

Three Generations Using Charolais Bulls

Profile **FRASER & ELLEFSON FAMILIES** Sarah Wright

When it comes to knowing the benefits of using Charolais bulls on commercial cow herds, these three generations of ranchers know them well. With 40 plus years of using Charolais bulls, they know what Charcross calves can do for their calf cheques in the fall.

Wallace Fraser is no stranger to making his living from the calves off Charolais bulls. He has been using them on his commercial cattle herd for over 40 years. He grew up on a horse ranch in between Gem and Hussar, Alberta, located in the Southern part of the province. His family had a small herd of cattle, primarily Hereford based. Today, at 79 years young, Wallace still ranches in the Gem area, where he and his wife raised their 2 children, a son and a daughter. Their ranch consists of 800 irrigated acres of primarily grass and hay land, with a small amount of farmland. He recently rented out the farmland to a neighbour so he can slow down a bit. Irrigation is used extensively in the area due to the

semi-arid climate of Southern Alberta.

Wallace was first exposed to the Charolais breed when he was seventeen or eighteen years old, just over 60 years ago. His father was approached by a neighbour, the McKinnons, with a proposition. Mr. McKinnon asked Wallace's dad if they could use 25 of the Fraser's Hereford cows and artificially inseminate them to Charolais bulls. The semen was brought from California. In the deal, the Frasers would keep the heifer calves, and the McKinnons would take the bull calves. The Frasers took the deal. Wallace laughs as he recalls a memory. His father gifted Wallace's wife with one of the heifers that was born from the deal. Wallace says, "that heifer would turn her body sideways

with her nose at the end of the feed bunk and eat her way down to the other end of the bunk."

For the last 40 years, Wallace has used Charolais bulls to breed his predominately Red Angus commercial cow herd. He begins calving his cows the 20th of March and calves until the middle of May. The bulls get turned out with the cows on June 10th and are pulled on the 15th of August.

Wallace watched the Charolais breed evolve and improve for the better over the last 40 years. He acknowledges the work Charolais breeders have put into developing the breed. He believes, "there are better bulls out there today than there were 40 years ago." The breeders have moved away from straight hock bulls. They have also improved on calving ease and moved away and improved the problems plaguing the breed in the 1970s with some bulls throwing monster calves. At that time, the Charolais were leaving a bad taste in commercial cattlemen's mouths but Wallace acknowledges the cows were

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L-R: Wallace Fraser, Grant and Barb Ellefson, Colter, Sage, Quincy & Whitney

smaller in frame size back then and were ill-equipped to handle the cross with Charolais. Most importantly, breeders have not forgotten that Charolais are a terminal breed and haven't tried to redefine them, which is important when you get paid by the pound for the calves coming off the bulls.

Wallace's daughter Barb has always been actively involved with the cattle from a very young age. Wallace fondly remembers Barb helping around the ranch. "When Barb was a kid still living at home, I never had to worry about the cows and checking on them because Barb was doing it, and doing a good job of it," said Wallace. It is no surprise that Barb continues to actively ranch with her family, utilizing Charolais bulls within their commercial program.

Barb married Grant Ellefson, and together along with son Colter and his family, own and operate Ellefson Ranch. Their ranch is southwest of Brooks, along a section of the Bow River. Grant grew up in the Lomond area, and laughs at life's sense of

direction. When Grant and Barb were looking to buy their current ranch in 2005, "we looked at places across the four western provinces and ended up buying our place 20 miles from where I grew up," says Grant. Along with ranching, Grant keeps busy working as a ring man at bull sales in the spring. Barb works full-time off the

"My weaning weights were 75-100 pounds more..."

farm and takes care of the ranch when Grant is travelling the sale circuit. Together, she and Colter hold down the fort working well together to get things done.

The Ellefsons' ranch consists of approximately 1,000 irrigated acres, 1,200 acres of native grass, plus they utilize grazing allotments in the Lomond and Eyermore Community Pastures. Irrigation allows them to grow all the feed they need to support their herd through the winter months. They currently grow sorghum,

triticale, alfalfa, corn and have some irrigated pastures. With the crops they grow and a good mineral program, the Ellefsons can extend their grazing program well into the winter months. The cows graze on stubble and are moved to either swath grazing or standing corn. They are fed good hay one month prior to calving. Utilizing the community pasture provides the Ellefsons access to hard to come by grazing opportunities in the summer months.

Grant purchased his first Charolais bull in 1983. He still remembers the look on his dad's face when he came home with the bull. Grant's dad at the time was running a straight Hereford cow herd and was not happy with Grant's new acquisition. But, in the fall of 1984, the results showed in the weaning weights that Grant's venture was a successful one. "My weaning weights were 75-100 pounds more than my dad's," says Grant. There was no turning back, and Grant has been running Charolais bulls ever since.

Each year, the Ellefsons breed 350





commercial cows (black and red Simmental/Angus cross) to Charolais bulls, and a total of 550 cows. Open heifers are bred to Black Angus bulls. They purchase 30-50 bred heifers every year in the fall to add to their cow herd. They begin calving in the last week of March and calve until the end of May. This time frame for calving works best for these ranchers because it wraps up and gives them time to get the calves branded and out to grass before seeding and the demands of summer begin. The bulls, like Wallace's program, get kicked out with the cows on the 10th of June until the 15th of August.

Colter Ellefson is the third generation of this ranching family to use Charolais bulls in his program. Colter along with his family, Whitney, and daughters Sage and Quincy, ranch together with Grant and Barb. Their ranch is six miles down from the home place. Colter also works off the ranch as the main sorter at the Bow Slope stockyards. He enjoys the fall run, as it gives him a chance to look at other people's calf crop, and the opportunity to work with cattle and utilize his skill set acquired from growing up on the ranch. Whitney is a schoolteacher but has a passion for the ranching way of life. She grew up on a ranch near Millicent. Together, Colter and Whitney share the passion for the livestock and land and enjoy

raising the girls in this lifestyle.

Colter runs commercial cows he breeds to Charolais as well. When Colter and Whitney got together, she had a herd of black cows. They were being bred to black bulls, but now that group of cows are bred to Charolais bulls and throwing nice silver calves. In addition to their commercial herd, they also have a herd of purebred Simmental cows. They retain 30-50 replacement heifers each year and sell

both purebred and hybrid bulls from this program.

Colter grew up seeing the advantages of using Charolais bulls on commercial cows. He is also

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starting the girls off using Charolais bulls on their herd. Sage is 6½ and Quincy is 3, and each girl was bought a nurse cow. They breed the nurse cows to a Charolais bull each year, and the profit from the sale of the calves goes to the girls' education fund. The girls help raise and care for the calves until they are sold, starting

them with the responsibility of caring for their stock. They are the fourth generation of the family to utilize Charolais bulls in their programs. They are starting the girls young and teaching them to appreciate the ranching lifestyle.

When asked about the traits they look for when purchasing Charolais bulls, all three generations had similar answers. For Wallace, the bull must be well balanced, with length of body and a good hind quarter, that blends well from the nose back to the tail. "I don't want to pick him up at the withers and he tips over forwards," says Wallace. Grant looks for a bull with a lot of performance. "We don't worry too much about birth weight, as long as the bull is built right," says Grant. All three generations aren't put off by a larger birth weight and it isn't troubling to them because they know if their cows are built right, they can handle a bull with a larger birth weight number. For Colter, he looks for bulls that are big, thick, smooth travelling, with good performance and

calving ease numbers.

All three generations are known to buy high selling Charolais bulls in the spring. Wallace laughs and says, "if I like the bull, I generally end up getting it." Grant explains his logic, "we try to buy top end bulls and feel the payback is in the weaning weights." Colter echoes his dad's



Colter, Grant and Wallace in irrigated Sorghum fields



Cow with calf profiling

statement, saying, "I want the best, and I know every dollar you spend on a bull comes back in your calf cheques." Grant's other logic for buying high selling bulls is "only a rich man can afford a poor bull." This year, they didn't buy the high selling bull, but Wallace and Colter did get the second and third high selling bulls. They always work to buy the best bull for the best dollar.

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The three generations have a friendly competition when it comes to their weaning weights in the fall, when they sell their respective calf crops. They feel it is good to have to ensure the families and their respective ranches keep moving forward. They push each other to improve their programs, making them more efficient, and to enjoy their ranch so future generations will carry on their ranching traditions.

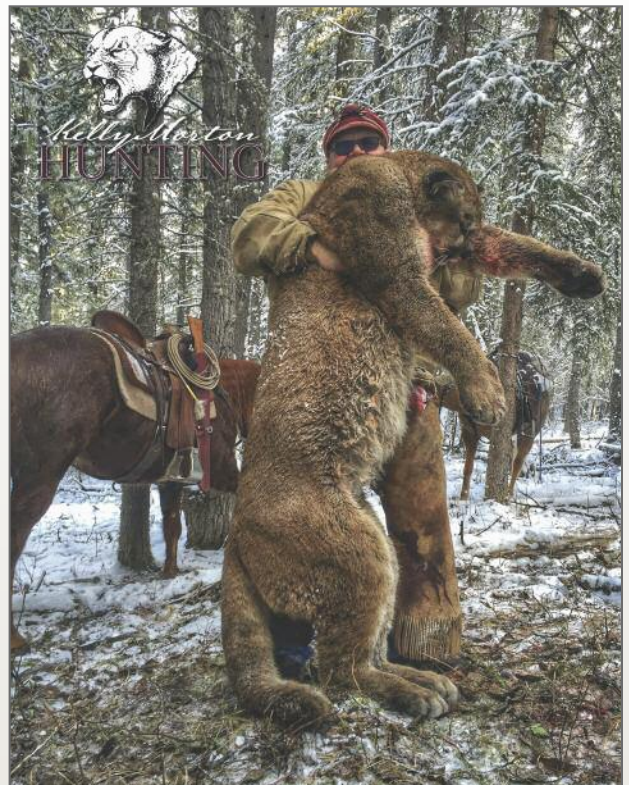
When asked what the advantages of using Charolais bulls are in their respective programs, and why they continue to utilize Charolais bulls, for each the answer was easy with no hesitation. Wallace found through extensive time using Charolais bulls, "there has always been a good market with good demand for Charcross

calves." He has also seen time and time again that his Charcross calves receive a premium. Grant and Barb have found "Charolais bulls will cross with just about everything." They are happy with the weaning weights of their Charcross calves, with steers averaging 700 pounds and the heifers weaning only 25-30 pounds lighter. Colter says, "I use Charolais bulls because they work. If you pick a good Charolais bull, you can take it any direction and do whatever you want with it. I can breed a mediocre cow to a Charolais bull, and the calves come out with vigour. I have very few birth problems with the calves, and I see good growth, vigour and weaning weights with my Charcross calves." As a lease rider, Colter has also seen firsthand how Charolais bulls can travel just as well, if not better than other breeds, and they outwork and outperform the other breeds.

When it comes to marketing their calf crop, they utilize a program their bull supplier promotes.

When asked what the biggest challenges they face in their respective operations, for each generation the answer was different. For Wallace, who is winding down his ranch, the challenges he faced were minimal, because he has reached the point with irrigation where he can grow enough feed to support his cow herd. For Grant, Barb and Colter, the challenge is land availability and pasture availability. Pasture and land are getting harder and harder to come by, which can limit the potential to grow and expand their ranch and herd.

Going forward they see their programs growing, but with each generation at different stages in life, the answer is different. Wallace says, "as long as I can, I will be raising cattle." At 79 years young, the love of ranching still pulses through his veins, with no sign of slowing down anytime soon. He loves going to brandings and stays busy helping wherever he can. Grant, Barb and Colter want to keep building their ranch for as long as they can. They are always looking for ways to improve and do a better job with their cow herds, to make their herds more efficient and to get more return from their calf crops. They always cull to



Grant is in avid hunter and outdoorsman

improve their quality and make the cows more efficient. Colter enjoys attending forage tour days and seminars, as he is passionate about learning more. He always looks for ways to learn how to get the most out of the resources they have, be it their land base, or the crops they grow for feed. Ideally, he would like to not have to feed cows in the winter and is looking for ways to stretch their grazing well into the winter months. He is even looking at the benefits of cross species grazing, although he hasn't taken that leap yet. He is always willing to learn from anyone willing to share their knowledge. When they are not busy ranching, they are avid outdoorsmen and hunters. Grant stays busy team roping competitively and enjoys having time to do it.

When asked about what misconceptions they feel exist around commercial breeders buying purebred Charolais bulls, or about the age-old tales of Charcross calves, all three generations laughed and answered hesitantly, acknowledging what a loaded question that was. On the misconceptions, they feel not every commercial breeder wants a horned bull. They want polled bulls and will spend the extra money for polled because it eliminates the hassle of dehorning. Also, cheaping out on a bull because commercial guys don't

raise seedstock should be a mindset of the past. When buying bulls, cheaping out shouldn't be an option, because the bulls should be used to produce calves that you want to keep, whether you keep them or not. They should be of the quality you are proud to promote. They also feel the misconception of Charcrosses giving you rat tail calves is still out there. For these three generations, rat tails have never been a problem, unless it was something going back on the cow's side. The misconception of calving

Charolais bulls will cross with just about everything

being problematic with Charcross is also untrue. They all have very few assisted births when using Charolais bulls, and if it is an assist, it is because something is wrong, very seldomly is it size.

Wallace remarks, "it is rewarding to sell calves to a 4-H kid and see them have success with the animal."

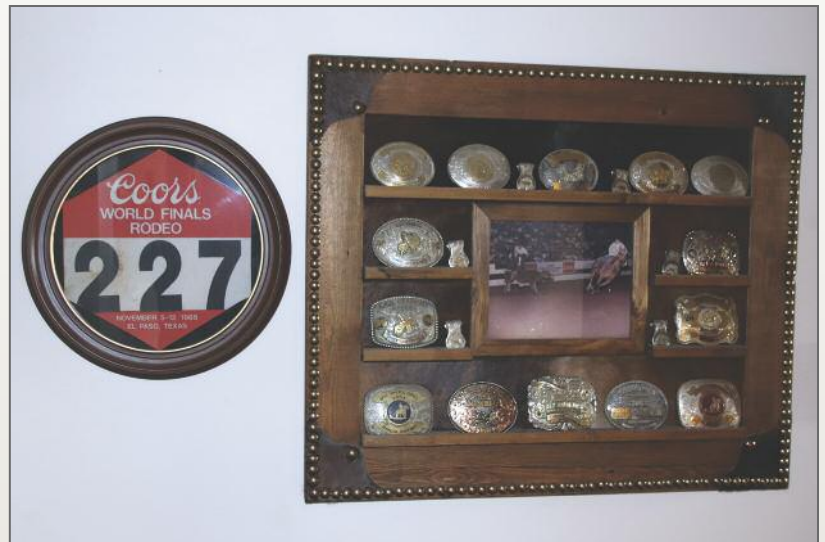
For the last number of years, the Frasers and Ellefsons have been strong supporters of the 4-H program, buying steers from 4-H members. This year, even Colter got on board and the three generations bought a steer. Wallace says, "4-H is a good thing and it is good to buy calves and help the kids. It is a way to give back to the 4-H program and the kids even though I am not

involved." Wallace was a 4-H member back in the day. He aged out of the program at 18. He went on to be a leader of the Gem club for a couple years, then to an assistant leader for 5 years. He was a ring man at the local show until the club folded but was asked to go and ring at the Brooks show. For 50 years, Wallace was involved in the 4-H program and can't say enough good things about it. He loves to watch the youth get involved in the industry. For Grant, Barb and Colter, they strongly believe in supporting the 4-H program because there are not enough young people wanting to stay in the agriculture industry, so they want to support the ones that are involved to help give them a positive experience by purchasing their steers. The wall in Grant's and Barb's house is a testimony to how many positive experiences in which they have participated. All three generations thoroughly support the youth programs, because they acknowledge kids are the future of the industry.

These three generations of ranchers are at different stages of life and in their ranching; one is slowing down and nearing the end of his ranching career, one is well established and fully involved in their ranch, and the younger is starting to become well established and figure out the direction he wants his ranch and cow herd to go. All have the same thing in common—for as long as they are able,



Some of the trophy saddles and buckles on display at the Ellefson Ranch





4-H banners of steers the Frasers and Ellefsons have purchased hang with pride in the entrance of the Ellefson home

they are going to ranch. For as long as they are running commercial cows and are being paid by the pound for

their calf crop, they will continue to use and benefit from Charolais bulls in their programs. As a family, they

are going to keep ranching and showing the fourth generation how to appreciate the ranching way of life. —