources.

"This is very drought-influenced country," Austin explains. "The number of cows we run year to year changes."

The constant drought threat also explains why the ranch is what Austin terms as infrastructure-based. There are 60 miles of water lines and more than 100 miles of fence.

"My dad and my grandpa realized infrastructure would make this ranch," Austin says. "It's so important to be able to move water around."

A well provides water for the upper end of the ranch, about 5,000 acres. Three springs accommodate the 15,000 acres on the lower end.

The commercial cows are about two-thirds Hereford and one-third Red Angus of various percentages of the breeds. They use 15 Red Angus bulls and 30 Hereford. The Hereford bulls breed the straight Red Angus cows, and the Red Angus bulls breed the straight Hereford cows.

Snedden Ranch uses artificial insemination on a limited basis in the registered herd, choosing instead

to source walking bulls from across the nation. The ranch foregoes embryo transfer, in part because their pastures are so large, but mainly because that's not how their customers raise cattle.

Yearling bulls are sold in October, grown on long hay and four pounds of grain per day after weaning.

"Our goal is to push them hard enough to see the ones with the ability to perform and show separation without getting fat," Austin says. He explains customers favoring yearling bulls has increased significantly over the past 20 years.

Marketing yearlings also coincides with the Sneddens' philosophy of challenging their genetics.

"Selecting genetics to use at a year of age is important to all aspects of the business," Austin says. "It's the same age as when you select replacements and the same age you want the steer mates to perform in the feedlot. If I want my females to breed as yearlings, then I'd better push bulls to semen test as yearlings. It puts more pressure on them, genetically, and that carries over to our cow herd."

Keep in mind, virtually all Snedden Ranch customers retain their own replacement heifers.

"The Hereford breed offers the best of both worlds. You not only have a calf that will feed for less cost, on average, in the feedlot, but you also have a female that will produce calves year after year," Austin says.

Proof positive

The Snedden commercial cows serve multiple purposes on the ranch. For one thing, they provide a drought buffer. The Sneddens don't have to cut the purebred herd as deep when needing to decrease the stocking rate.

More important, Austin explains, "Our commercial herd allows us to test our product, which is bulls. Some of it is hard lessons. Maybe we find out we went down a wrong road, but our commercial cows help us find that out faster. It's a great way to see whether or not our genetics are working."

When it makes economic sense, the Sneddens also discover genetic merit by retaining ownership in calves through the feedlot. Austin is a champion for the Hereford Feedout Program, which provides the same opportunity.

When they don't retain ownership, the Sneddens market calves at Overland Stock Yard. The cattle commonly end up at Harris Ranch.

"We went to marketing at the stockyards from selling on video because they sell cattle really well and potential bull customers see the red-hided cattle selling right up with the black-hided ones, and that's driven some bull buyers to us," Austin explains.

Similarly, the Sneddens expand their buyer pool by selling three lots of five open commercial replacement females in their annual bull sale — a straight Hereford lot, a Red Angus lot and one comprised of red baldies, all top picks from the commercial herd.

"People are coming back to Hereford to improve cow performance. Fertility and longevity will always return dollars every year to the commercial operator," Austin emphasizes. "Hereford has done a better job of building cattle that can work in the feedlot and on the rail, and also as cows that can work on the ranch. I feel like the AHA has done a better job of paying attention to cow efficiency, more than any other breed." **HW**

