Prize heifers arrive at UGA dairy farm

By LEE SHEarer  updated Saturday, December 6, 2014 - 9:08pm

Signing autographs for money cost University of Georgia football star Todd Gurley more than just a four-game suspension by the NCAA and a shot at winning the Heisman Trophy.

It also cost the star running back a chance to have one of the university’s new heifers named after him.

Not just any ordinary heifer, either, but one of six prize heifers that arrived Thursday at UGA’s Dairy Science Farm off Highway 78 near the Oglethorpe County line.

The 9-month-old cows mark an new departure for the department. They are the first of the Jersey breed at the dairy farm in at least 40 years, said animal and dairy science professor Jillian Fain Bohlen, and will be the foundation for a new Jersey herd to complement the roughly 100 Holsteins that form the herd now.

Donated by UGA alumnus who’s now a California dairy farmer and cattle breeder, the heifers are top of the line; amongst the top 1.5 percent of heifers.

“They are the top of the top of the top,” said Bohlen.

They are judged to be of such high quality that they’ll not only build UGA’s herd, but pay for the cost of running the dairy farm with the calves they’ll produce in the future, she said. The first babies will come around spring 2016, when the heifers turn about 2 years old.
The heifers are so important that each got a name that will be the beginning of a lineage, explained Bohlen.

Students picked the six calves and will manage the herd as part of their education. They also helped name the six young Jerseys.

“That process of selecting names was as difficult as selecting the heifers themselves,” Bohlen said.

The students argued for Gurley to start the herd’s athletically-named line. It’s a perfect name for a female cow, they argued. But as the NCAA investigation into whether the real Todd Gurley autographed sports memorabilia for money, Bohlen held out for another former UGA great — Herschel Walker.

Besides Herschel, their names are Athens, Archie, Glory, Sanford, and Russell, for C.A. Russell, the Hilmar, Cal., man who donated the heifers.

Russell, a 1985 graduate of UGA’s animal and dairy science department, allowed UGA to choose from among the best of his top-quality calves, Bohlen said. Russell’s father was also a UGA graduate.

The young Jerseys are valuable for more reasons than their genes and good health, Bohlen said.

They are smaller than Holsteins - about 1,000 pounds fully grown vs. 1500 or 1600 pounds for a Holstein — and don’t produce as much milk as their bigger cousins, but it’s pricier, higher-quality milk.

Holstein milk fills milk jugs, but Jersey milk is more suitable for pricier milk products such as ice cream and cheeses.

Their milk added to the Holsteins’ milk will give a higher-quality blend that will fetch a higher price from milk distributors, Bohlen explained.

Students may find the Jerseys more fun than the plodding Holsteins, too.

“They’ve got such a completely different personality,” she said. “They’re needy, like a companion animal.”

Most importantly, Russell’s donation will ultimately give UGA students more hands-on knowledge of a different part of the dairy industry.

“I really think it’s going to open up some doors for our program,” Bohlen said.

Companies have already begun contacting UGA about acquiring future calves, another part of the dairy world students will be able to explore, she
“This is a huge opportunity for students to work with elite Jersey cows and actually help manage the herd,” said dairy science major Joseph Seta. “This hands-on approach started even before these heifers arrived, as a group of students studied the pedigrees of several Jersey heifers and got to pick which six heifers we wanted. This pedigree selection process was a tremendous learning experience.”