

# TURNING SILVER INTO GOLD



## PROFILE – HICKEN RANCHES

Candace By

***Why does a successful commercial cattleman breeding Black Angus on black cows suddenly decide to sell his bull battery and buy Charolais bulls? The answer is simple – profit.***

Brian and Carla Hicken, Hicken Ranches, Raymond, Alberta, started in the cattle business with 40 Simmental cross cows in 1996. Brian explains how it all began, “I also do construction so it was more of a hobby than anything. It wasn’t long until I felt that cattle were something I really wanted to expand in, so over the next few years, I continued to build my herd and purchased more grass. I decided very fast that I didn’t want to have 1700 pound cows or hay burners around, so I sold the entire herd of about 300 in 2002. That same year I found 300 nice open heifers at Beazley Ranches in Brooks. They were going to be the perfect sized cow, between 1100 and 1300 pounds.”

“Over the next seven or eight years, I continued to build my herd with smaller framed black Angus heifers or young cows, bought some more grassland and decided to get pretty serious about the cattle business.”

“ This was a great improvement from my 550 lb. Angus x Angus breeding program. ”

“Things were going well, except the black Angus cows bred to black Angus bulls just didn’t quite have the size of calf I needed to make the profit I was looking for. So, I was sitting in my good friend Bob Perlich’s office one day and asked, “What do you think about breeding my entire herd to Charolais bulls?” He said, ‘Well, you’re crazy enough to do it and I think it’s a great idea.’”

“I also told him that when he came to town with 1500 Charolais x Angus calves, people would be taken back by it. The feeder will know and he will have to let the secret out. He’ll pay a premium because they have performance, they grow and they grade,” Bob Perlich, Perlich Auctions, Lethbridge, explains.

Brian continues, “So, all of a sudden I had a lot of black bulls to sell and a lot of white bulls to buy. At this time I was talking about breeding 1500 head and owned about 15,000 acres of grass plus some rented grassland. Anyway, the rest is



Perlich Bros Auction Market



history. My third Charolais calf crop was sold November 2nd, 2011 at Perlich Auction in Lethbridge. My 1200 lb. cows have been weaning silver and buckskin calves weighing between 650 and 700 lb. on the steers with about a 210 day weaning. This was a great improvement from my 550 lb. Angus x Angus breeding program.”

“Calving was never really an issue when I was considering the change. I am not afraid to use a 115 to 120 pound birth weight Charolais bull coming out of a 1800 pound purebred cow. When you put that bull on a 1300 pound Angus cow, the birth weight won’t be that big. There is so much more stretch and length to the Charcross calves they come way easier than 110 lb. Angus calf,” Brian tells.

“It really is the best of both worlds. You get a shot of performance from the Charolais and grading ability from the Angus. Basically, you have the perfect product,” Bob Perlich states. “I am an advocate for Canadian beef, as we have some of the best beef in the world. However, I wanted to demonstrate that if you had enough silver numbers, you would get the premium and it was proven in the last three years. This year Hicken Ranches sold some of the highest selling calves in the country.”



*Carla and Brian Hicken*

Bob philosophizes, “If you want performance and grading you have to cross with something. It’s pretty hard

to beat looking at a yellow calf. If you like a blonde, you will always like a blonde.”

So what keeps more people from making the move to bigger profits by using Charolais bulls in a crossbreeding program? Bob answers, “It is the unknown factor of stepping out on the edge and actually trying it. What would happen when you took that product to town? The thing of it is, Brian is not afraid of a new venture, he wants a profitable bottom line and he’s not scared to face a

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*Pens of black heifers at Hicken’s Bred Heifer Sale in early December where he sold 1300 heifers he’d purchased the previous fall and bred*





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challenge. His commitment and determination has made him a success in all facets of his life.”

Brian has been using buff coloured Charolais bulls and found that he gets 7/10 tans, really nice looking tans. If he is using white bulls, he'll get 7/10 silver, 1 darker grey and 2 tan. If they are throwing tans, there is a zero chance of getting a funny coloured one. He feels that if they were all light silver, that would be the ultimate. There were no more rat tails than slicks or fuzzy when he was using black on black. “I don't think you would get any if you were using straight black Angus cows. If you don't know what is in the cow, a touch of Simmental could be doing it. I was only discounted 3-5 cents at the end of the sale when we ran in five or six in a group.”

The talk in town when that first group came was immediate. “They were in awe, they were surprised at the quality, length, substance and hair coat. They were shocked the animals looked that good – spectators and buyers included, “ Bob tells.

“People called to see how the sale sold. It was not a sorted sale. The traders were not concerned when a mouse coloured one could have been sorted off. At the most, there may have been 5 rat tails out of 1500. In order to be efficient in the cattle business, you have to crossbreed. More pounds bring more dollars.”

“Guys are still holding back. Seeing it once, isn't believing it yet. They



Bob Perlich

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will have to see it more, to be convinced to try it.”

The sale on November 2nd, 2011, should go a long way to proving the silvers are profitable. 595 silver steers and heifers out sold the 312 tan steers and heifers by nearly \$10/head and were \$90 higher than the 246 black steers and heifers from the first calvers. One buyer from southern Saskatchewan purchased 213 head of

silvers from this sale to go to grass. He runs 2500 grassers, of which 200 were silvers last year. He commented that he “would run all silvers if I could afford them and find them. I love them on grass as it is hard to beat silvers at the end of the day.”

“Now is the time for the Charolais breed. This is a real opportunity and breeders need to get on the band wagon. There could be a shortage of Charolais bulls and somebody has to do the homework to see the business grow and ensure their spot in this growing market. How you treat a customer after a sale is important.”

Hicken concludes, “this program has simply given us better profit,

more vigor and made selling calves in the fall a lot of fun. In keeping in contact with buyers of the calves, they seem to be doing great in the feedlots with great daily gains, good vigor with very little sickness. These calves have also seemed to bring more dollars per pound than regular market value. All in all, I would recommend this program to all of my friends!”

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*Some photos compliments of the CCA Ad & Promo Committee*

