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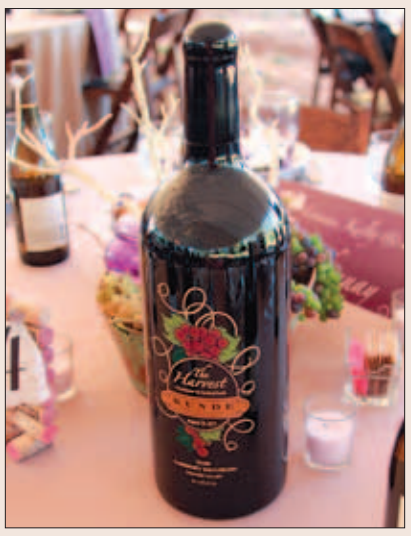

Hereford Made the Difference

Hereford genetics increased profitability for Scott and Matt Cupps.

*Story by **Sara Gugelmeyer,** photos by **Jocelyn Butler***

Hereford genetics changed Scott Cupps' cattle program and his bottom line. By breeding Hereford bulls to what Scott calls "generic" Angus-based cows, he and his brother Matt have increased prices paid for their replacement heifers by $200 to $350 a head.

Simple start

John and Sandy Cupps raised twin brothers Scott and Matt and younger sister Julie on the family cattle and crop farm near Shell Knob, Mo. The Cupps family, like many others, was victim to the hostile economic climate for agriculture in the mid-90s, so when Scott and Matt decided to enter into the cattle business, they started from scratch. In 1999 the brothers were freshmen in high school when they were each granted a FSA young farmers and ranchers program loan to purchase five cows from a local Angus seedstock breeder.

"That made our herd a whole 10 head," says Scott, chuckling. "He sold them to us at commercial price because he knew we would take care of his babies, so to speak. They were good cows, not outstanding, but it gave us a pretty good start."

At that time Scott and Matt's goals were simple. "We hoped to make enough money to put gas in our trucks to go to town on Friday night," Scott says. "We wanted to make the loan payment and buy a little gas and maybe buy a pair of tennis shoes."

And raising a few "generic" Angus calves and selling them as weaned yearling replacement heifers and bulls allowed them to do that, Scott says. However, bigger and better ideas started to form as the two matured and studied agriculture at Crowder College, Neosho, Mo., and then Missouri State, Springfield.

"As time went on we started thinking about the future and how maybe it would be nice to have some income," Scott says. "And, when we were in college, we realized that this is a lifestyle that might be able to support a family someday if we make the right decisions along the way. Then maybe we could move back home and start a legacy for future generations."

Also, as Scott and Matt gained more knowledge, they started to identify some problems in their program. "Since we were retaining heifers and selling replacement heifers, we ended up breeding for calving ease. After breeding calving-ease Angus genetics for five or six years, we really started to question whether that was going to be sustainable.

"We were raising calving-ease Angus stacked on top of calving-ease Angus. That was leading to lower weaning weights, definitely lower yearling weights, and mature size was decreasing on females. The fleshing ability was decreasing and saleability was decreasing because of all those reasons."

During this period of reflection and considering where to take their operation, Scott learned about the

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Scott Cupps says he considers the Hereford-Angus cross the best.

...Hereford Made the Difference continued from the cover

Scott and Matt Cupps have discovered that using Hereford bulls on their black cows has increased profitability.

Cupps' black baldie calves are highly sought after for replacements or feeders.

Show-Me Select Heifer program (see "Show-Me profitability") and saw an opportunity. "We thought maybe this could be a secondary profit point for our operation. So while we were in college we purchased 20-30 heifers with a loan and those were almost all solid black, straight Angus genetics with a handful of baldies on them. We AI (artificial insemination) bred them to easy calving Angus bulls and ran some easy calving Angus bulls clean up on them."

Hereford solution

That's when things started coming together, Scott says. Whether it was the Herefords' efficiency influence or the advantages of heterosis, Scott's not sure, but he says the handful of baldie heifers in the group were easier fleshing and went to the sale in better condition even though they were managed in the same group as the solid black heifers.

Scott explains, "We were developing our heifers on grass and a little bit of supplement, and it seemed like the heifers that you could tell went back to a little bit of Hereford genetics were a lot easier fleshing on the same low amount of feed we were giving them."

It was also hard to discern if it was the heifers' whitefaces or that they were fleshier, but the baldie heifers brought $200 to $300 more per head than the solid black heifers.

"That's when we really started questioning the validity of our program from a heifer retainment standpoint. That, in turn, has slowly lead us to where we're at today."

Today's Cupps Farms

Where they're at today is a successful farming and ranching operation. Scott and Matt farm row crops and raise top-quality Hereford-Angus cross calves. The cow herd consists of about 280 solid black cows, although Scott says that's not necessarily on purpose. "Many of them do have Hereford genetics a couple years back, but it seems if I was ever able to hang on to a good baldie cow, inevitably somebody would want to buy her from me," Scott explains. "If I ever priced her and/or some solid black animals, same genetics, same quality of cattle, they would always take the baldie cattle. So I just kept ones that didn't have as high of saleable value.

"I think that the F1 50-50 Hereford-Angus cross is not only the best fit for southwest Missouri and our area but is also the best fit from a marketing standpoint. It's hard to hang on to any because somebody else wants it too."

The cows are bred to Hereford bulls, and the heifers are raised with the goal of being replacements, but the Cupps brothers keep their options open.

Scott says, "We usually sell, depending on what we've got, anywhere from 20-80 heifers in the fall and 20-80 heifers in the spring. That varies depending on the quality of cattle coming out of each calving season and also

Show-Me profitability

There are many programs available to help producers make the right decisions when developing heifers to sell or to retain for the cow herd. All are designed with the producer's profitability in mind. And one such program is Show-Me Select Replacement Heifers Inc. (SMS). It was developed by the University of Missouri and in 2004 became a producer-owned-and-operated non-profit corporation. SMS was patterned after a similar program developed by the University of Kentucky.

Basically, the program consists of established guidelines and protocols that produce a reliably consistent product for replacement female buyers. And the advantage for producers is an established marketplace in which to sell their heifers at a premium.

Of course, the SMS program's protocol may not be perfect, but it is a good example of what buyers may be looking for. Here are a few of the guidelines that must be met in order for heifers to be eligible for the program:

- **Prebreeding evaluation:** A prebreeding reproductive evaluation is required for all heifers. Individual animal identification, pelvic area and reproductive tract score is required. It is strongly encouraged that prebreeding exams be performed six weeks prior to breeding. Heifers with a pelvic area less than 150 cm2 at prebreeding may be re-measured at the initial pregnancy exam within 90 days from the start of the breeding season and must have a minimum pelvic area of 180 cm2 at this examination.

- **Minimum vaccination requirements:** A comprehensive herd health vaccination program starting at weaning age or before should be administered under the advice and guidance of your veterinarian in the context of a valid veterinary-client-patient relationship.

  Calfhood vaccination against Brucellosis (Bangs) must be given in accordance with state and federal regulations by an accredited veterinarian.

- **Weaning:** Heifers must be vaccinated and boostered for IBR, BVD, PI 3, BRSV, leptospirosis (5-way), vibriosis and 7-way clostridia. Heifers must be 5 months of age or older at time of vaccinations. Follow label directions for all products used.

- **Prebreeding:** To maximize protection against reproductive loss, vaccinations against Leptospirosis (5-way) and Vibriosis must be given between 60 and 30 days prior to breeding. A booster vaccination against IBR and BVD is required between 60 and 30 days prior to breeding. Modified live viral vaccines for IBR and BVD are recommended. If killed viral vaccine products are used, two boosters are strongly recommended. Follow label directions for all products used.

- **Pregnancy check:** A booster vaccination against Leptospirosis (5-way) is required at pregnancy examination.

- **Pregnancy examination:** An initial pregnancy examination must be performed within 90 days from the start of the breeding season. Individual animal identification, pregnancy status and fetal age (in days) are required. Herds utilizing artificial insemination must report breeding dates. Any heifer that fails to become pregnant during or loses a pregnancy following the original breeding season is no longer eligible for the program.

Also outlined in the program are restrictions on the bulls the heifers can be bred to in order to qualify. There are criteria for each breed of bull used for either birth weight or calving ease direct expected progeny differences (EPDs).

The guidelines above are not comprehensive, and even more criteria must be met in order for the heifers to be eligible to be sold through the SMS consignment sale. A complete list of requirements and costs involved with the program can be found at *http://agebb.missouri.edu/select/prgmreq.htm*. Although these guidelines are specific to the SMS program, but any producer can adopt similar procedures in order to effectively manage their heifers to sell or retain in the herd. **HW**

"There have been Show-Me Select sales where my solid black females out of the same calf crop, out of the same black Angus based cows, would bring $300 to $350 less than their Hereford-sired counterparts. That's not just because they had a whiteface; that's because they were better heifers."

— Scott Cupps

what the market dictates. If feeder heifers are real high and there's not much value in replacements, then that number is going to be lower. If feeder cattle have slacked off and replacements are doing well, then we'll retain more of those and go ahead and develop those heifers and AI them for the program."

The heifers must meet all the requirements for the Show-Me Select program, which include being bred to a calving-ease bull. Scott says they usually breed the baldie heifers to an Angus bull and use an Angus clean-up bull as well.

"We have AI bred some of our solid black heifers to Feltons Legend 242, a Hereford bull that meets the requirements of the Show-Me Select program. There was one sale that we had a fairly sizeable group of heifers, probably 40 to 45, that were all bred to Legend and then the balance were bred to easy calving Angus bulls that were the same accuracy and same calving ease scores and same exact heifers, same exact genetics, same everything."

The proof that the producer is looking for Hereford-Angus cross genetics was in the price paid. "The solid black heifers bred to the Hereford bull did bring more money because the producers knew they were likely going to have black baldie calves," Scott says. "The producers that are buying those heifers, they know what they want because of what they've had in the past and what's performed for them. They always seem to be willing to give a better price for something they know is crossbred with Hereford, and it didn't take us long to figure out if that's what was in demand then that's what we're going to produce."

The Cupps' Hereford-Angus cross steers are also highly sought-after. The steers are sold at Joplin Regional Stockyards, Joplin, Mo., through a value-added sale. They are weaned 45-70 days, started on feed, source- and age-verified through the Pfizer WeanVAC program. "Our black baldies seem like they always top the market; you just can't find a set of steer calves that do better."

Although Scott says the buyers have always believed in his cattle, he decided to retain them to prove their advantage. He entered them in the Missouri Steer Feedout with excellent results.

"In comparison to the straight Angus genetics, they did just as well from the gain and quality standpoint, but they had less fat thickness. They graded 100% Choice and didn't have any "outs." They were all yield grades 1 and 2, so from a feeding standpoint, you couldn't ask for any better. In my opinion, if I had used straight Angus genetics on my same cow herd, I probably wouldn't have had a set of steers that did that well."

At the end of the day, Scott says, Hereford genetics have made their program successful. "The big deal is we were raising straight Angus genetics and we had run-of-the-mill black cattle and we were getting run-of-the-mill black cattle prices. When we introduced those Hereford genetics, we saw an increase in price of $200 a head at the low end.

"There have been Show-Me Select sales where my solid black females out of the same calf crop, out of the same black Angus based cows, would bring $300 to $350 less than their Hereford-sired counterparts. That's not just because they had a whiteface; that's because they were better heifers. I'm here to tell you anytime you are trying to be competitive in the marketplace and you can get $350 more for a heifer it makes that genetic investment definitely worth it." **HW**