

# Performance Yields Profit



Profile

FORBES BROTHERS

Candace By

**B**urt and Tom Forbes calve 980 cows and don't consider birth weight when buying their bulls. They run an efficient operation with no outside help. Forbes Brothers at Senlac, Saskatchewan, has found that as they get older, things just have to get simpler.

They calve their main cowherd on three quarters. The first and second calvers start in March and the main herd starts in April. They keep them separate and pay a little more attention to the younger females. "We also wean them earlier, usually in September, just to give them a good chance to recover and be ready for the next calf," says Burt.

The red cows are bred Charolais. They have been buying 100 replacements each year from a breeder in Strathmore. They are high percentage Red Angus with some Simmental in them. They also have a small Charolais herd (150). "We can take some replacements from them, but we prefer red cows and we get mostly tan calves. If we can't source good replacements, we will put a Red Angus bull on the Charolais to raise our own replacements. We like our Charolais cows, but we like our white bulls the best," explains Burt. The bull

battery consists of 35 purebred Charolais bulls and maybe 6 Simmental and 6 red Maine Anjou bulls.

"Spring 2016 was the biggest premium for Charolais calves I have ever seen. If anybody was following the market, there should have been a flood of people wanting white bulls. The market had dropped considerably in the spring when we sold. I talked to my brother Tom because we sell on

were back to \$1.84. There was a fifteen cent premium on Charcross in that sale. Our steers averaged 890 lb. We normally sell in the first part of March. Even though we are calving a bit later, we will probably continue to sell in that time frame. A lot of it has to do with spring break-up. We just want to get them out before the road bans come on. I don't think these calves will be that much lighter, just

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T.E.A.M. and said, 'You had better be on the phone. This market is a lot lower than we were thinking it was going to be.' He said, 'Well, Burt, we don't have any choice, we have to sell.' They started them off at \$1.84 where they thought they might sell, but they didn't catch a bid until \$1.82 and they sold for \$1.995. The next group of calves were a good group of Simmental cross calves, and we know the young fellow who raised them and they were good calves, but they

backing off even a month. I realize this spring was an exceptionally good spring and we did not have a bad calf day. For their age they are powerful calves, so I don't think we will drop our weaning weights much."

"Our heifers go about two weeks later. Generally, our calves the last number of years have ended up going east. We space it out so there is no trouble getting trucks in to haul them. If you work with them, I think they buy more aggressively. Lots of times



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our steers don't even go out on the same day. They are really good at getting them out, but sometimes they will go two trucks one day and two the next. Rather than have the truckers wait until all five or six trucks are here, we let them come and load and go. They sell packaged in semi loads, so we try to package them evenly. This year we sent five loads out and there wasn't a fifteen pound difference between any of the loads.”

“We do a pretty extensive sort in the fall. We aren't afraid to feed some for grass. Our first calf heifers are bred to Red Angus bulls with the intention that we will put the calves out on grass. The heifers will be fed to see if they will make replacements. Fifty percent of the replacements come out of our heifers.

They rotate grass with crop land on 5000 acres. The crops are wheat, barley, canola, oats and peas. They bale hay and usually tub grind it with silage for the feedlot. “We bale graze green feed but we will bale graze hay too depending on the year. We tried winter electric fence and it was a struggle to get good ground. We bale graze 40-60 acres fields. It is easier to move the cows, my brother can move the cows all by himself and quite often does.”

“For us, as commercial guys, we want performance. Birth weight

doesn't matter in our Charolais. Our bulls have to meet a design, birth weight is the last thing we ask about, but mostly after we have already made our selection. Both my brother and I don't get hung up on birth weights as long as we know the purebred breeder we are dealing with. For example, one of the guys we buy bulls from has really big cows. For his cows to kick out an 80 lb. calf, you are going to look at it and say, what went wrong? Those cows can't have little calves.”

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“The biggest birth weight we have ever bought on a bull was 155 lb. Do we buy all our bulls that big, no, absolutely not. We know what all the birth weights on our bulls are, 116 pounds to 130 pounds is really common in our Charolais bulls. I don’t know if it is our predominantly Angus based cowherd that regulates the calf size, but we don’t have problems.”

“We bought this bull in the eighties and I asked the purebred breeder what the birth weight was, because back then birth weight was everything. The purebred breeder said to me, ‘What do your calves weigh?’ I said I don’t know what my calves weigh, a hundred pounds. He said, ‘Are you sure?’ I said, No I don’t have a clue, I don’t weigh my calves. ‘Then why do you care what mine weigh?’ he said. ‘I can tell you that bull is going to calve for you.’

“I thought about that afterwards and that spring we started weighing our calves. We had a few 80 pound calves but we had a lot of 120 to 125 pound calves. I didn’t think we had any that big because they weren’t any

problem at all. They were just laying down and spitting them out. So anyway, we bought that bull from the guy and he told us to put that bull in a pasture where we were sure we

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could tell every cow that was bred to him. So we did that. Springtime rolled around and we pulled one calf out of the 40 females he serviced. At that particular time, we didn’t worry about one. It was probably ten years later when I was talking to that breeder when I finally asked what the birthweight of that bull was and he

told me 155 pounds. We used that bull for eight years and never caesareaned a calf.”

“I believe you have to deal with a purebred guy that knows his cattle well enough, that if he doesn’t believe they will calve, they don’t make the bull pen. Disposition is more important to us than birth weight. You have to be able to catch them and handle them.”

“We want a heavy-muscled bull, as thick as we can find him, with lots of muscle because we use a Red Angus cow and they tend to be a little narrower. They aren’t a big powerful muscled cow so we need our bulls to have good muscle, depth, length and thickness. Everything that you would think would be hard calving. People are going to think I am just telling you this, but it is the honest truth. Having the front shoulders tucked in is all part of the design.”

“The bulls have to move. That is what Charolais has ahead of the other breeds and they just haven’t caught

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up. You will go a long ways to get other breed bulls to move as well as a Charolais at five years of age.”

“We semen test all of the bulls every year about a month before we turn the bulls out. We mix our bulls in the pastures. We have yearlings, two-year-olds and mature bulls in the pasture. It stops the fighting. I would like our yearlings to look better but once the weather warms up you just can’t stop them. They just keep walking and walking. If the pasture is bigger, the younger guys will work the outside and the mature bulls are

“The weather plays a huge part. If we get a spell of really cold weather, we will run the silage wagon up there and supplement them. We aren’t afraid to feed according to the weather. In mild winter like we had this year, they just got green feed, except on Christmas and sometimes on Sunday,” Burt adds with a chuckle.

“Once the weather warms up in spring, we find we have to feed them silage because they want green grass. These cattle will winter well on green feed, but feeding silage in the spring keeps them from pushing on the

sale ring, there is a lot of grey hair and they don’t want that.’ I said to Tom, ‘We are going to buy this bull.’ We never ever saw that bull be excited again. If you go out back and look through the bulls and go in a small pen with a bull and it doesn’t put you out of the pen, you can get a decent buy if they explode in the ring.

Chances are they will settle back down because they have already been stirred up once hauling them in there. Big birth weight bulls and ones that get a little nervous are good buying. We used to try to buy every piece of land we could, so we had to cut corners somewhere.”

“People will tell us that a Charolais calf is big and dumb and they won’t get up and suck. We have 700 cows bred Charolais, do you think we have time to help these calves suck? My brother predominantly does all of the calving. I feed and it takes me just about all day. He tags and calves. I have said that to people, ‘Do you really think they are big and dumb when one guy can do it? Even Superman couldn’t do that.’

“We haven’t had a c-section in ten years. In fact, Tom and I were talking about it and it has to be longer, we couldn’t remember the last time we had a Charolais one. Out of our 700 cows, we maybe helped ten this year. We had three big calves this year and one was a Simmental, one was a Maine-Anjou and one was a Charolais. Helping ten is totally insignificant. Some of them it is because they are calving three miles from home and we weren’t sure when they started. Usually it is a malpresentation.”

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**“When we used to go to bull sales, we found these larger birth weight bulls were really the best buys.”**

in the middle of the herd. The females that wander out a bit will be bred by the younger bulls. The bulls run for 63 days and they are pulled. They get three cycles. When we pull the bulls at the first of September, they all stay together. When they come home in December, that is when we vaccinate and Ivomec the bulls and we separate the young bulls. We keep the yearlings and any two year olds that look a little run down at home and they get fed a little extra. The other bulls go to a quarter section of grass were they predominantly just get fed green feed.”

“Last year we started the season with one spare bull and never used him. We never lost a bull until after we pulled them, then we lost three.”

fences. Silage is like candy and you can save your fences by feeding a little bit of silage.”

“When we used to go to bull sales, we found these larger birth weight bulls were really the best buys.”

“Once we went to a bull sale and they had a show bull for sale. I looked him over and said to Tom, ‘Look at that bull, is that ever a nice bull.’ Tom replied, ‘What are you looking at that thing for? We will never afford that bull.’ I said, ‘Yeah, but you have to admire that bull. He is a really good bull.’ He came in the ring and blew a gasket for about ten seconds. He went from corner to corner and I happened to be sitting by a bank manager and he said, ‘Whoa, that bull just got a whole lot cheaper. Look around the





“If we are going to have trouble it is usually our higher percentage Simmental females bred Charolais. I attribute it to more hybrid vigour. The Angus seems to control that a little bit more.”

“I have a definite bias to these tan calves, because do they feed. They are just the best feeding animal in the feedlot. We background our calves until March when we sell. We use silage with a grain ration, that’s why we have to have Charolais calves, because they can handle it. Pretty much all winter long they will be on a 30% grain ration.”

“We have a whole herd health program. They are 8-wayed every second year. They receive IBR, BVD, BRSV every year and we Ivomec in the fall. The calves get vaccinated (Pyramid 4), castrated, tagged and we use dehorning paste, if necessary, within twelve hours of birth. When processing time comes, all we have to do is needle them and check the horns. We use different coloured tags on the calves just to make things easier. If my brother tells me to go catch 168 yellow, I only have to look at yellow tags, I don’t have to go through all 980 calves. It just keeps it simpler. Believe it or not, my brother knows all of the cows by number.”

“One of the unfortunate things about a tan Charolais calf is the show ring. They are the worst calf you can possibly take in 4-H. There isn’t a judge out there that can judge a Charolais calf from what I can see. My

daughter got so disappointed last year. She had a Charolais calf, and this again is probably hard to believe, but

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weigh in is always in November and we never have all of the calves home. 4-H weigh-in rolls around and I told Kendall to pick a steer from what we had weaned. This tan steer was fed in the morning and walked across the scale, then in the spring the same, he

was fed in the morning and walked across the scale. He was full weight both times and he gained 4.54 lb./day with no pampering, no corn, no implants, just silage and barley. Just about every year the 4-H calves here do 4 lb./day and to me they are missing the boat by not teaching these kids that is where the money is. It is all judged on confirmation and judges don’t put their hands on them anymore. Underneath all the hair is a 2.4 rate of gain that will make you go broke if you have a feedlot full of them. It is really unfortunate. How did the show ring get so far from the feedlot finished product?”

“We are a farm that gets excited about our red cows and our Charolais bulls because they just work. They have to work because we have repeat buyers that fought for our calves this year. In the fall of 2015, one of the order buyers phoned me when we put our grass heifers for sale, just to make sure there were no dogs in the group. I assured him that the package had no dogs. Anything that wasn’t quite right would walk in front of him in the market and he could pay what he wanted to pay for it and put it where he wanted to put it. Every calf has a home, but if you are going to sell on T.E.A.M., don’t try to pass off any dogs. You will only do it once and your buyers will start dropping. The buyer said, ‘Burt, I am going to own those calves this year. I have four cents more than anybody else.’ I said

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good luck and told him I appreciated him wanting to bid on them. The sale was on a Friday morning and they sold to someone else. I walked into the Provost Auction Mart. The buyer that called me walked right over to me and said 'What does it take to knock that guy off those calves. I had four cents more than anybody and I wasn't the runner up bidder.' He was just so excited and said, 'You do know those were the highest priced calves to sell in western Canada to date. I was sure I was going to buy the highest priced calves. Burt, I had more money for those calves than all the order buyers here and we represent every feedlot except for two and I think you had them both bidding on your cattle.' It was an entertaining conversation. You had to feel good. He said, 'That is just insane what they paid for those cattle.'"

"We bought 100 replacement heifers and have 100 of our own this year. We only run bulls with our heifers for two cycles. It is surprising how few heifers you actually lose by dropping off that last cycle as long as you run good bull power. If a heifer is going to start calving in the third cycle, she is probably going to calve in the third cycle her whole life. We just eliminate it right off the bat. You may get a really good heifer and think, we would probably be keeping her if we kept the bulls out one more cycle. But once you take them to town and sell them, you forget them. We have kind of become used to that."

"The biggest challenge is to keep all ages of calves in all pastures so your cows are cycling on a rotating basis and aren't all coming in the same day. When we process, we process in groups of fifties or hundreds. My brother is fantastic. When the cows come in he just says which pasture they are going to and they are sorted as we do them."

"A feedlot fellow told me, when he first bought a ranch, he said he was going to go cow/calf as he had never done that before. His vet asked him if he was going to go and get a set of black cows. The feedlot guy said, 'Now why would I buy black cows?' His vet said everybody knows they are a little smaller and a little more

efficient. The feedlot guy said, 'Well it might be known to you guys, but it is not known to me.' It was interesting to me because I happened to be there. He put us in his truck and drove us down the alley of his feedlot. He came to a pen of black steers, then a pen of Simmental steers, then a pen of Charolais steers. He told us what each pen was converting for pounds of feed for pound of gain. He said, 'that Charolais pen is converting the best, so don't you think those mothers are probably the most efficient cow?' Who is going to argue that point? It was over a half a pound difference on the conversion between them, so he went and bought Charolais cows. He figured to raise calves more efficiently, the cow has to be more efficient. I wouldn't know that from where I sit, but he knew what every one of his pens was doing and he gauged the efficiency on the conversion."

"My father-in-law used to have Charolais cows for years, but is retired now. People used to say they ate too much. He told me he knew exactly what his cows ate because he weighed every pound of silage that ever went out to them. He said his cows never ate what people would say his big cows would eat. He fed his big cows their whole entire life 30 pounds of feed on a dry matter base whether they weighed 1600 pounds or 1000 pounds. He said they don't eat more, that is a myth."

The Forbes brothers have grown up farming on this land together. They are now looking to the future with the next generation as their family has expressed interest.

They are trying to make things easier as they go. They built a processing system on the half section where they calve the cows. Burt is the welder and he made the steel system so three people can process. "I feed and fix or weld, Tom predominantly calves. Our kids help after school or when they are home on weekends. All our kids know how to work, including my brother's kids. They all work in the community, Tom has done more than me because I worked off the farm for a lot of years. I know these kids will all do well no matter what they choose to do, because they know how to work."

"At the end of the day, our family has traditionally got along very well. Even our two brothers that aren't on the farm used to come home and help out. One brother still comes home to seed, he loves driving the tractor. It is a family operation all the way. Our Dad wasn't a big farmer, he only had 50 cows. We have just been fortunate to have some good opportunities come along and have taken advantage of them."

Judging by the number of full belly laughs we shared during our short two hour tour, humour is a big part of this family's working success.

