

Profitable Buckskin Charcross

Candace By

Brothers Tom and Jack Collins calve around 150 females each spring near McCord, Saskatchewan. The cow herd base is Red Angus x Simmental but there are quite a few tan cows, which are Red Angus x Charolais. Research shows using an F1 female and a terminal cross bull maximizes hybrid vigor and the Collins brothers have experienced this in their herd. “We try to not have any more than 50% of one breed in a cow. The 50% can be Red Angus, Charolais or Simmental. We try not to breed a tan cow white, or a red cow red. It doesn’t always work out with the field size and the bull battery, but it is what we prefer to do,” explains Tom.

Like many people operating on a limited land base with capacity cow numbers, it is important to be aware of the income and expenses per female in the operation. “We breed our heifers to Red Angus and breed our red cows to Charolais. Just in the last little while we have bought a red Simmental bull to raise some more replacement females instead of buying them. The red calves just don’t sell as well as tans, even though they are good size, we don’t get the same dollar per pound or dollar per calf value as we do for the buckskins. It maybe doesn’t work for everybody, but they really work for us.” When they do buy replacement females, they like to buy red, blaze-faced females.

“The Red Angus bull only gets used on heifers, as he is a heifer bull. I don’t like to breed cows to a heifer bull and we don’t keep a replacement from our two-year old first calvers. They were bred to a heifer bull and we feel it takes some of the bang out of the performance. It would have to be an extremely good heifer before we would consider it. The only way we have been getting Red Angus in our cow

herd is by buying replacements. We have been buying from a few different producers and have had pretty good luck, so we stick with it.”

“We turn the bulls out June 1 and pick them up July 15th, six weeks later. We have been doing that for so long, we can’t remember not doing it. We do it because we are finished calving by the end of April and we can start seeding without having to come home to check cows.” It is a pattern that serves them well. They take their own bulls to the community pasture on June first. Most of the bulls in that pasture go out June 1. They don’t often sell a bull because of his age; they usually end up getting hurt before they get too old. The community pasture seems to be harder on bulls as they are intermingling with bulls from other programs. Tom and Jack each have an allocation of thirty females, so they take sixty pair to that pasture each year. “The pasture manager has been very helpful getting our bulls pulled by July 15th. There are other bulls left there after that date, so we get our females preg-tested by the vet and we get the expected birth day. Anything that is due to calve after the first of May, we usually sell. The ones we keep in our own pasture, we don’t have to worry about, as we know exactly when they were exposed to a bull. They are either dry or bred in the time frame. We don’t have to worry about any neighbour’s bull, as our pastures don’t border other people’s pastures.”

“Our calves are born from the tenth of March to the thirtieth of April.” Calving all happens at Jack’s place. We watch our cows at calving time. If something needs help, we help it. Just like most producers. As they are born, we tag and sort them so the group that is having calves, does



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not have calves among them. We move them out to a bit larger area when they are about a day old. We feel it works better for us when tagging the calves, as there aren't older calves running around. It also helps to keep the pen cleaner.”

“We used to weigh more of our calves, but now we just weigh the extreme ones. We weigh anything that looks small, which is usually 75 lb or less. I don't mind getting an 75 lb calf out of a heifer, but to get one out of a cow is pretty disappointing. On the large size, we think anything over 125 is large. We don't have problems calving and our calves are commonly 110 to 115 lb and that isn't a problem for these cows. Our mature cows are typically around 1600 pounds. We were surprised when we started

weighing calves. We really had not guessed their birth weights very accurately. We don't keep our cows until they are really old. We allow them to calve at ten years of age, but usually not at eleven. We just find their production drops and they aren't worth as much themselves when we sell them. We feel if you can sell them when they are still looking good, we will get more for them and have a younger cow herd.”

“The calves are weaned and shipped from Jack's place. After weaning the cows are preg checked and trailed to different fields for fall grazing eventually ending up at Tom's place for winter feeding which is ten miles away. Jack and I feel it works for us. This way there is a lot less manure around Jack's come calving time.”

“A lot of people you talk to want smaller cows. In the end, maybe they eat less and they make more money. But the buckskin calf is going to make us more money than other calves. Normally, for the same weight of calf, we see a nice premium for the buckskin calf over the Red Angus or Simmental calf within our own herd. They can have the same breeding, but the tan calves definitely bring more. Sometimes we end up with tan heifers and red steers, which is exactly opposite of what we want,” he laughs. “But that is just part of the business.”

Tom and Jack's brother Paul works at a machine shop where they were putting a catwalk in a mine. Anything under four or five feet in length was being discarded, so he brought some home and used it to build a ramp for



Portable panels used when and where needed



Quad ramp built by Jack to cross fence



crossing the fence with a quad. They also used it on their cattle handling system.

About ten years ago they went to pipe corrals and they did it in three stages. "We have never regretted it. It makes it so easy for one guy to move stuff around. It was a fair bit of work to construct, but we feel it was worth it. We had to build a new barn for calving, the old hip roof one was just not worth repairing and really wasn't very functional. During calving time, we set up some pens in the barn. We also have an insulated room in the barn with three pens in it. We have a heater in there, but have found that putting another cow or two in the room works better." In the summer, they use it to store their water tanks and such.

They seed about 3000 acres, half durum, a quarter canola and a quarter lentils and they put up all of their own hay.

Tom and Debbie have three children

and seven grandchildren. "We have a daughter, Laura, that is a journeyman plumber who is married to a geologist. They live in Martensville and they have two children. Our son Ryan is at Mankota and has two children. His partner also has a little boy so we have a bonus. Ryan is

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farming with his partner's family. Our daughter Amanda lives in Assiniboia and is married to Destin Ash and they have three children. If anyone decides they want to continue with the operation, it would probably be Ryan." Jack is single and likes his work and his farming. They have talked about expanding their

operation, but don't want to deal with employees. What they have now, is what they can manage well between them and they are content with that.

They buy their Charolais bulls from sales and purchase performance bulls. If there is too much influence on calving ease, they don't feel it will be beneficial for their herd. They like to deal with nice people. "I don't believe the Charolais breed has an issue with calving problems or weak calves. When buying Charolais bulls, they have to be thick, they have to have good feet and the birth weight has to be 100 pounds plus. That is the way we like to have them. We only buy yearlings and I like them to have a minimum testicular measurement of 36 cm."

Helge and I were interested to hear what attracted this producer to sales specifically. It is something Helge has been telling seedstock producers for years. "I like to look at bull sale catalogues but I think no picture is



Kade Collins' 2019 4-H project



Emily Collins' 2019 4-H project

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better than a bad one. It turns me off. If I get a catalogue and most of the pictures are good, it still is a detriment if I go to the sale and find a calf I like, look in the catalogue and see a bad picture of him. I just won't buy him.”

Producers with good management look at all the angles and measure what they can to improve. A lot is learned through trial and error, but some is learned through research and willingness to learn. “When I go through a catalogue, I don't have scrotal measurements, but I do have birth weights and weaning weights. I won't buy a bull from a two-year-old. It would have to be an exceptional calf for me to consider it. I also won't buy a twin. I know biologically or genetically it may not mean you will have any more twin calves but that is how I feel. We just don't want them when we are calving. A lot of times it works out, but sometimes they are just more work than we need.”

The brothers have discovered what many producers are experiencing

when searching for a bull, polled bulls do bring a premium. “Buying a polled bull is the most expensive way to dehorn a calf,” Tom laughs. “Often I feel I can get more for my money and a better bull, if I buy the horned ones.”

“We keep 25-30 replacements heifers, everything else goes to Assiniboia to be sold. We always sell in a Charcross sale, sometimes it is a Charcross and Exotic cross sale, or a Charcross and Red Angus sale, but there is always a Charcross advertised component in the sale. We sell in the last week of October. The calves are always sorted by colour, weight and quality before the sale. Every year our tan calves sell better than our Simmental and Red Angus calves. Sometimes our white heifers will bring more than the tan ones. The steers usually make the 650 lb range and the heifers make 600 lb range. After the replacements are selected and a few steers for the grandchildren's 4-H projects, everything is sold. We don't keep

anything to background, partly because our hay has too much alfalfa in it, we need to be careful about bloat. For our replacement females, we have enough grass hay so this isn't a problem. You also have to factor in the cost of losing one or two in the process, it really cuts into the profit.”

“We sell at the Assiniboia Livestock Auction and have taken the overnight stand for a number of years now and have no complaints about how they have been sorted and mixed with other producers calves of similar type. We take them Sunday night for weighing on Monday and the sale is Tuesday. I think it is good because they can sell liner load after liner load of tan steers. I love to sit at the sale to see some of ours in those packages. We have been quite pleased that quite a high percentage of our calves can make those top-cut pens. I think that is all you can hope for. Everybody has a calf that isn't as good as the rest for whatever reason, we never keep them at home. We sell them and take what we get. We don't like to see a poorer quality animal around all winter. It is better to take your loss than invest more in it. You can't expect it to sell in the top cut pen because it is not. You can drive by anybody's herd and see



Tom Collins



the odd poor calf, everybody has one, it isn't breed specific, it is just part of the cattle business."

"The Assiniboia market works for us with the Charcross sales. We really have no reason to change.

"Because these red calves sell for so much less, we are considering buying the right Charolais bull to put on our heifers. We aren't concerned about increasing the weaning weight, we are concerned about getting a tan calf that will pay more for the same or marginally better weight. It hasn't been easy to convince my brother of this, but I think the next time we buy a heifer bull, it will be Charolais. If we want Red Angus for replacements, we will buy a cow bull for breeding or buy replacement females."

"There is no wrong breed or colour, but we have found we maximize our program with tan calves." In the end, that is all everyone is trying to do, maximize their program to stay alive and thrive.

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*Standing: Destin Ash, Kade Collins, Heather Lochart, Hunter Lochart, Ryan Collins, Emily Collins, Darren Slugoski
Sitting: Amanda, Rowan and Liam Ash, Debbie Collins, Finley Ash, Tom Collins, Sawyer, Zoey and Laura Slugoski*