

Looking for Performance

After trying other breeds, Hereford fits this rugged foothills ranch best.



BY JUDY FINSETH *Managing Editor*

“Looking for performance guys,” Howard Hawkwood, Alberta Hereford Association’s Commercial Breeder of the Year advises purebred breeders. He looks at WW, YW EPDs and wants an actual YW. He also likes to see his bulls in the 1300 to 1400 weight range as yearlings.

Emphasis on this has ensured that Hawkwood’s calves weigh up at sale time and he also feels he benefits when it comes time to sell his cull cows.

The ranch, owned by Howard and wife Nielle, is located northwest of Calgary in the rugged foothills of the Alberta Rockies. From the highest point on the ranch you can see the southernmost tip of the Rocky Mountains, west to Banff, north to Jasper and also includes a bird’s eye view of the Calgary skyline.

With an elevation of 4,285 feet, winter comes early to this Madden area ranch and Howard expects to start feeding by Halloween. The ranchland is split between two watersheds, the Red Deer River to the north and the Bow River to the south. The land is hilly with lots of bush and water. “One third water,” Howard says. His herd of Hereford cows share this land with moose, whitetail and mule deer and the odd bear, cougar and wolf. “Hereford cows handle our climate conditions, the weather changes and the cold and the feed.”

Hereford cattle are famous for thriving in tough conditions and they have certainly proven their worth on this ranch. Howard has toyed with Charolais bulls on his Hereford base and had too many calving issues. He also tried



Angus and didn't like their disposition, so he is back to running a straight Hereford program. "I keep three straight black cows to remind me why I don't like them," he says. This rancher feels that running both horned and polled bulls gives him an extra genetic punch without looking to another breed. "I stay with the breed because I believe there is enough diversity within the breed."

Howard always wanted to be a rancher and after attending Olds College worked a short time before establishing Ironwood Ranches in 1980 when he and Nielle were married. Pastures are all fenced into 1/2 section fields and are all native grass. Hay and grainland is found on the north side of the ranch and Howard produces hay and greenfeed and a small amount of grain. "Some of the old-time cowboys thought this was the best grazing land that they rode across in the foothills," he says, "and it is some of the most productive farmland in Canada."

The bush provides plenty of protection from the elements and Howard has cleared narrow strips over the years. "We used to burn the brush piles, but not anymore," he says. The fire would smoulder in the ground for too long. The brush piles disintegrate over time and the cleared areas offer more grass.

Like many stewards of the land, Howard has a keen eye and appreciation for the wildlife on this ranch. This is horseback country with the heaviest rains falling in June and the greatest snowfall usually in March and November. This pocket of the province was little affected by the 2021 drought and Howard has had plenty of grass and feed to get him through the upcoming season.

Hawkwood runs the ranch on his own with a little help from

family and friends when he needs it. Nielle and Howard have two sons, Joe is an emergency room doctor at Medicine Hat Hospital and Dan is a lawyer with Beaumont Church LLP in Calgary. Joe and Dan continue to help at branding and Howard says they provide him and Nielle with valuable health and legal advice. They also have a new granddaughter, "so the future is bright," says Howard.

Working on his own most of the time, having quiet Hereford cows make life simpler. About 40 replacement heifers start to calve February 20 and cows will start calving on March 10. "I like to be done calving my heifers before Calgary Bull Sale," he says, and wants his cows to start afterward. This schedule enables Howard to attend the sale, his preferred source for buying his bulls. "You can get top quality bulls at Calgary Bull Sale and I like that they are halter broke!"

Howard likes to leave his bulls out with his cows longer than some and has figured that it pays in the long run. Later calves will be sold in February at Strathmore. The early, heavier calves usually sell at the British Breeds Rancher Calf Sale at Balog's in Lethbridge in October. Two paycheques a year also makes good sense from a cashflow point of view. He also runs a few extra bulls with his cows because the country is so rough and he will keep bulls until they are usually six years old and up to a maximum of seven years.

Selection for larger framed bulls that are long and thick has ensured that the 200 head cowherd is above average in size and scale. Howard figures that most of his cows weigh in the 1,500 to 1,600 pound range. Cows will be

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tagged with a blue tag if they are going to be culled and Howard believes the size and quality of his cows pays a big dividend when they hit the market as cull cows.

You would have to travel a lot of miles to find a more enthusiastic supporter of the Hereford breed and Howard credits Hereford breeders with providing him with the tools he needs for his breeding program. "I really need to thank the guys that raised the good quality bulls that have made this herd what it is!"