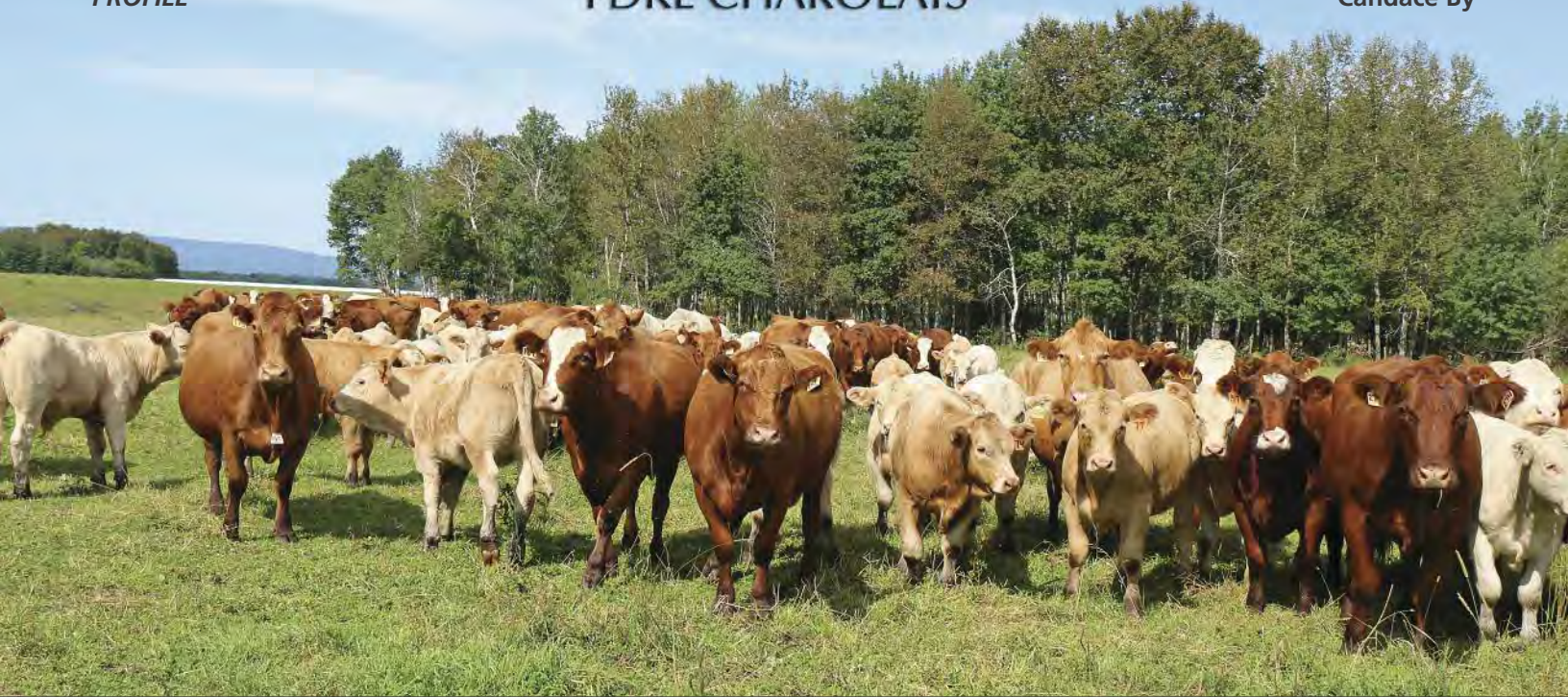


# Progressive Management Pays

PROFILE

FDKL CHAROLAIS

— Candace By



*Editor's Note: This was written in the summer of 2016, sale information is from the fall of 2015*

**K**ris and Louise Kristjanson, along with their son Trevor operate FDKL Charolais at Ochre River, Manitoba. Louise and Trevor's partner Kayla work off the farm, so the 400 head cowherd is managed by Kris and Trevor. There have been many changes in management since Kris started with his parents Finley and Dyanne, but they have improved their bottom line by focusing on improving their program.

"We start calving around the 20th of January. We usually run a 65 day calving window, but this year is probably closer to 80 days. That is because we have 150 first calving replacements this year and we just wanted to give the younger ones a little more of a chance to get bred back. We have been buying our replacements except for a handful from our own herd, but this year we are trying something new. We synchronized some of our best red females and bred them to sexed Simmental semen for replacements. All of our replacements are Red Angus-Simmental crosses. We buy them from three main guys but it is

hard to get them calving early enough for our program. Ninety-five percent of them are bred Angus," says Kris.

"Our whole focus on the cows is having them red so we can breed them Charolais. We struggled the last few years sourcing females when we

**"Our whole focus on the cows is having them red so we can breed them Charolais."**

are selling these big tan commercial heifers that are just awesome. When you are loading them in the trailer and you look at how wide they are and how thick they are, you think we should be keeping these, but it just doesn't fit our program. We would lose some of the colouring and some of the hybrid vigour. Out of our 400 plus cows, we only have about 15 white cows from years ago."

There was a brief period where the Kristjansons bought some purebred females to raise their own bulls and sell a few by private treaty. Over time they decided it was more efficient to buy their bull genetics and focus on their commercial cowherd.

They have 19 quarters of land and rent another 12-13 quarters. They seed about 700 acres of crop (canola, oats and barley). There is a lot of hay land and they are able to swap hay for custom silaging. The corn silage varies between 145-200 acres. They had such

a great oat crop last year, they carried over 1800 tonnes of oat silage and a bunch of hay bales. This year they will





have more feed than they need again, but admit it isn't a bad problem to have. When I suggested they could always get more cows, there was a resounding No. "What we've got on our plates for two of us is enough," Kris concedes. "All of the credit for the yard work and house stuff goes to Louise, I just don't get there."

Louise is a full time LPN in Dauphin and works in the renal department. Keeping up with yardwork, housework and gardening is an accomplishment for sure.

Trevor, Kris and Louise's son, has

been home since the spring of 2013. He has enjoyed his three years of full time work with the cows and has no plans to change professions.

**“Last year, the Charolais steers averaged 747 pounds across the board, we didn't keep anything back, whether they were later calves or not.”**

The calves get no creep feed and are raised on grass and mother's milk. The calves are weaned and sold in October. The steers usually go around the 20th of October and the heifers go around a week later. They are marketed through Ste. Rose Auction Mart. "Back in the BSE years, we did do some off the yard, but I'm not sure that really pays anymore. The way Myles markets from the Auction Mart with the show list works very well. It is nice because the calves go in there two days before. It allows us a little more time to sort and haul and we don't have to sit in line-ups when you are trying to bring in 150 steers in one

*continued on page 22*

*New calving and processing barn*





FDKL calves selling at Ste. Rose Auction Mart

shot. Within a couple of hours of arrival they are sorted, on a scale and back in pens. They use a 4% pencil shrink. I think we are a little more accurate on the weights because they aren't standing around for a longer period of time."

"I also like the fact that our calves sell together, our cattle are not mixed with other producer's cattle. The buyers are starting to get to know our cattle and they will wait for us. Some of them ask when we are bringing our calves to market. So you know if they are buying them year after year, they have to be working for them."

"In the future, we may consider sourcing them out of the yard. Just because we are going to be able to put groups together in a potload. We

could sell almost two potloads of steers at one time. It is something to think about, but I am not sure if we will get there or not. When you look at the cost of the commission you wonder, but a couple extra bids and the commission is paid on calves of this size."

"Last year, the Charolais steers averaged 747 pounds across the board, we didn't keep anything back, whether they were later calves or not. That is right off the cows with no creep or backgrounding. The heaviest group was 838 pounds shrunk. The heifers can be just as heavy as the steers, but there will be some 40-50 pounds lighter. There is usually a group of heavier heifers that weigh 770-780 pounds."

**“We weigh every calf, all 400 of them, and there are still some that surprise me when I see how heavy they are.”**

"The Charolais steers averaged a bit over \$1900 across the board. The Charolais heifers I think were around \$1680."

"The larger steer calves from the replacements are marketed in September. We wean the rest and background them until the first part of December or after Christmas. It just depends on the market and what is going on. I like to background them and put an extra 150 pounds on them and ship them two months later."

"The first calf heifers we like to wean early because they are still growing themselves. You have to give them a break before they have to come back in to calve again. It's nice to let them grow and put some weight back. To source the quality of replacements we want, we have to pay for them. We have a couple of local breeders that also calve early, so they are a good source for us. Sometimes we need a large group, we will work out a price with the guys and make arrangements to have them bred for our schedule. Now we won't be looking for larger groups, it will just be to maintain the herd size. The cow herd is strong enough here as we have been focusing on performance for a few years. Now we can be more selective as we maintain these numbers. If we have a cow in our herd that just isn't performing as well as we would like, we will replace her. We are hoping the A.I. program will really help us keep the quality up as we select replacements from the top cows in the herd. It should also help us to get a more uniform calf crop."

"It goes right back to buying bulls. We are competing with some purebred guys when we buy bulls. Do

*continued on page 26*





*Louise in the oat crop*

“The bull market is a funny thing. We struggle with sourcing bulls, that is probably one of my biggest headaches. Probably because I am fussy.”

we need to select bulls that are that good? I don't know, but when you look at our calf crop, I think we are doing the right thing.”

“I think we will continue to breed our replacements to a moderate Simmental. Most of our cows have some Angus and Simmental in them, maybe down the road ten years, we will if they have too much Simmental, we may have to introduce more Angus back into them, but for now,

we are happy with our cowherd. Our cows average 1500 to 1550 pounds. We don't weigh, but we have shipped enough cows in the past few years to know what a mature cow weighs. We run the bulls for so many days and we pull the bulls and the cows are preg-checked in the fall, around the first part of November. If a cow is open, she is gone, there is no second chance. There is the odd, odd one, if there is a very good reason why she came in

open, we may give her a second chance, but that does not happen very often. When we ship those cows, we know what they weigh. We don't keep them to feed them up at all, once the decision to cull is made, they are gone.”

“When we do all of our rations we shoot at a 1600 pound female. We know we are over feeding them a bit but I don't think it hurts them.”

“The bull market is a funny thing. We struggle with sourcing bulls, that is probably one of my biggest headaches. Probably because I am fussy.”

All of their pastures are sorted by cows with steer calves or cows with heifer calves. It is simply easier in the fall. When they want to sell steers they take a whole pasture and don't have any heifers to sort out of the group.

“There aren't that many people in our area using Charolais bulls. Most of them are chasing the replacement female market. They are using Angus or Simmental bulls but a lot of them are using a Angus/Simmental hybrid bull. I would rather source the females and sell my Charolais steers and heifers for more money. I don't think many of those calves would out-perform our calves when they go to town. It isn't that there is a lot of expansion going on, they just want to



*Aspen groves provide shelter on this land that is suitable for grazing, not cropping*

*continued on page 28*



raise their own replacement females. There is a handful of them that want to sell a package of 20 or 30 replacements. That isn't what we do. We have been told to we are crazy not to sell some of our tan heifers but we don't source our bulls at all for maternal traits. All of our bulls are purchased strictly with performance in mind. Saying that, if these bulls can be 900 pounds when they are weaned, their mama cow has to be doing something. Not just any cow can do that. There has to be strength in the herd."

"I don't specifically chase a birth weight. We try not to go over 110 pounds, but I don't want to buy bulls that are 80 and 90 pound birth weights because it is a waste of time. We weigh every calf born on our place and have been for around fifteen years. Any commercial guy that says 'we can only buy a 90 pound birth weight bull' needs to invest \$700 or whatever those scales are and weigh their calves. I would almost guarantee that every one of them would be surprised what their calves actually weigh. The scale we use now is under the head gate where we vaccinate, tag, dehorn and castrate. It is pretty easy to see what they weigh."

"We weigh every calf, all 400 of them, and there are still some that surprise me when I see how heavy they are. If you get a long bodied calf, they really weigh up. All I tell the purebred guys we buy bulls from is 'as long as they will calve.' We go up

to 110 pounds. Mature cows can handle that. If they are built right, they will calve. You can have a 100 pound calf that will give you problems and you can have a 120 pound calf that will calve with ease

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every day. They just have to be built right. You can't raise calves that wean at 900 before shrink, with a 70 or 80 pound birth weight calf. It just is not going to happen."

"We haven't noticed a specific birth weight trend linked to either of the breeds we use in our cows," says Trevor.

"We have had some straight Angus cows that have had some 120 pound calves too. The Red Angus breed is chasing performance as well and the

only way most of them are getting that performance is by upping their birth weights. It just goes hand in hand. You aren't going to raise a 1700 or 1800 yearling bull and have him come out at 75 pounds. The hybrid vigour in the cows is also probably adding some birth weight."

"We have had more issues with certain breeders in all of the breeds we have dealt with than we have specific breeds. We have bought bulls out of different programs and been disappointed in too small of birth weights out of mature cows and the performance isn't there and the calves are too small in the fall."

"I think in the Charolais breed, lots of breeders have chased calving ease and lost some of the performance side. To me, the Charolais industry is still a terminal cross sire for the commercial industry. I know there are some guys chasing the heifer bull market and there is a need for that,

but I think some of them have lost the punch behind them. By chasing the calving ease, they are losing the natural performance out of the breed. As a guy using Charolais bulls, that has to come back a bit. Pounds pay. The day that we don't sell calves by the pound, it won't matter. As long as commercial guys like me are selling calves by the pound, that's how we are making money. The heavier they are, the more we make."

*continued on page 30*



"I understand it has been market pressure for calving ease that has done it, but the first thing commercial guys need to do is buy a scale so they can find out what their calves actually weigh. We are surprised all the time. We have had 135 pound calves born unassisted. I am not saying I want every calf to be that big, but I don't think guys know what their calves weigh."

"You look at that calf that weighed

won't come out of the cow, but a 110 pound Charolais calf will, just because he is a foot longer in the body."

"I know the herds I buy bulls from. There are some big cows out there. If they kick out a 90 lb. calf, there has got to be something wrong."

"Our Charolais steer calves average easily 100 pounds and it's probably closer to 110. Out of 400 cows this year we had one cesarean and it was a

added another 120 feet insulated. This included an office area with running water, fridge, microwave, a deep sink, bathroom, hot water and a rest area. "It is crazy how much easier it is with hot water there," says Kris. Louise adds, "It is just so much easier to not have to run to the house to boil a kettle. There are no more needles in the house, or drugs in the fridge, everything is handy to where there work is."

"I wish we had it years ago but we didn't have the numbers to justify it. It just makes everything so much easier. We dug another well here that is specific to this side of the yard and the building."

"We are planning to sync about 200 cows this year and we are going to A.I. about 60-70 with sexed Simmental semen for replacements. The other 130-140 we are planning to breed to semen we have drawn from our own bulls. If we can breed half of them and get an 80% conception rate, there are less for the bulls to service naturally. Trying to breed as many cows as we do, in the spring has been a challenge. We have had bulls go down with injuries that have been breeding well. In the last year, we have changed our total management program on our cows – our feed program, our mineral program – we switched everything. This spring our cows were cycling so hard, I think some bulls got injured simply because they were working too hard. We have spent enough money to obtain a strong bull pen to be able to do that. The cost of drawing the semen isn't that much and when you pay \$7,000 to \$10,000 for a commercial bull, we know the quality is there. You

*continued on page 32*

## **“I understand it has been market pressure for calving ease that has done it, but the first thing commercial guys need to do is buy a scale so they can find out what their calves actually weigh.”**

135, I remember weighing him. I was thinking where is all this weight coming from because she is not a huge cow. He was probably 10% of her live weight, but he was so long. It tells you two things. It tells you she is built right to calve and the calf is also built right to calve. The weight comes from the length of spine. If you have a short-spined, sawed-off, little calf, he is not going to weigh up like that long-backed calf."

"Different programs are looking for different things, guys calving on grass are probably going to watch that birth weight more than we are. We push the opposite side, but I don't want to push our calving weights a whole lot heavier because our cowherd isn't that big. If we had a bigger cowherd, we would push that a little bit more. Any self respecting 1500 pound cow should be able to have a 120 pound calf unassisted if it is built right. You can take a 90 pound Angus calf and it

Red Angus calf out of a first calf heifer. We calve in January, so we are around and watching. If they are taking a bit of time, we throw them in the barn and check for a malpresentation. We probably assist more than we need to just out of lack of patience or convenience, but we like to see the calves on the ground."

"Every cow has a time limit," adds Trevor.

"Exactly, and you will find on a day when we are really busy and have 20 calves, we will assist very few. Whereas if there is a day with only 6 calves we aren't as patient because we are watching and waiting and waiting. Now with the new barn and all of the pens, it is so easy. Every pen is connected by an alleyway and the alleyway is connected to the calving barn. So any cow that is taking a little longer, we can run her in the calving barn and check her easily."

They had 84 feet uninsulated and



see the proof in our calf crop. I think in the future we could even spend more money and instead of that bull breeding 30 cows, he will breed 120 cows in a year."

This year they hired someone to do the A.I.ing because it was something new to them. They synchronized them all and have no plans to ever attempt heat detection with that number of females. "Syncing with the facilities we have now is no big deal, it was just a couple of hours. The day they came to A.I. 60 cows, we started at 10:30, we brought the cows out, split the calves from them, we sorted them, they were bred and we were having lunch in the office at 1:30. We have three rows of pens in the barn, on one side of the barn we just took out about four or five stalls and we have a crowding tub alley-way head gate system we just backed that right into the barn. That is what we processed the cows through to A.I. and it was so slick. It makes everything we do so easy now."

"I thought it was going to be an all day adventure," says Trevor, "but it took no time at all."

"Now that we have the facility that we do, we can do things like this. Five years ago we couldn't have dreamed of doing this. Now with the barn with pens and alleyways, we can bring them in, do what we need to do and it is never a big job and our cows are all quiet."

"Anything that is always heads up or not good in corrals has to go," affirms Louise.

## “Our Charolais steer calves average easily 100 pounds and it’s probably closer to 110.”

They are situated close enough to Riding Mountain National Park that they were quarantined by T.B. a few years ago. "I am very happy that it is over. It is a real pain because you have to process the cattle once and then again in two days. By the third time around they just don't want to do it and the cows were always heavy in calf and they didn't want to be bothered. We always had at least one abortion because of it. The big herdbulls were the worst. They don't want to be messed with and I don't like bothering them."

"There is a big presence of wild life in the area. Actually some of our biggest issues now are from wolves. We lost a mature cow last year from a wolf kill. We see them when we are fencing and we see their tracks in the mud. I sit on the Watershed board and the guy from Parks Canada is doing a research project on the wolf numbers and the populations and what people that farm on the edge of the park think of them. We have had a couple of colourful conversations about it. The people in the city that think they are nice should come and have a look at a wolf kill. That is not nice to find. If they would stay to deer and elk, that would be fine, but with the TB situation they irradiated a bunch of the population. When you take away their main food source what are they

going to do? They are populating like crazy and reproducing and they have to be fed. Because the elk and deer population isn't in the park, they are moving out to the surrounding farmland and apparently, they like beef. The cattle are easier to catch than elk and deer. What you get paid by crop insurance to replace the cow killed by a wolf is a joke. They paid us \$1800 and I told them if they could find me a bred cow the quality of her for \$1800, they could buy me a hundred of them. We are replacing them and we have to pay \$2500 to \$3000. I know it is there to help, but that number doesn't cover the cost now, it may have been okay five years ago, but not now."

"I go to the Manitoba Beef Producer meetings when I can. I voice my opinion on different topics, but the government is limited in what they can spend and you can only scream for so many things at once."

By participating in the larger beef community, the Kristjansons are not only learning, implementing and improving; they are also sharing their knowledge and experience to ensure the industry is strong and viable for the future. With their ability of adapting to change, high level management skills and strong work ethic, you know they will continue to succeed.

