



Charolais-Cross Cattle Make the Cut for Tomorrow's Consumer

After seeing virtually every cattle breed's performance in the feedyard, James Henderson knew Charolais outperformed them all and created a place for the white hides on his wife's Angus seedstock operation.

*By Paige Nelson
Photos courtesy Bradley 3 Ranch*

"There's only so much you can do to a chicken," says James Henderson, partner/owner in Bradley 3 Ranch Charolais. "We don't have to do anything to make our product taste good."



Seedstock producer Bradley 3 Ranch chose to add Charolais to their Angus sale offering due a number of factors. James Henderson explains it was a natural fit as, from his experience, Charolais and Charolais-cross genetics perform well in the feedyard and on the rail, as well as provide their commercial customers some hybrid vigor.

With a background in meat processing and a former packing plant manager, Henderson approaches seedstock production with an understanding of consumer activity. "[Consumers] vote with their dollars," he says. "Fifty-five percent of our product is sold ground; I don't know that we need to feed everything like it goes to Morton's."

Why Charolais?

In his feedyard and packing plant experience, Henderson watched the performance of several different breeds of cattle in the feedlot and at the packing plant. That helped he and his wife, Mary Lou Bradley, decide to add seedstock Charolais genetics to the historic 60-year Angus operation, Bradley 3 Ranch, located near Memphis, Texas.

"We knew that Charolais-Angus crossed cattle really performed well in the feedyard. They were nice carcass cattle. When you've got something that performs well in the feedyard and the packing plant, we knew, from a commercial standpoint, there's some real opportunity there," Henderson explains.

The first Bradley 3 Ranch Charolais bulls were sold private treaty in 2010. In 2011, Charolais made their debut in the Bradley 3 Ranch bull sale.

"We're believers in hybrid vigor," he says, "Our Angus herd is known as a maternal herd. If you're going to use a crossbred program and you have a good maternal cow herd, use something that's going to make a really nice terminal cross.

"From a visual standpoint, a Charolais-cross is an easy animal to pick out. You don't have to go with DNA or anything else to know what you have," he adds.

Bradley 3 Ranch is a seedstock operation designed for the commercial cattleman and values customer service enough to provide well-adapted cattle to their clientele. "We're probably somewhat unusual in the seedstock business in that we tend to run our cattle more like a commercial operation," Henderson points out. "I don't know how to understand what a commercial guy needs if I don't put our cattle through the same things he's going to put them through."



Henderson also recognized that producers in his home state of Texas were the main buyers of Charolais bulls. He figured that some of his Angus customers were probably using Charolais, as well.

It is this mentality that solidified the addition of Charolais genetics to the operation. "It just made a lot of sense to us, if we were going to provide a little more customer service, to do it with Charolais."

A further bonus of adding Charolais to the ranch has been the new opportunities. "It's a new group of people we get to meet, and we get to learn a new set of cattle," he says.

The Charolais Difference

After many years in the Angus business, Henderson has noted some significant differences in behavior between the two breeds. "Charolais cattle tend to stay in a herd more than Angus cattle do; if you find one you'll find them all," he says. He adds that the Charolais cattle tend to have a different flight zone than the Angus cattle.

"We're in a pretty heavy predator area. We've got lots of coyotes and wild hogs and lots of things that hang around and try to catch a baby calf, so that mothering instinct has to be in those (Charolais) cattle. We've really worked on selecting Charolais cows that have that mothering instinct. They can lay down, have a calf, get up and protect it, and nurse it pretty quickly."

When customers ask about calving ease, Henderson says he likes to remind people that his herd started with Charolais embryos in Angus cattle. "Those Angus cows had their calves on their own," he says.

Bradley 3 Ranch keeps terminal cross in mind when they select Charolais bulls. Growth and carcass traits are clearly a priority, but overall soundness, libido and scrotal circumference are selected for, as well. "We expect that they're going to be able to get cows bred on the first cycle," Henderson says.

Performance

Because Bradley 3 Ranch is managed like a commercial operation, only replacement heifers and donor cattle are bred using artificial insemination (AI). Everything else is bred through natural service for 60 days. Then, through DNA testing on progeny, the ranch is able to test the libido of their bulls.

Charolais bull customers' feedback has been really good, says Henderson. "They have been impressed by the performance in the calves."

Henderson describes his customer base as fairly sophisticated—they make good marketing decisions, and look for and appreciate getting accurate data back on their calves. "They understand pretty well that just taking a calf off of a cow and hauling it to the sale barn is probably not the place to get maximum dollars for that calf. Most of them are going to at least background their calves for 45-60 days."

Thanks to his experience in both the feedyard and the packing plant, Henderson



adds value for his customers, not only by supplying good genetics, but also through his industry contacts. "We have a lot of contacts in the industry that feed cattle and sell cattle on a grid, so we'll help them market those cattle. We can help get them in programs where they get the data back on those cattle," he adds.

Bradley 3 Ranch is proud of their Charolais cow herd and is expanding every year. "We'll probably try to target 25-50 Charolais bulls every year to go along with our Angus offering," says Henderson.

A strong selling point for the ranch is the rough terrain the cattle graze. "We go from pretty sandy soil on the south side, to rocky, steep, really brushy terrain on the north side of the ranch. Our water's not very good and this year, temperatures have ranged from 0°F to 105°F. The cattle have to cover some country to forage," explains Henderson. "We've sold cattle to Florida and clear to Idaho. If they can handle our country, they can handle just about anything."

It is Henderson's hope cattle purchased from Bradley 3 Ranch will perform for the future consumer. Calves are born in the fall, so breeding decisions for the next crop will be made within the next two months. Henderson says, "We try to think out front all the time." He explains that the bull calves born next fall will be in the 2017 bull sale. The earliest progeny from those bulls won't be consumed until 2019 and female calves born next fall will still have offspring going to market in 2029-2030.

"It's a pretty awesome responsibility to try to predict what the market's going to look like in 2030," he says. "We're really trying to look way out in the future to see what the demands will be."

Beef Industry Outlook

"The last four years have been really, really tough," Henderson remarks, but adds "I don't know that I've ever been more optimistic than I am right now about where we're headed. We're in prices that no one could have dreamed of, and our demand is hanging in there awfully good. I think that bodes really well for our industry." Due to demands on the beef industry from competing industries (government, recreation, crops, oil, mining and timber) Henderson thinks good prices will continue and beef price fluctuation will not be as drastic as it has been in the past.

Despite his optimism, he admits the industry needs to make some changes. "I think as cattle get bigger and bigger, trying to sell whole steaks and expecting people who are not proficient in cooking to have a good eating experience, is wrong. I think we need to change how we're doing some cuts, just to get a better eating experience for consumers," he says.

Good prices, a low supply and a high demand are great, but Henderson says, "Politics can mess up a lot of things, government interference and regulation worry me more than anything."

Still there's power in the product and Henderson notes, "But, gosh, people love the taste of beef, and that's the advantage we have over all the other proteins."

