A Preference for Charolais-Sired Genetics

The product that results from Charolais bulls crossed on English cows makes this Continental breed a long-time choice for these Montana ranchers.

Story by Kim Holt
Photos by Howard Rambur

Commercial producers know what type of cattle pay the bills. In Montana, it’s a Charolais bull on English-based cows for brothers Jim and Craig Steinbeisser of VS, Inc. — and they’re not alone in their crossbreeding preference.

VS is a family-run, third-generation enterprise that includes farmland, a cow-calf herd and feedlot near Sidney in eastern Montana. Jim focuses on the commercial herd, while Craig on the finishing yard.

The Steinbeissers retain their own calves, all now exclusively Charolais-sired. They also purchase feeder cattle for their 4,200-head feedlot; all are crossbreds and, if possible, sired by a Charolais bull.

Crossbreeding: “easy money”

The VS base cow herd has been black, but Jim explains they’ve been moving it toward black-baldie for several years now.

“We’re doing that because we’re trying to get a moderate-sized cow,” Jim explains. “If you breed her to a Continental breed, especially with Charolais, you can get a little bit bigger animal with stronger growth traits. We find it’s pretty efficient for us. It just works well.”

He continues, “To get that big of an animal with one breed, you’d need to have a mighty big cow. We don’t want that — not only is it inefficient feed-wise, they tend to be less fertile and more difficult to keep in body condition to rebreed.

“We feel our fertility and longevity has increased by having crossbred cows,” he concludes.

The Steinbeissers started by breeding their own replacement heifers. But, “it got a little complicated,” according to Jim. So they decided some three years ago that it was more simplistic, also given the demands of their cropland, to instead buy replacement heifers.

“We’re pretty happy with it, although they’re pretty expensive to buy right now,” he remarks. One of their long-term goals is to build a relationship with a supplier in order to have genetic information on their black-baldie replacements. “We hope at some point to get there. But we’re not there just yet,” Jim says.

He adds, “Actually, I think the industry is moving or will be mov-
calves out on the range, so calving difficulties are certainly something we want to stay away from, and the Charolais has made quite a bit of stride in that area.”

He believes it’s getting easier and easier to obtain moderate birth weights with strong growth, but would still like to have even more performance information on which to base Charolais bull selection decisions.

And as far as crossbreeding: Jim and Craig are both big believers. “I think it’s easy money,” Jim remarks.

“Our calves will have a three-breed cross. So they’re gaining that much more from heterosis.” He adds, their F1 females are also a “good combination,” especially for their environment. “We have really good grazing cows; they don’t have to eat just lush grass. And they make good mothers.”

Jim points out, “When you crossbreed your cows, you increase longevity and fertility. When you have a crossbred calf, you’re gaining there too. You put them in the feedlot, and they’re tough to beat. They just feed really well. In this day and age, they’re not discounting those larger carcasses, unless you get extremely large. So it works very well.”

Craig agrees with his brother. “There are too many things that you give up by not crossbreeding. Hybrid vigor is a big one. I think you have less sickness in crossbred cattle. That works for my feeding phase of the operation too.”

He admits it is a give and take though. “Look at us, we had to go from raising our replacements to buying them. But we feel this is the best step for us. You need to have a plan and just stick with it.”

He also adds that what works in eastern Montana may not work in southern Georgia. “Everybody makes it work to fit their own environment.”

Crossbreds for the VS feedlot

VS breeds its cows to start calving April 1, with weaning beginning in late October. All calves are backgrounded and finished in the feedlot. Craig forward contracts cattle on the live market for delivery in June-July because, in that time frame, he says grids don’t work in their favor.

Their own Charolais-cross calves perform well on feed, and are good examples of what crossbred cattle can do in a feedlot. The Steinbeissers needn’t any persuasion to buy more like them. “That is our first cross of choice,” Craig relays.

He realizes the value of crossbreeding, especially as it relates to added growth and performance.

“It’s pounds that pays the bills,” he comments. “For the rancher it does too — pounds pays the bills. It’s not color, it’s pounds. It has always been that way. In fact, when I sold these cattle to the packer, there was no mention of what color are the cattle,” he comments.

Craig says he still pays a premium for the “right preconditioned cattle, especially if they’re age and sourced.” He adds, “I won’t buy them unless they are preconditioned.” His experience has shown that if a ranch has a good mineral and vaccination program, their calves are generally healthier.

Another factor that plays into it is better genetics. “It really pays to buy better bulls,” Craig believes because he sees results firsthand in the feedyard.

Their feedlot specializes in ranch-fresh calves, and Craig says they can handle 1,000 a week. Typically these calves will start arriving October 1, are backgrounded through mid-January, stepped up on feed and out in early summer, completing their feedlot’s one turn a year.

“We’ve been getting awfully good yields out of crossbred cattle,” Craig shares. Last year, their calves yielded 65%, and averaged 70% Choice on a gate cut. “I feel if a calf hasn’t done what he’s supposed to do in 240 days, why give him another 30 days?” he explains. Furthermore, yield grade 4s are a rarity.

Each calf is identified back to ranch of origin with a letter on its ear tag. That gives Craig a quick means to know which ranch’s cattle may be of concern. He keeps track of feed performance by ranch, and communicates it and group carcass data back to the commercial producer.

When purchasing calves, especially on video, Craig reviews performance information and likes to see the cows and “what kind of herd bulls are walking by with the calves.”

He tries to buy calves close to home or north of them, to help keep freight in check.

While Craig is a believer in top-quality Charolais-cross cattle, his experience is he can’t find enough of them to feed. “It seems like the people who are buying the really good Charolais bulls don’t sell their calves; they feed them themselves,” he says. “People already know the value of what they are doing.”

Quality crossbreds a pleasure to feed

Some 80% of the crossbred calves VS purchases are from the same ranches each year. “You always want the best cattle,” Craig says, adding, “I think we have a great set of cattle put together this year.”

Cattle being fed this year include three sets of calves featuring Rambur Charolais bulls, including calves from VS, Stimpson Brothers Ranch, Inc., Lodge Grass, Mont., and Prewitt Cattle Co., Sidney, Mont., all from English-based cow herds.

Craig says they tend to get calves from operations that run black, black-baldie or red cows for a Charolais-cross calf. “It seems like everyone likes the black or red cow. There’s a reason for that — they’re good cows. They make a great base for a Charolais bull.”

Charolais seedstock producer Howard Rambur reports a growing customer base with Red Angus genetics. He says some 30 to 40% of his customers have straight Red Angus cows, another 10% black-baldies, and the balance Angus.

“Thats buckskin calf is hard to beat,” Rambur remarks. He believes the Red Angus breed has a tighter genetic nucleus from which to work. “A buckskin heifer will out-grade and out-yield a black calf any time.”
Craig remarks, the Red Angus-Charolais cross “gives you a beautiful yellow-looking Charolais calf that does very well.” Both the bucks and red noses work well for VS, he reports.

Like Craig, Rambur recognizes the advantages of Angus genetics, too, and the highly sought after black-nosed calf that commercial customers, like Stimpson Brothers, build by crossing these two breeds.

Regarding the Stimpson cattle on feed, Craig says, “We compete to buy bulls with these guys and I always wanted to own their cattle. And finally the opportunity came, and we didn’t pass; we took them.”

He describes the Stimpson’s cattle as a rarity: “That many good cattle in one spot that aren’t retained.” Craig says you can tell Stimpson calves. “They are probably 6-8 inches longer than the other ones. They’re good, healthy, and big growthy,” all from a progressive herd.

Stimpson Brothers is located near Lodge Grass, Mont., some 280 miles southwest of Rambur Charolais. Third-generation rancher Dale Stimpson shares that he never lets a $1,000 bill get in the way of the herd sire he wants to buy at the Rambur production sale. “I like to buy in the top 10% of the sale,” he confirms.

Stimpson returns each April to exclusively buy Rambur Charolais bulls, a breed his family has used for some 35 years, ever since his father started with these cattle. Stimpson says he’s pleased with the bulls he has to choose from and also with the way Rambur has taken care of him, as a customer, over the years.

He sorts for high marbling, larger ribeye size, and heavy 205-day weights. Calving ease isn’t high on his criteria. Stimpson says he hasn’t experienced trouble with calving ease with Charolais sires.

He strives to buy half brothers to increase calf-crop uniformity, which is a definite benefit at marketing time. He says he also wants calves to perform well and possess a lot of vigor, an important factor in their northern climate, as they calve in a short time frame, beginning February 10.

Stimpson purchases all commercial Angus replacement heifers, striving to buy medium-framed cattle that will mature into 1,275-1,300-pound cows from herds within similar environments.

Charolais bulls add predictability to the cattle business for the Stimpson family. “As far as predictability of calf weight, it’s really great. My calves have been weighing up in the low to middle sevenths,” Stimpson says, at weaning.

Some 98% are sold off the ranch in the fall, and all are preconditioned and age- and source-verified, something that Stimpson says his buyers, including VS, require of his cattle. He uses IMI Global’s third-party verification services, and says age and source has added about $35 per head on his end.

Stimpson especially appreciates Rambur-bred cattle for their calving ease and high production. Craig says he’s sat by the Stimpsons for some 30 years at this sale and is pleased to have an opportunity to feed this outfit’s feeder calves.

When asked if he’ll be back next year to buy another set of their Charolais-crosses, his reply is “Oh yeah.”

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Crossbred cattle owned and purchased by VS, Inc., are all third-party verified for age and source. Craig Steinbeisser believes that ranchers, who are taking the time and making the effort to add value, including preconditioning and verification, are seeing more money because of it.

Craig and his brother Jim aren’t sure, though, if the age and source premiums will still be a factor in the near future, as their finished cattle are already forward contracted – at a premium – with no mention of this on the contract. And Japan is considering lifting the age limit from 20 months to 30 months for cattle imported as U.S. beef. The industry expects an announcement this summer, although no time frame has been set.

Regardless, both brothers still agree that product documentation is important, and that source is only going to continue to grow as both packers and consumers desire to know who and where their product originates.

In fact, Jim plans to participate in IMI Global’s program, Where Food Comes From®, which showcases farmers, ranchers and processors who adhere to best practices from farm to fork and meet third-party verification requirements. Through it, VS can put together a profile of its ranching and feeding operation for the IMI website and display the program brand.

IMI’s John and Leann Saunders founded the Where Food Comes From program and introduced it in 2010 (www.wherefoodcomesfrom.com). Their goal is to help ranching families share their passion and dedication for food production with consumers, while helping inform, clarify and reassure consumers about food choices.

“The more confidence the consumer has for our product, the better it is for us,” Jim remarks. Craig adds, “I think it’d be better for everybody if they knew where their food came from.”

VS feeds its own cattle and also purchases ranch-fresh calves. “Calves come with a paper trail and, if they’re bought on order, that buyer continues the documentation trail to VS. “We want the rancher to tell us what he did too, because I think it helps our business,” Craig notes.

Originally the Steinbeissers’ feedlot began as a backgrounding yard. As they’ve started finishing cattle the past several years, they’ve further learned the importance of risk management and the value of forward contracting.

“We look at the packer as our friend, not our enemy,” Craig relays. He says risk management is “a necessary tool to be in business.”

VS does just one turn of cattle from fall to summer, so they are looking for simplicity to also balance with their farming enterprise. They’ve fed some non-hormone treated cattle in the past, but weren’t as pleased with rate of gain. It’s also easier to keep records and verifications straight when feeding one or the other – implanted or not – Craig says.

Furthermore, the Steinbeissers believe, “there’s too much to lose without an implant when corn is $6.” Says Craig, “We think feed efficiency is so important on these days of high-cost feed.”

He points out that the extra dollars paid per head for adding value are “near,” but it’s still important to remember that “it’s pounds that pay the bills.”

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**Documentation and Pounds Still Important**