

A Heart for The HEREFORD



At Burns Farms, the focus is on one breed, family, hard work and junior cattle programs.

BY VICTORIA G. MYERS

Long before they got married, or baby Helen came along, a date for Katie and David Burns could be something as down-to-earth as checking cows. And that was just fine with Katie.

"I knew early on Herefords were something he was passionate about," she says with a laugh. "David's dream was to do what he is doing and continue with the traditions of his family. So, yes, a date to us was checking cows. But as I learned about cattle, I saw what a great career choice it is. I guess you could say it's become my passion, as well."

The two have been married three years now and call Burns Farms, in Tennessee's

Sequatchie Valley, home. The picturesque area, with its rolling hills, lakes and pastures, is about two hours southeast of Nashville. Burns Farms is home to the largest registered Hereford operation in the Southeast. It all started with two heifers that David's dad, Phillip Burns, bought for a 4-H project in 1952 from Duck River Hereford Association.

"That was really the beginning for us," David says. "We have such a love for the breed and a true commitment to genetic progress and the industry. It all goes back to that 4-H project."

Phillip was president of the American Hereford Association in 1998. His commitment to the cattle industry has been so widely known that many people through the years had no idea he worked cattle on the side. His day job was as a doctor. Today, he is chairman of the department of surgery at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, in Chattanooga.

Phillip passed his love for the cattle industry to David, who took



David Burns puts a good disposition top of the list when he talks about the genetic qualities they strive for at Burns Farms.

over management of Burns Farms in 2005 after receiving his master's degree in reproductive physiology from Michigan State University in 2004. His sister, Sarah Burns Bernard, works the business and technology side of the operation. Her master's degree is from Kansas State University in agricultural business.

Today, Burns Farms runs about 300 cows and 150 heifers. All are registered Herefords, both polled and horned. They also keep 150 recip cows for use in their growing embryo transfer (ET) program, which David says is helping them push the best genetics out as quickly as possible. All of their cattle are bred at least once using artificial insemination (AI).

DEFINING THE BEST. So what do "best genetics" mean to someone with such a long history in Hereford breeding? What do the Burns like to see in a good Hereford heifer or a bull?

A good disposition is high on the list for both the female and the male side. David says he doesn't like having to chase cattle, so he breeds for animals that are easy to work. From there, he's pretty specific about what he wants.

"We are looking for light birthweights and big growth," he says. Lower birthweights are an indicator of calving ease, a hallmark of the breed. In addition, Burns says since a majority of their buyers sell at weaning, growth is also key. In addition, they breed for good udders, eye pigment, muscle and bone.



PHOTO: VICTORIA G. MYERS



Heifers are culled based on structure and/or conception. Good feet and legs are critical here, as is udder quality. But if they don't have a calf at their side, they are out. David says his philosophy is that there is no reason to keep anything that is not the best.

The same goes for bulls. David looks at parentage and GE-EPDs (genomic enhanced expected progeny differences) on all bulls. He doesn't believe in carrying any that aren't outstanding. He culls on feet and legs,

as well as genetic data that includes target weights. He considers color patterns and pigment on the eye, and avoids white legs. Anything with a birthweight over 90 pounds is gone.

David believes seedstock producers carry an added level of responsibility for the direction cattle genetics take.

"We are the ones pushing the genetic inflow for the entire industry. We don't take that lightly. We have to be progressive, which is why we use GE-EPDs on all our bulls, AI

and are including more embryo transfers in our program. Everything is aimed at providing the industry with the best genetics possible."

Hereford breeders have the enviable position of producing a breed that is looked to throughout the cattle industry as an excellent means of bringing hybrid vigor into commercial herds. That means these cattle need to last well, hold their condition, provide doability and produce calves with growth and muscle—all while maintaining that Hereford docility.

It may sound like a lot to come in one package, but David says given how fast genetic progress is being made, there's no reason to doubt animals can't continue to improve—across all breeds within the cattle business.

"GE-EPDs are helping us set a new bar. We can now tell a commercial breeder, 'this is what this bull can do,' and have the data to back that up.

"I know that since we've started using GE-EPDs in our bull development, over the last three years, there is a difference. I thought I knew from a visual standpoint which bulls performed better. But now I have the data to prove it. I've been pleased to see the data is matching up pretty well with what my eyes have been seeing."

IN THE FUTURE. Looking ahead, David thinks the Hereford breed will continue to make strides in developing bulls that can bring calving ease to a herd without sacrificing growth.

"We have to work to do that in a structurally sound, visually appealing package, with good fleshing ability. It's a balancing act of traits." ►

Burns Farms got its start in the purebred cattle business when Phillip Burns (see vintage photo, above) raised a Hereford heifer as part of a 4-H project.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE BURNS FAMILY

cattlelink extra



A sale barn was added to the operation in 2009, allowing the family to market through annual auctions in addition to private treaty sales.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE BURNS FAMILY

BUILDING NEW MARKETS.

For 50 years, word of mouth brought customers to Burns to buy Herefords in private treaty sales.

While David continues that tradition, he added a

sale barn to the operation in 2009 and now holds two annual sales: one for bulls and one for heifers. Those sales generally take place in the spring and fall. He also has two 75-day calving seasons, one between February and April, the second between September and November. This helps provide marketing options throughout the year.

"I felt strongly we needed to move in the direction of auctions," David says. "They allow us to reach out and market better. We are able to advertise more and bring in people who might not come to a private treaty situation. It also helps from a budgeting standpoint, because you know there are at least two paydays a year."

Between auctions and private treaty sales, Burns Farms sells about 150 bulls each year. This is the biggest side of their business. They also sell some show cattle, as well as bred heifers.

Most of the Burns' bulls are sold as long yearlings or 2-year-olds. All come with parentage and GE-EPDs. In addition, they sell 30 to 40 registered heifers each year and include some commercial-bred and open heifers from bull customers in the farm's fall bull sale.

BACK TO THEIR ROOTS. As the business grows, both in sales and genetics, the Burns have not forgotten their roots. David says his commitment and love of the farm go back to his childhood.

"Honestly, the Hereford youth program is what attracted me to the cattle industry," David explains. "My first real exposure to cattle was showing heifers. That just drew me into the industry as a whole. We see it as a valuable way to start kids in the business. It gave me a good work ethic and helped develop me as a person and a leader. I want others to have that same opportunity."

Burns Farms works with the National Junior Hereford Association, as well as with youth in the area showing 4-H calves.

"We try to help them once they get a heifer, giving them guidance with feed and nutrition, and showing them how to get the heifer halter broke. One of the biggest benefits you see with the Hereford is they are just naturally so docile and easy to handle, they are a great breed for the youth."

In addition to the youth programs, Katie, who handles the farm's marketing and promotions campaigns, believes the farm has a responsibility to use social media and education to advocate for agriculture. She has led that outreach drive with a goal of openness and sharing the farm and the farm experience with others.

"It means so much to have young people come out here and see them open up and be excited about what they're learning," Katie says. "I believe it's so important to tell our story, and we all want to have that one-on-one interaction, where someone comes away with a new, informed viewpoint about what we do. It's one way we can really make a difference for all of agriculture." ●

For More Information

Burns Farms: burnsfarms.com

American Hereford Association: www.hereford.org