

Charcross Heifers Perform for Profit

For the past 30 years, rancher Bob Fraser of High River, Alberta has been raising and buying Charolais cross heifers for his grasser program and has had great success. When asked “why Charolais cross heifers?” Bob is quick to reply, “It’s simply performance. I’ve tried other breeds, the Charolais heifers gain on grass and they will feed right along with steers in a fat lot.” He

added “I can buy heifers 10-15 cents cheaper and sell them at steer prices.”

What started out as 300 head of grassers gradually grew over the years and Bob is now grassing 1200 head of heifers along with some steers each year. The heifers are purchased from October to May at weights between 460 to 660 pounds. Bob does all of his own buying and generally buys cattle from the same producers year after year. He realizes the importance of having a good relationship between the customer and the provider whether it’s with the producer or the auction markets. “If the

auction marts have a bunch of tan heifers coming in, they’ll call me; they have looked after me well.” Most of Bob’s buying is done at the Innisfail and Highwood auction marts.

Bob’s selection criteria for buying is simple – “they have to be true Charolais. I try to stay as yellow as I can.” He is quick to add “I buy by type, not by color. Straight white heifers don’t scare me, I will guarantee the straight white ones do as well as the tans.” He also stated, “I try to buy the best ones no matter what the cost is, if a group comes in with whites in it, I will tell them not to pull them out. It’s only a color thing, it has nothing to do with quality.”

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Bob sees an average gain of 2 lbs/day on grass with the heifers. The average weight of the heifers last year when they were sold was 936 pounds. On years when grass is short, it's survival. They are not fed any grain or silage. The cattle are rotated from pasture to pasture as required. The pasture land is both native and tame grass being spread out from High River to Cochrane.

The heifers are marketed between October 15 and November 1 each year depending on weather conditions. They are generally sold at Highwood or on the Canadian Satellite. Most of the heifers are sold to repeat customers and are usually sold in two groups of 500 head and one group of 200 head. Bob knows the type of cattle his buyers like and that's why his selection criteria is what it is. Bob states, "Everybody knows my program, the heifers sell themselves." "They know they'll feed well in the feedlot." "Another reason

both Bob and the buyers like the Charolais cross heifers is their hair coats. "The buyers like lots of hair,

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that's why I eliminate any Limousin or Blonde crosses, buyers like the true Charolais." When the cattle are sorted to sell, Bob makes sure none of the straight white heifers are cut out of a group. "I know the cattle and they are all the same quality." Bob proudly states, "the biggest compliment I get is when the buyers ask me if I raise them all myself."

Along with his grasser operation,

Bob also calves out 250 commercial cows and 60 heifers. His cowherd is half red and half tan and all of the cows are bred to Charolais bulls with the heifers being bred Red Angus. He finds the Charolais cross cows to be low maintenance and easy calving. The cows are calved on grass beginning April 1 and are only fed hay unless weather conditions dictate otherwise, then they are given 1-2 pounds of grain. Living in close proximity to the Foothills of the Rocky Mountains southwest of Calgary, snow, and lots of it, can fall at anytime of the year, especially in the spring! The cattle have to be able to adapt. Bob purchases most of the hay he feeds as the majority of the cultivated land is now seeded to grain, "since grain became worth something!"

True to his selection criteria for the heifers he purchases, his bull buying tactics are not much different. "If I like a bull, I buy it. I'm not concerned with EPDs," states Bob. He adds "if I

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really like a bull with a 110 pound birth weight, I'll buy it. Most of my cows weigh 1400-1500 pounds. Birth weight doesn't scare me." He is quick to point out he is fortunate to not have had any bad bulls. Most of the Charolais bulls he purchases are purchased out of the Calgary Bull Sale and privately. He is comfortable

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knowing that when he picks a bull out and asks the owner his opinion, he'll get a straight answer. Once again leading back to the importance of a good relationship between the customer and the producer and each knowing the other's program.

A professional calf roper and team roper for 30 years, Bob has seen many successes in the rodeo arena and just as many in the sale ring. "I've always been in the cattle business and it is the best way of life," he proudly states. He is quick to point out his gratitude to his business partner of 30 years and long time friend Dee McDougall, M & P Ranches, of Cochrane. "It's a great partnership and I appreciate everything she does for me."

Like most cattle producers, Bob has seen the ups and downs and uncertainty of the industry and road out the highs and lows. Looking back Bob expresses, "BSE was the biggest joke that ever happened." He is optimistic for the future of the cattle industry, revealing "Good cattle prices have taken a long time to come." But it is clear there is no uncertainty when it comes to his thoughts on buying Charolais cross calves, "There are not enough Charolais calves to be had. It's tough to buy them, there should be more guys raising them. They are the best ones that work for us."