

A CHAR-CROSS OPERATION IN THE OTTAWA VALLEY: THE WRENS

by Heather Coughlin

Jim and Erik Wren can't imagine doing anything other than farming. The father-son duo runs a cow-calf and background stocker operation in the Ottawa Valley, just an hour west of the nation's capital.





Jim and his wife Karen, who is also involved in the operation, bought a 100-acre farm on Wofltown Road in Renfrew County in 1982 and started building their cow herd with a few Limousin cows. Gradually they increased their numbers, switching over to Charolais as they did.

One of the reasons for going to Charolais was temperament.

"We love the Charolais, the quietness of them. There's 104 steers in the yard here and you can walk out in the yard and you can probably pet 95% of them," says Jim.

In 2020 they had the old unused frame barn taken down by local Mennonites, and built an open-front shed for the stocker yard.

In 2021, Erik bought his grandfather's farm of 150 acres just a few kilometres away, where he and his partner Reiana live. When she is not working at the local bank, she also helps out at the farm. Erik feels fortunate that he was the only one amongst his cousins who was interested in farming and was able to make a deal with his grandfather. "There's no other way I'd be able to afford a farm and be this close to dad," he shares.

Between them, they grow a diversified crop



including corn for silage, soybeans, fall wheat, and some hay, but buy the majority of the hay they need from neighbours close by. They also rent about 800 acres of pasture land, which is readily available given the number of livestock guys who have sold their cattle over the past several years.

Together, they run 150 cows – 110 spring calvers at Erik’s farm and 40 fall calvers at Jim’s – they background those calves along with an additional 200 calves, all Char-cross, purchased at the local sale barn. A hundred of those are fed at a neighbours’ place. For this year, the heifers are yarded at Erik’s farm, but that can change with numbers and needs.

Everything they buy is vaccinated within a week or two of coming in, even if they are said to be vaccinated at when they buy them. They don’t like to buy calves that are castrated by bands – their experience has been that a high percentage are not done right and it becomes another job for them to do that leads to more stress on them and the cattle.

“Polled bulls 100%,” says Erik. “That is my least favourite job by a country mile. I hate taking off horns. It’s added stress on us and on them. It’s worth more money to buy a polled bull, especially now with the [bulls tested for] homozygous polled.”



**“WE LOVE THE CHAROLAIS,
THE QUIETNESS OF THEM.”
SAYS JIM.**





“THOSE CALVES SEEM TO GROW, GROW, GROW,” SAYS ERIK

Their own calves are vaccinated, dehorned, and castrated in the fall when they come off grass, then left on the cows and weaned a couple months later. They feel there is too much stress on the calves to do it all at the same time.

“The calves go backwards and you lose 30 days of weight gain. We’ve had good luck doing it this way,” says Erik.

Their weaned calves go on straight dry hay for a while and seem to adjust well and get going on feed better when they change over to free choice corn silage, first cut baling, and a 35% pellet to reach anywhere from 800 to 1,000 pounds.

Finished stockers are shipped about five hours to Ontario Stockyards in Cookstown or Brussels Livestock sale yards, where they find there is a better market for those heavier, short-keep animals. Getting them there is not a problem with a couple of real good truckers going on a regular basis.

“The guys at the market, they are crying for those Charolais calves, whites or tans, as long as you have that crossbred in them somewhere,” notes Erik.

A few heifers may be retained from their own herd, but for the last couple of years they have pushed to buy

red angus females, breeding them Charolais to get tan calves.

“Those calves seem to grow, grow, grow,” says Erik. Recently they have been selling a group of heifers in a fall bred heifer sale at Renfrew Pontiac Livestock (aka the Cobden sale barn). They are sometimes questioned by potential buyers about calving problems, since they are bred Charolais, and they have no problem giving a guarantee.

They offer up the example of calving 27 first-calf heifers, bred to calving ease Charolais bull, and ending up with 29 live calves without assisting any of the births.

The beauty of breeding the heifers Charolais too is that even the first-calf heifers are also having white or tan calves that fetch a top price.

The Wrens run up to eight Charolais bulls. That is one challenge encountered when renting smaller sized pastures... they end up needing more bulls to run with smaller groups of cows, which gets expensive buying bulls. And while they haven’t had any issues finding/keeping pasture land, another issue is finding pastures that are fenced given the increase in cash cropped land. “It used to be you’d see cattle everywhere, now it’s all cash crop,” comments Jim.

“IN MY MIND, IT MAKES THOSE BULLS WORTH MORE. IF YOU CAN SELL A STEER AT THE SALE BARN FOR CLOSE TO \$3,800 YOU SHOULD PAY \$11,000 FOR A BULL,” SAYS JIM

While they don't gloss over the challenges of the business they're in – the ever-increasing costs of inputs, the price of land, and the ups and downs of the market being a few – the Wrens feel optimistic about the cattle industry – there is a lot of demand for the product they are producing.

“It's mind blowing, to think where the market is at right now,” says Erik.

Looking ahead, they plan to keep using Charolais bulls. “It's just the pounds that we've gained and the cents per pound – it's a no brainer for our operation,” states Erik.

“We love the temperament and calving ease. We get a premium for the white or tan. It seems to be the right thing in our area,” adds Jim.

“In my mind, it makes those bulls worth more. If you can sell a steer at the sale barn for close to \$3,800 you should pay \$11,000 for a bull,” says Jim, going by a rule of thumb he heard years ago – to spend the price of three steers to buy a commercial bull, and he offers some advice: “Guys should buy good genetics, don't skimp. Your bull budget should be limitless. The return you get adds up quick.”

