Charolais/Red Angus cross hybrids generate plenty of attention from cattlemen who appreciate hybrid vigor.

By Paige Nelson
Photos courtesy of Heartland Cattle Company and Frank Wedel

Sorrels and buckskins are for sale at Wedel Red Angus in Leoti, Kan., but you won’t find many of ranch owner Frank Wedel’s offerings chasing barrels in the arena; although, that would be something to see. Five years ago, Wedel added a composite component to his registered Red Angus herd. In addition to Red Angus bulls and heifers, he now sells red and buckskin Charolais/Red Angus hybrid cattle.

After years of retained ownership in feeder cattle, Wedel had seen the results Charolais-cross cattle produce at the packinghouse. “We’ve always found that the Charolais-cross, whether they be to Red Angus or black Angus, perform very, very well. As we talked to packers, they expressed a real interest in acquiring more hybrid cattle, so that’s what got us down the road with our Charolais program,” says Wedel.

Strawberries ‘n Cream

In 2010, Wedel Red Angus purchased 50 Charolais/Red Angus half blood heifers from Hoodoo Ranch out of Cody, Wyo. They were obviously commercial cattle, but Wedel could track parentage from the group’s herd sires. Using those parentages, he mates the half bloods to Red Angus bulls to produce three-fourths Red Angus, one-fourth Charolais offspring.

The male offspring are then marketed as breeding stock for Wedel’s commercial customers.

“The demand is really good,” says Wedel. “When we make a three-fourths cross, about half of those animals are solid red and about half are still buckskin. We have a tremendous demand for the red ones.

“I think it’s just people have a solid colored herd, and they’d like to keep it that way, so we can sell all the red ones we can make. We have a really good market for our buckskins, as well. I’m not partial at all, but the market is telling me that if they’re red, more people are interested,” he explains.

Wedel says, his bull customers keep coming for more hybrids because they like what they are seeing in their calves. One of his customers who has primarily used Charolais bulls on black cows, is using Wedel’s buckskin bulls to improve the quality grade of his calves, while still benefiting from mostly black hides.

Frank Wedel chooses to develop his Charolais/Red Angus cross heifers at Heartland Cattle Company near McCook, Neb., where the hybrid females have excelled in fertility. Customizing a program to each customers’ needs, Heartland provides valuable management information pertaining to reproductive efficiency, first-service conception and pregnancy rate.

Wedel saves the “cream of the crop” females for his breeding herd and retains ownership in the feedlot on the others.

Wedel says he keeps a pretty tight rein on mature size in his hybrids—those too big or too small are gone. But even then, there is still wiggle room.

“Even if that calf has a fairly high birth weight, we can moderate it with our Red Angus bulls,” he says.

Stating that birth weights from the hybrid heifers have never been more than a couple pounds more than the straightbreds, he adds, “Calving ease has never been a problem with those [hybrid] heifers.”

Making Mamas

For several years now, the ranch has chosen to have the breeding heifers developed by Heartland Cattle Company of McCook, Neb., a professional heifer development program.

“For me, it just became a management tool. With our operation, it’s difficult to dedicate the time it takes to get the heifer settled
to AI [artificial insemination] at the percentage I wanted. We can consistently get 70 percent plus first service conceptions with our heifers at Heartland," he states.

In fact, Wedel’s red/Charolais half bloods did better than 70 percent conception at Heartland.

On January 20, 2011, Wedel sent his brand new Wyoming-born heifers to Heartland to be developed. According to owner and general manager Dr. Pasty Houghton, Wedel’s heifers settled to a 73 percent first-service conception rate and a 92 percent pregnant rate.

“They beat our yard averages by three percent in terms of first-service conception and by a couple percentage points in terms in season pregnancy rate,” says Houghton.

“A hybrid heifer, generally speaking, will have an advantage in terms of fertility production data over straightbred heifers,” she adds.

With 25 years and 100,000 heifers under her belt, Houghton runs nothing short of clockwork heifer development for her customers.

In the custom program, which is what Wedel uses, heifers are brought in at least 90 days before their synchronized breeding dates to get them on a nutritional plane appropriate for breeding stock. Between 35-45 days prebreeding, all heifers undergo prebreeding soundness exams.

Customers are offered their choice of 35- or 45-day total AI programs (no cleanup bulls on site). Then, 45 days after the last breeding, heifers are pregnancy tested and sent home as 90- to 45-day bred heifers. Minimum time spent at Heartland is 180 days.

For customers with enough heifers to fill several pens, Heartland will group heifers by frame size (small, moderate, large). By grouping heifers, Heartland can customize each set’s nutrition and help them reach their optimal target body condition for breeding, which is a 5.75 body condition score at Heartland.

Heartland then provides that information back to their customers. “Our invoicing system becomes an educational tool for them. If they see that their large framed heifers are eating “X” and that’s costing “Y” compared to their moderate framed genetic counterparts that eat less and cost less, then they can relate that to reproductive efficiency, first-service conception and pregnancy rate,” Houghton describes.

“If they see their moderate heifers achieve an extra four or five percent conception rate for less feed per head per day than the larger framed heifers, maybe the rancher needs to pull the large end of his heifers back a little bit, or vice versa.

“Maybe the moderate framed heifers have a four to five percent higher pregnancy but the difference between the small and the moderate groups, in terms of cost of feeding is minor. That’s also telling him to pull the smaller end of the cattle up a little bit and bring everything more to the middle,” she explains.

Heartland is also known for its valuable work in reproductive research. Among many other research projects, the company was one of three that tested and cleared the way for the commercial sale of CIDRs in the U.S.

The Crossbred

Most of the heifers Houghton develops are black, she says, but she does have three customers using the Charolais/Red Angus cross, and she really enjoys the cattle. These crosses, she says, have not presented issues with frame size or reaching breeding condition.

“The kind of Charolais/Red Angus we’ve gotten haven’t been extreme in frame size, they’ve been appropriate. They might be a 5.75 frame or right on the edge of frame 6 score, and that would fit right in with a lot of our English bred cattle. If you select the right crossbred heifers, that are appropriate in terms of frame size, they’ll be a really good heifer from the stand point of being very feed efficient, and being able to get to the proper body condition score for breeding with no more feed than an English bred heifer,” she notes.

Overall, Houghton says, the crosses make really nice, fertile and functional heifers, and healthy ones, too.

“I think hybrid vigor is a plus when it comes to immune response. Between heifer rotations, we typically wean about 7,000 bawling calves each fall for feed yard operators. Crossbred calves, generally speaking, have an advantage in terms of immune response and health issues. We’ve probably started 175,000 bawling calves. Calves that have a little hybrid vigor advantage are something you enjoy seeing come into the yard when you start a lot of calves,” she says.

Houghton agrees with Wedel in that marketing shouldn’t be an issue for the crossbreds.

“If you get a good, high quality heifer,” Houghton states, “especially in today’s market, you could sell her for good money, regardless of her breed. When you find a commercial cattleman who understands the value of crossbreeding and hybrid vigor, those cattle are worth a lot to them.”

With his first half bloods five years old, Wedel says the Charolais/Red Angus cows’ udders may not be as pretty as his Red Angus cows, but nevertheless they are still very functional. As far as mothering ability, the “Charolais certainly doesn’t hurt it,” he states. He even thinks they are a bit more protective than their straightbred counterparts.

“They can get a little bit woofy. In this group of cows, we’ve not seen any issues in mothering ability, calving ease or fertility,” he says. “I just love them. I think they’re great. I can’t say enough good things about them.”

Wedel’s future plans center on continuing his three-fourths Red Angus program and acquiring a Charolais bull to make more half bloods.