

# STRONG Against All Odds



*Sue Coley epitomizes a will to live life to its fullest.*

by Lisa Bryant

**S**he's a fighter — whether competing in the show ring, cheering at her son's basketball game or battling for her life. Sue Coley has made her life a success. In a male-dominated industry, she prevails as a knowledgeable, well-respected player. If you don't know her, you might think she has the world at her feet, but a closer look reveals a woman whose picture could be placed beside strength and courage in the dictionary.



Sue grew up the middle of three girls on a registered Angus operation in Jackson, Tenn. Her father, John Smith, was the livestock marketing supervisor of the State Department of Agriculture for western Tennessee. He later became a full time farmer. Sue and her sisters grew up with an agricultural background and helped with cattle, cotton, soybean and hay chores. Sue spent summers spraying cotton and enticed a few friends to help. Sue said they learned what work was in those days.

Along with crop care, the girls showed cattle during the summer, competing in 4-H and Angus shows. Sue won her class at several national shows, but never took home the big prize. She did, however, twice win the Tennessee Agribition — the largest heifer show in the world at that time.

When Sue was a senior in high school, she met Tommy, a Hereford farm boy from Lafayette. They dated two years while Sue attended the University of Tennessee. They married and moved to Michigan for about four months for Tommy's job. It was then that an AHA field representative called and told the Coleys about a management position with Treefine Hereford Farm in Warsaw, Ohio.

The Coleys moved to Ohio for five years and Sue finished her degree in human nutrition at Ohio State University, helping Tommy with the show cattle. The Coleys eventually moved back to Jackson and farmed with Sue's father for several years. During this time, they had a son, Matt, and a daughter, Kristi. In 1986, AHA field representative Ralph Dodson told Tommy about a management position with Foreman & Burrus Hereford Ranch, owned by H.R. Foreman and George Burrus, in Ashland City, Tenn. Sue was unable to interview with the owners and did not meet Foreman until they moved.

Sue said the foundation cow herd was already established in Ashland City due to extensive embryo transfer work. They set a goal to have the top cow herd in the country. Sue said Tommy was able to use his knack for genetics to build a contending herd.

After the Foreman and Burrus partnership dissolved in 1989, Foreman kept the Coleys as Foreman Hereford Ranch managers. Sue said Tommy had given Foreman a list of what the new ranch needed and they got almost all the cattle and equipment they needed, but no farm.

Sue said she immediately called the realtors and pretended Foreman was her uncle in order to find the cheapest land. They had to have at least 600 acres with a triangle radius for Foreman, who was a doctor, to drive back to Nashville when he was on call. Within two days, Sue found the perfect farm in Pembroke, Ky. They had a deadline of four months to move off the Ashland City farm and build new barns and fences at the new ranch.

According to Sue, the move was a good one. Pembroke has some of the richest soil available and the corn and alfalfa hay flourished. They also continued to improve the cow herd and established a nationwide reputation for quality females.

However, it wasn't long before Foreman was diagnosed with cancer and sold the cattle and equipment to the Coleys in 1991. When plans for the farmland fell through, the Coleys held a sale in the fall of 1992. Doug Perks, who had first approached Tommy about managing his ranch in the spring of 1992, bought much of the herd for Perks Ranch Inc., Rockford, Ill. Tommy and Sue met with Perks and agreed on terms and moved to Illinois in February 1993.

Perks already had a good herd of cows and a top bull, PR Primeline, when they came to manage. Sue said many people think the "C" in the Perks logo stands for Coley, but the logo and ranch already existed and the "C" stands for Doug's father, Campbell. With the addition of Coley's cattle, new barn facilities and new management, the ranch was well on its way to adopting and continuing Foreman's goal of establishing a top cow herd.

Tommy soon found CL 1 Domino 373 in the Cooper Hereford Ranch 1994 sale. Sue said it is the only bull Tommy has ever said they had to buy. With 373's addition to the herd, the ranch has enjoyed continued success in the show ring including Midwest region show bull and show heifer of the year in 1995-96.

Tommy and Sue are a team in every phase of the cattle business. Many wives in the cattle industry do not receive the same recognition as the husband, but this is not the case with this couple. Sue and Tommy agree that people treat her the same as him and will talk to her about the cattle just as easily as to him.

Tommy credits this to Sue being a strong-willed, dedicated and opinionated woman. He said she focuses on what is right and wrong and practices that. They don't always agree on matters, but she stands her ground and speaks her mind. He said he has developed as much respect for Sue's thinking on cattle as anyone he knows.



The Coley family works as a team. From left, Matt, Tommy, Sue and Kristi pose below some awards the family captured.

*The family gets to be a lot more important. Whether you get the last board up on the fence before you go home to be with the family is hardly as important as it used to be.*

— Tommy Coley

Together, this partnership built several successful herds, some from scratch, and gained recognition and respect doing so. From a business perspective, it seems they have everything going their way.



*Matt's hectic sports schedule squeezes time for academics; however, both he and Kristi take advanced classes. Here, Sue helps Matt with homework by pointing out a math tip.*



*"In 1991, Sue showed the champion heifer in Denver one year after she started her treatments," said Tommy. "I guess that was as rewarding to me as winning Denver."*



*Sue keeps the office running smoothly. Tasks include registering cattle, answering phones about semen calls and handling the bookwork for the cattle division.*

**B**ut in August of 1989, tragedy struck when Sue found lumps in her right breast. The doctor couldn't fit her in and nurses advised her not to drink caffeine for awhile. While on the doctor's waiting list, she was able to have a mammogram. Nurses told her she probably had a benign cyst. Sue said the

knots kept growing and hardening and she decided she must do something. Sue was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 1989. Once she had surgery, the doctor found three malignant tumors. Sue had a mastectomy and six treatments of chemotherapy. The doctors pulled 16 lymph nodes and found no difference from the first test. Sue said she thinks they thought she was home free at that point. The next summer she had the left breast removed and received bilateral implants.

For two or three years, she thought she was fine. But the disease was silently spreading throughout her body. Sue started having back pain. She went to an orthopedic specialist, but never had a bone scan. The night before she was to leave for the 1992 Louisville show,

she began coughing and ended up lying on the floor. She said she believes her back broke then. However, she took a muscle relaxer and drug herself back to bed that night. The next day, with the aid of a back brace and tremendous fervor, she showed cattle in Louisville. A month later, Sue and Kristi rolled their car into a ditch. At that point, doctors discovered her back was broken, the cancer had unknowingly spread and weakened her spine.

Sue was diagnosed with adenocarcinoma, a slow-growing cancer that is typically found in 60- to 70-year-old women, not a 35-year-old. The news stunned the family because there was no family history of cancer. The children were too young to understand anything

except that mom was sick. Kristi didn't know why Sue couldn't pick her up. Sue said everyone kept telling her she was too young, but breast cancer strikes women as young as 20.

Sue's family has been a foundation for her

during tough times. The kids help by cleaning the house. Her sisters and parents provide emotional support. Sue said her father, before his death in September, was a source of support because of situations he had survived.

Upon diagnosis, her doctor told her she would find out what kind of husband she had. She said many husbands leave their wives during the cancer battle, but Tommy never wavered. Tommy gives Sue shots even though he dreads it. He said he has tried to give her space and to allow her to continue to live a complete life. Her contributions to the family and ranch are important he said. Tommy said she placed herself last in priorities and it's been hard for her to realize she has to take care of herself more and the remainder of the family and ranch less. Yet, Tommy said Sue shows courage despite her trials and gives her strength to him and the children.

Tommy said Sue's cancer changed his perspective on life. He said losing somebody you love unexpectedly is one thing, but to know so far in advance what looms ahead is another. He said it is unbearable at times to watch Sue but he tries never to tell her so.

"The family gets to be a lot more important," said Tommy. "Whether you get the last board up on the fence before you go home to be with the family is hardly as important as it used to be."

Sue said Hereford breeders have been a constant source of support. Initially, she received many cards and letters from the women's auxiliary and breeders. Fellow breeder and doctor Phillip Burns has given Sue valuable advice. Every time she is hospitalized, she receives get-well cards from Hereford friends. Sue has been extremely open about her condition with other producers and she thinks this has helped her deal with it.

The sickness also caused financial havoc. One anti-nausea pill taken daily costs \$37. At times, bi-weekly chemotherapy injections cost as much as \$8,000 a treatment. Blood transfusions and weekly liquid food supplements each cost \$2,800. On top of insurance, the Coleys paid \$18,000 to \$20,000 out-of-pocket in 1993 when they moved to Illinois because the ranch plan did not pick them up as they had expected. Sue later changed companies and now annually pays \$2,500 out-of-pocket expenses with a \$500 deductible.

Sue said she cannot stress enough the importance of having insurance. She said farmers and ranchers think they can't afford insurance, but the danger is so great you can't afford not to have it. She emphasizes the importance of reading the insurance policy and checking the cap allowed for each family member before out-of-pocket expenses begin. She said many companies now allow \$2 million for out-of-pocket expenses and recommends this because it doesn't take long for a farm worker who's in a severe accident or diagnosed with a catastrophic illness to eat up \$1 million.

Today the cancer occupies virtually every part of Sue's body and her heart does not pump properly. She

even underwent radiation treatments on her brain. This April, Sue had a radiation treatment and later found out if she had waited two weeks longer, she would probably be totally paralyzed due to a rapid growing tumor pressing against her spinal cord. In June, she was diagnosed with liver cancer. Typically a patient is expected to live only two years after this discovery.

Sue's body hasn't responded well to chemotherapy. Her treatment must be administered very slowly because it is so toxic. Currently, she's taking a new hormone remedy that seems to be helping kill the cancer. It has given her renewed energy and she hopes it will prolong her life or cause the cancer to remit.

Outsiders wonder how she keeps up with her hectic family schedule, ranch operations and tiresome treatments. She said she is tired often due to chemotherapy treatments and nightly feedings that steal sleep but give her energy for the next day's activities.

The cancer somewhat affects her memory. She no longer remembers people's names as she used to. In earlier times, she would forget an entire day's activities because of anti-nausea drugs used then.

Her typical day involves rising around 5:30 a.m., waking the family, making breakfast and getting the kids off to school. She keeps the books, answers phones, helps make management decisions and runs errands at the ranch office from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. She said this work helps her forget what she is feeling. She picks up the children from school and attends their extracurricular activities at night.

Sue's illness limits her physical work on the ranch. "I used to bale hay but do little now," she said. "That was my favorite job. I love the smell of hay." She is not able to check cows at night like she used to — her bones are too brittle to risk slipping on the ice and short walks deplete her oxygen levels. She is not supposed to lift over 20 lbs. so she cannot lift and pull calves either. Sue, who was the showman of the family, can't do that either. If a bull butted her, she could be paralyzed. Although she misses this greatly, she can experience the show ring through her son, who she describes as a proficient showman.

Sue's strength lives in her children. They have her tenacity, work ethic and determination to win. Both children are actively involved in sports and their schedules keep Sue busy. Her lively spirit and outspoken demeanor was apparent at one of Matt's basketball games when she jumped down to the court. The referee asked her where she was going. "I'll be taking my son to the hospital if you don't start calling fouls," she replied.

Like any mother, she wants to prepare her children for life's challenges. Sue hopes to get her children through high school, but fears she will not make that goal with 10-year-old Kristi. She is trying to make them as self-sufficient as she can so they can take care of themselves. She wants Matt and Kristi

to get through college and have a good, happy life. Fifteen-year-old Matt wants to be an engineer while Kristi wants to be a veterinarian. She thinks Kristi will stay on the farm but expects Matt to work for a while before returning to a farm.

Another goal of Sue's is to win champion carload and champion bull at Denver. The couple showed the champion heifer in 1991 when working for Foreman Hereford Ranch. They are working hard at these goals and have been within striking distance at times, but fallen short.

But for now, Sue lives day by day while others around her plan for retirement.

"When I was diagnosed, I just didn't want to give up — I had years to live. I have my children to worry about — not just myself," she said. Sue stays upbeat for her family and herself because she thinks depression is a sign of giving up. Even though she is in pain, she seldom complains even though she said she used to complain about every little problem. She thinks this helps everyone around her.

Sue said she can't change her situation. All she can do is what the doctors ask. "In a way I dread what it's going to be like later on," she said, knowing she could eventually be confined to a wheelchair.

"I dread the unknown and just hope it doesn't get that bad, but you just don't know. I guess I dread the last — I just don't know what to expect."

"Every day is a different day and I live it to the fullest because you don't know what's going to happen next," Sue said. Her doctor told her she has a wonderful attitude. Her drive and inner strength are vividly evident.

"I just want to live," Sue said, "for as long as I can." HW



*"I have as much respect for Sue's thinking on cattle as anybody," said Tommy. "If I need a herd bull, I would just as soon send her as anybody I know to go buy one for me."*



*Sue learned cattle lingo by doing. She attributes her respect in a male-dominated industry to her knowledge and background. She talks to Harold Watson, Jackson, Tenn., and Bill Brewer, River Rode Company representative, at the National Western in 1995.*

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*— Sue Coley*