

Craig Jensen – Making Money in the Cow Business



“When I was ten years old, I went with my father to pick up ten black heifers he’d purchased from a guy back in the hills by the Saskatchewan Landing. We were in a two-ton truck with stock racks on the back. When we came over the hill at the Saskatchewan Landing and I saw that open ranch land, I had a dream to someday have my own ranch. That’s how it all started. You have to have a goal and something to work towards. There will be good times and bad times, but hopefully more good,” Craig Jensen reminisced about forming his first goals in the cattle industry.

Craig has seen both sides of the good and bad, but has reached his goal in a big way. He had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time with the foresight to see an opportunity that assisted his land expansion. In 1974, the PFRA put a section up for sale that had been broken. It was so full of rocks and weeds that nobody wanted it. I bought it for \$10/acre and fenced it. I put 150 Hereford steers on it and paid for it and made enough to buy 3 more quarters of grass the first year.

In time it came back to native grass and is good hard grass. The PFRA had taken the land to clear the rock and leave it farmable. The plan was good, but it didn’t quite turn out that way. The rock was used for the dam

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at Diefenbaker and the land was left with many potholes and not all of the rock cleared.

In 2010, he put around 450 head on his 54 quarters of grass, northeast of Milden. He sold 220 pairs for fall delivery 130 head going to one buyer. He has 100 breeding females left and although he is downsizing his herd, he has some great advice for young producers.

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calves each fall and buying Red Angus based heifer calves, preferably with no Simmental in them, as replacements. In order to make a uniform package of solid, tan Charcross calves at sale time, he has consistent success by keeping the cowherd British based. He likes to purchase 200-300 open heifer calves each fall to feed through the winter. He culls the group hard in the spring and the remainder are put on grass for the summer to be bred. They face their second cull in the fall with preg testing, structural soundness and condition as the criteria. After calving, they are culled once more. They simply have to be able to produce a calf. Starting with 300, he would hope to have 50-60 females to place in the herd after his stringent culling procedures.

In the fall of 2009, he purchased 250 heifers for less than \$500 each. After roughing them through the winter, he sorted in the spring, selling the ones he didn’t want to breed as grassers in April for an increase in price per pound along with added

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weight gain. He bred the rest black and put an ad in the Western Producer to sell the package. He sold all 83, sight unseen, before preg testing for \$1100 each in October, to the first caller.

In 2010, he bred all his cows white. "White feeder heifers bring good money and will gain, they'll out-gain a straight British steer," states Craig. Craig knows his Charolais calves perform. "One time after BSE, I took a hundred and some over to Goldenhill Feedlot at Viscount. The 47 white steers gained over 4 lb./day with the white heifers and Red Angus x Charolais heifers gained 3.6 lb./day. Only one came back AA, all the rest were AAA."

"You have got to shoot for a package you can market. The buyers are using colour as a sort instead of quality right now. It isn't right, but you aren't going to change them, so you might as well give them what they'll pay for. It doesn't matter how



Craig and Grant Barnett, Manager of Heartland Livestock, Moose Jaw

good of a job you do producing your calves, when it comes to sale day, you have to get the job done. Look into all the variables, assess your options and follow the fat market as it determines the price of the calves."

Last fall Craig was selling his Charcross heifers weighing 660 pounds in the high 90s. He bought

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his replacements at 475-500 pounds at 83-85 cent per pound in the third week in October. At the same time he sold 176 steers in a good market. In November he decided to sell another 100 Charcross heifers because the market was strong.

He prefers to have Red Angus based females bred Charolais because it doesn't take much of a Charolais bull to get a decent calf. The mother has the right size and no horns. He doesn't care if his herdbulls are horned or polled, the horns will go at birth anyway. He selects bulls on thickness and uniformity and has no calving problems. He doesn't mind bulls with 110 lb. birth weight, but they have to be shaped right. The birth weight could also come from the cow. They used to weigh every

calf when they calved in February. His bull calves weigh 85-90 pounds at birth but he knows he'll have a calf to market in the fall.

Over the years they have run herds of black cows and white cows. Both of these groups worked well but, once again, it comes down to marketing and he has found the tan calves bring him a premium price every year.

Craig's son Daryl runs a good herd of tan cows which was built from their white cows bred Red Angus. He bred these Charolais this year so he would once again get consistent light tans or white to package and sell.

All cows like to eat and Craig has found they eat more as they get older. He's had Red Angus cows as big as 1800 pounds, but he likes to keep his cowherd around 1300 pounds. "If you keep your biggest heifers as replacements every year, your cow size is going to grow. You would be better off to sell the top and bottom third of your heifer pen and keep the



These cows have Red Angus sired calves but were bred back to white bulls to get more consistency in colour and size uniformity



middle third to keep your cows a moderate frame. I also try to keep replacements off cows that are consistent. Some cows don't produce a good calf every year, but it's not always the cow's fault."

"People kept telling me the heifers weren't big enough, but you don't need an 800-1000 pound heifer to put on grass to breed. By the time they are a mature cow, they will be 1300-1400 pounds where you want them, you don't have to start there. We don't need dinosaurs."

They bring their calves in a week ahead of the sale date to get them used to waterers and some feed. They sort and wean on Monday and sell on Tuesday with a less than 3% shrink. They run their calves across the scale before loading them to ship. It enables them to make uniform packages and they know what their shrink is. "We prefer to sell in the Moose Jaw pre-sort because they know how to sort cattle. We've tried other markets and have not had the same success because of their sorting philosophy. In Moose Jaw, the buyer and seller benefit from the sorting instead of just the buyer."

"I like the Maple Creek market for blacks. It is an interesting sale to attend. That is ranch country and when they sell their calves, the whole family is at the sale. People take pride in their herds and the entire family participates on the ranch. There are a lot of good cattle down there. In my area, there aren't many ranchers, the

people take more pride in their equipment than their cows. Craig is situated in an area that has very good crop land and very good pasture land and knowing the distinction has

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played a role in his success.

"We've never bought a bale in our life. We've had to buy some grain. It's hard grass country and there is lots of straw in his area. With the shift in farming practices to utilize more of the straw in the grain industry, straw is getting a little harder to find. The weather is consistent, which is also good for cattle, no big warm and cold shifts."

He calves the cows in small paddocks by the feedlot in March-April. He moves them out to grass around the 15th of April and the bulls go out in mid June. Grass management is a high priority. "Pasture land has a lot to do with the weight of your calves in the fall. You don't want to overgraze, you always need to keep some for next year. You need some cover to lay down on the ground so rain gets under and the cover will hold the moisture. If pasture gets too grazed off, there is no cover to hold the moisture and it

can take five to six years to recover from a dry year.

"Some guys are getting stung moving to new areas when they don't know their grass. Grass in different soil and annual rainfall zones needs to be managed differently. You've got to know your grass." In some of his pastures, there are many varieties of grass, he notices the cows have their own grazing patterns for each part of the grazing season. In affect, they run their own rotational grazing system.

"Your cows have to be in good shape when they calve or they never seem to catch up on grass and the calves aren't as good."

"You have to have good quality cows. Some young guys are buying trouble by buying cheap cows from the auction mart. All you are getting is someone else's problems and there is no bargain in that. You've got to build a quality cow herd to make money."

Craig keeps up on the markets and the politics around the beef industry that shape the markets. At the time of BSE, they sold old cows as ground beef to city people. It's not something he thinks people should get into doing. "You shouldn't go out and sell beef on street corners. We need standards and we should get paid through the system."

"The CCIA keeps talking about trade stability and all it is is bullshit. They tell us if we do this, we'll get all of this information back. The packing plants don't have time to send stuff



back and they do what they want. All we need for trade stability is to put a brand on those cattle and that's enough. When other countries come here to buy, all they care about is price. Packing plants make money by what is on the hook, it's that simple. If the CCIA wants all of this, they should supply and pay for the tags. Send me 300 and I'll send back the 25 I don't use. Now it costs me \$3.50/head for what? I get nothing from it."

"We don't want to go the route of the European markets with all of their paperwork. Our market is so different, we can't compare it. In England there is a butcher shop on every corner, it just isn't the same."

"If our export markets want to dictate what we should produce, let them come here and build a packing plant. Let some company from China do it. They could set their own standards and we'll provide whatever they want."

"If you want stability in our market, all we have to do is put the country of origin in big bold letters on every piece of meat sold. Women go to the store and buy sub-standard beef from another country and soon quit eating meat. It's too inconsistent, it's no wonder people are buying chicken and pork. It's too hard to compete when you have sub-standard cheap meat on our market."

"I was in a restaurant and I

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ordered a prime rib. This was an uptown place and the price for the prime rib was not cheap. I got that piece of meat and I knew it wasn't Canadian. So I asked the waitress where it came from and she assured me it was Canadian. Eventually, through the manager and the chef, we discovered it wasn't. They were more surprised than me to realize it wasn't a Canadian product, but as a quality beef producer, it was obvious."

"There is more opportunity in the cattle business than ever, but you need to manage well and work towards a goal." Craig has two sons in agriculture, one in grain and one in cows, but neither of them share Craig's goals and he is the first to recognize that you can't force your goals on your kids.

One of his sons farms 3000 acres. He got rid of his cattle four years ago and has had four good crops. His other son has 80 cows and 2500 acres of grass. "I've got two good daughters-in-law and five good

grandchildren aged 17, 17, 14, 14 and 11, 3 boys and 2 girls. I like going to watch them play hockey. My granddaughter played in the Western Canadian Bantam Finals in Strathmore. We also go fishing together. I'm lucky to have them close by. Last year the grandkids talked me into buying a new boat, so we picked it out together. The two older grandsons do a lot of work on the farm." Craig lost his wife in a car accident in the summer of 2009 and lost some interest in the business at that time.

He sold his grain land three years ago. He'd like to sell the feedlot and rent the rest of the land. "You could run 300-400 cows and it would pencil. You couldn't buy it and have it pencil unless you were sitting on the money. I enjoy it and don't get stressed about it. I brought in 33 head to rent at \$1/day. If I could do that it would be a good retirement plan. I'd just have to keep checking the fence and hire someone when it needs to be fixed."

"I just love ranching, there's no better way of life. You come out here in the summer and all of the flowers are in bloom. It is so peaceful. When nature gives you a calf and you nurture it, you get a product you can have pride in. It's very rewarding. In grain farming, you put seed in the ground, it rains or it doesn't rain and then you put it in the bin. Whoopity-do. It's just not very exciting."



Uniformity and performance is what Craig strives to produce



Craig (red coat) and Daryl (to his right) watching some of their calves sell