

The Charolais Edge: White Hides Bring a Genetic Advantage to Commercial Herds

By: Chris Clayton, DTN Ag Policy Editor

Brett DeBruycker's father, Lloyd, bought his first Charolais bull in 1957. Within about five years, he had decided to develop a purebred Charolais operation. It was the start of DeBruycker Charolais, based near Great Falls, Montana.

"He loved it and started to grow the cattle operation from there," Brett recalled, overlooking a pasture of Charolais cows and calves.

In an industry dominated by black hides and Angus premium programs, those white Charolais bulls and cows would seem to be at a market disadvantage. But the Charolais has been the backbone of the DeBruyckers' production with roughly 2,300 purebred cows. According to the family's website, that makes DeBruycker the largest purebred Charolais herd in the world.

What's appealing about the Charolais? The breed is basically a larger, higher-yielding animal with gains in weight that help overcome some of those lost Angus-based premiums out there in the market.

"The Charolais blood lines, Charolais cattle, they have a lot of initial growth," said Brett. "They are a meat-making animal, more of a performance animal. I'm biased I know, but they are the single-best feeding calf in the world, the Charolais-Angus cross."

In addition to growth, these cattle bring uniformity, feedlot efficiency, carcass merit and proven calving ability to an operation. Getting those Charolais genetics into commercial herds is at the heart of the business here.

"I think we're adding value," Brett said. "The commercial cattle producers who use our bulls on their Angus, or Red Angus or Hereford-based cows, they will easily get 50 pounds more of weaning weight. I've talked to guys who get as much as 120 pounds more weaning weight. It's just adding huge value to those guys."

CHAROLAIS CHOICE

Brett said Charolais genetics mean it takes less feed to put on a pound of gain. In addition, quality grades are strong, with a high percentage of fed cattle grading Choice, with limited back-fat waste.

"The packers love them because they grade out well. I believe we're adding value for ranchers, feeders and packers," he said of those in the industry raising Charolais or Charolais-cross cattle.

The operation takes advantage of those traits with an 8,500-head feedyard, marketing on average 15,000 to 20,000 head of fat cattle each year.

BRING ON THE BULL

The centerpiece of the marketing year for DeBruycker Charolais is its spring bull sale. The family will sell on average 600 bulls at its annual offering in early April. Another 350 bulls go through individual treaty sales. Last year's sales resulted in bulls going to 22 states and Canada.

Prices for DeBruycker Charolais bulls last spring averaged \$5,843 per head over 581 animals. Bulls in the sale were mainly spring yearlings (13 to 14 months old) with about 75 fall-calved head between 18 and 20 months old.

"I've had the good fortune of being at the last two of their last three bull sales," said Dave Hobbs, manager of the Charolais Journal, based in Kansas City, Mo. The publication is through the American International Charolais Association.

"They do a remarkable job. They are very conscious, they pay attention to soundness, they pay attention to performance and their customer service is excellent. The DeBruyckers are really good cattle people. I see their genetics all over the country," added Hobbs.

Those genetics are based purely on actual data for things like birthweight and growth. Brett DeBruycker doesn't provide an EPD (Expected Progeny Difference) on his bulls, unless customers request it.

That same straightforward approach goes to breeding the cow herd. Brett believes in letting the bulls do their job. The operation doesn't use artificial insemination for gender selection, even though they are looking for bulls. Instead they let nature take its course, with cows just as likely to produce heifers as bulls.

"It's my opinion you get more cows bred, and if you are using good bulls as your herd sires they should be as good or better than AI sires," Brett added of the approach.

To maximize production of their genetics, they do however implant embryos. Every year Brett said they implant Charolais donor embryos to 25 to 50 Angus recip cows. Generally, he said, cows produce 20 to 30 eggs per flush.

They have been doing the embryo transfer off and on for more than a decade. When it's time to move a recip cow out, they often breed her to a Charolais bull so they can sell the bred Angus cow, carrying a Charolais-Angus cross calf. They also market semen and embryos.

PLANNING AHEAD

Keeping cows in good condition over those long, cold Montana winters can be a challenge. Grazing here is a mix of bluebunch wheatgrass, Junegrass and Idaho fescue that dwindles the farther it gets into fall. Fall-calving cows start getting hay around Thanksgiving. Generally it takes 2.5 to 3 tons of hay per cow to make it through the winter. They hay a mix of alfalfa and native grasses from irrigated meadows.

"We put up a lot of hay. We try to graze as long as we can. The spring-calving herd, we hope to make it to the middle of December," Brett says. "That's about the time normally every year we have to start feeding."

During the summer, cattle on the ranch are rotated to fresh grass on an as needed basis. Grass quality often peaks in early July, quickly declining into dormancy over the next six weeks.

"We have a pretty short growing season, so when the grass is growing and when you have moisture you want to graze it and get off so it will come back.

"Lack of rain is our biggest problem. If we can get our average of 11 to 12 inches a year, we're pretty happy,"

he said. "You can do a lot of good with 11 or 12 inches of rain, but it just seems like every year we're at six or seven inches."

For more information:

American International Charolais Association: www.charolaisusa.com

DeBruycker Charolais: www.debruyckercharolais.com

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