Benefits of Charolais Bulls in Commercial Herds
By Heather Smith Thomas

There are a number of advantages when using Charolais bulls in commercial herds. Many ranchers utilize Charolais as a terminal cross to produce superior calves. Doug Rogers (Rogers Bar HR Charolais in Collins, Mississippi) has been in business since 1959 and sells about 250 Charolais bulls each year, almost all of them to commercial cattleman.

“The reason commercial producers should use a Charolais bull is that they always get heavier weaning weights. Today with lower prices per pound, you need more pounds to make the same amount of money,” he explains.

“With Charolais cross calves you get good weaning weights, good weight gain and good yearling weights. If the cow herd is some other breed, you get the hybrid vigor on top of that. Documentation from studies at Colorado State University show at least 60 pounds more at weaning. This makes a lot of money for the producer and is one of the biggest values, in increased weaning weight,” says Rogers.

“Another plus is performance in the feedlot. Average daily gain and feed conversion is also better. These cattle don’t have as much fat, so it takes less energy to put the weight on. The gain is in red meat instead of fat,” he says. Muscle and meat is what you want, not fat.

Feed efficiency is worth a lot, especially when faced with increased feed costs. “A feedlot owner is trying to tweak everything possible, in order to be more profitable. If he can buy less feed and get the same amount of weight, it’s a good deal for him.” This is one reason Charolais-cross calves are in high demand.

“Uniformity in the calves is another plus. Nowadays, just because a calf is black doesn’t mean it is Angus. Everything has gone black. There are black Simmental, black Gelbvieh, black anything. But there is true uniformity in the calves when you use a Charolais bull; you know it’s a Charolais-cross calf. They have a distinctive look, so you know what you are getting. When you buy a black calf, however, you don’t know what you are getting.” Black has covered up a lot of other genetics.

“Another nice thing about Charolais in our part of the country is that they can handle the heat better. Today, for instance it’s 95 degrees with 95% humidity. A Charolais-cross calf is very heat tolerant (unlike black cattle) and can handle the heat far better than anything else in the Southeast. The Charolais bull will still be out working in the hottest part of the day, breeding cows, while other bulls are lying around in the shade. The Charolais bulls cover more cows, in our part of the country,” says Rogers.

Buddy Westphal, Valley View Charolias Ranch (near Polson, Montana) has been selling most of his 200-plus bulls per year to commercial breeders for the past 48 years and feels the biggest value in breeding commercial cows to Charolais bulls is heterosis.

“We’ve known about heterosis for a long time, even before I was in college at Colorado State University when this was the big buzz word. At that, the focus on hybrid vigor was for hogs; people discovered that crossbreeding hogs produced healthier, hardier animals with greater gainability. With crossbreeding, the meat was more palatable and the animals grew better and were ready to harvest sooner,” he says.
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“Now we’ve seen amazing gains in crop production through hybridization of corn and other crops, especially in how quickly we can grow it, and higher yields. We’ve also seen unbelievable production with chickens and other livestock. It astonishes me that the beef industry has been so slow to take advantage of heterosis,” he says.

“The idea that black is beautiful took over much of the industry. But green is better (meaning money). People need to see that they can produce more green if they use hybrid vigor. For instance, an average-quality Charolais bull can increase the production of a low-average cow of any other breed, yielding more pounds at weaning, producing a calf that will go into the feedlot and gain better, and also have better carcass value. To me, the whole goal of beef production is to have a calf that can wean at 700-plus pounds, go right to the feedlot and gain 4 to 5 pounds a day, and be harvested at less than 365 days of age. That young, tender beef will be more palatable and the input of production (cost of feed) will be much less than for an animal that takes longer to get to harvest weight,” says Westphal.

Every day that a calf is growing and eating costs money for feed. “With interest rates down from what they were at some points, producers may not look at this so much, but back in the days when we were looking closely at our investment in that calf and paying 10 to 15% interest, the important thing was getting them grown up and harvested as quickly and as young as possible,” he explains.

“This is a big plus in what the Charolais bull will do for you, in having a bigger weaned calf, with more gainability. We’ve proven that, along with carcass yield. With my purebred Charolais heifers we have produced 93% prime or choice grade with a 66% carcass yield. That’s a lot of beef and opportunity for profit! And with hybridization (using the Charolais on another breed of cow) you can even do better than that,” he says.

There is no better terminal cross. “This is why I got into the Charolais business in the first place. My genetics professor and mentor was Tom Sutherland. He was born in Scotland but spent time in France (where he learned about all the continental breeds, including Charolais) and then came to Colorado State University. He said there is no better breed to cross with British cattle (Hereford and Angus) here in the U.S. So when I got out of college I looked for a ranch that had Charolais cattle—and was fortunate to come here 48 years ago, where the former owner had already started a herd of Charolais.”

Sutherland’s influence, and knowledge of hybrid vigor and what a Charolais bull can do, especially on Angus or Angus cross cows, helped set the course Westphal took in trying to produce the best Charolais bulls for his commercial customers. “The Hereford-Angus cross is good, but with the continental cattle like Charolais there is an even greater amount of heterosis. Also with a parent like Charolais the offspring have more size, structure and gainability,” he explains.

“The superior gain in the feedlot and feed efficiency have been documented by years of research and experience. My own cattle are returning a pound of gain for 5.1 pounds of feed, and this feed conversion enables a producer to make money, especially when these animals are gaining 4 to 5 pounds per day,” he says.
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“And with the hybrid vigor produced by the Charolais bull, you eliminate yield grade 3’s and 4’s because you are getting lean carcasses. My average on the last heifers we fed was 2.2. You’ve got to eliminate the overfat 3’s and 4’s,” he explains.

“The good news is that the Charolais breed has overcome the problems with calving that we saw back in the days when I started. If you end up with calving problems today you are going to the wrong breeder and getting the wrong bloodlines. I sell a number of bulls every year that are used effectively on black, bally, red and red bally heifers as heifer bulls because of their reliability, ease of calving, and the fact that the producer can take those calves (from first calf heifers) and market them the same as calves from the rest of the herd. They are all crossbred Charolais calves that can go in the same pen and do the same job (as weaned calves),” says Westphal. This is a big market advantage for the rancher, being able to run just one color of bulls and have a uniform calf crop—and not have to sort back the calves from first calf heifers.

“We see some breeds where disposition is a problem. We’ve made advances in Charolais in this trait, and many Charolais cattle today are very gentle. I have bulls that are so docile that kids can get on them and ride!” he says.

Many producers now have black cattle, due to the great marketing campaign by the Angus breed, but they don’t yield as much meat as a Charolais. “With the prices we are seeing today, you need a lot of pounds, and it doesn’t matter what color the cattle are; the only thing selling is pounds. The disappointing thing is that the beef industry has known about hybrid vigor for so long, yet we are still far behind in utilizing it,” he says.

“The benefits become obvious when a Charolais bull accidentally goes through someone’s pasture and breeds a few cows, and then you see the Charolais-cross calves that are so superior to the rest of the calves in that pasture! Another way ranchers learn about this is to look across the fence to see that the neighbor is weaning another 75 pounds of calf per cow, even when the neighbor’s pasture is poorer!”

Westphal saw a lot of this enlightenment during the past year. “I gained several customers who had never used a Charolais bull before, but they came to my sale because they had seen what their neighbor was doing.”

The Angus breed has done a phenomenal job of marketing, and many creative things, but the Charolais cross will increase weaning weight, gainability, carcass yield, ribeye area, marbling ability and other carcass traits. “The Angus cow makes a really good cross but she needs a Charolais bull to increase the ‘green’ from her calves. And you can always tell it’s a Charolais cross by its color. You can take a herd of multiple-colored cows and get a very uniform calf crop with Charolais bulls. They can always be marketed as Charolais crosses and the buyers know what they are getting,” he says.

Bill Romans, Romans Ranches Charolais (located near Westfall, Oregon) runs 600 purebred Charolais cows, 350 commercial cows and sells about 150 Charolais bulls annually at their ranch (operated by Bill and Cindy Romans and their son Jeff and Julie and family) and says there are many advantages in utilizing heterosis. “A typical example of the outstanding quality that can be obtained are the calves produced by a Sim-Angus cow bred to a Charolais bull. That’s what won our County Fair here this year and in the
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past. This makes a phenomenal cross!” says Romans. The terminal cross using a Charolais bull makes a superior feeder calf.

“We all had Herefords when I was growing up. Then people brought in black Angus bulls and the black bally cows were one of the best thing that ever happened to the beef industry because of the heterosis from that F1 cross” Romans says. “The Angus breed has done a tremendous job, and the majority of cattle producers in the U.S. today are running straight black Angus cows. They know they are missing out on the benefits of heterosis, but running one breed takes less management and time,” he says.

“Most continental breeds have gone to percentage black cattle to make heterosis available to producers who want some in their herds, but this makes it hard to tell what breed you are looking at when you drive by a pasture. The nice thing about Charolais-cross calves is that you can always tell what they are because the white gene is dominate and the buyers know what they are getting,” says Romans.

“One of the economic benefits of using Charolais as a terminal sire is you don’t have to pay top price for the best Angus bull. You can buy an average-priced Charolais bull and get more pounds of calf—a lot more for your money—because of heterosis. Some ranchers run all black cattle and buy the top black bulls in order to top the market with premiums. I did the math, and they are not making any more money than someone buying a less expensive Charolais bull. If a bull sires 30 calves a year, and you are paying top price for the best Angus bulls to get the premium, you aren’t making any more money per calf than we are, using averaged-price Charolais bulls. The premium for black calves is simply paying its way but not making more profit. They receive more for calves at sale time, but have to pay more for those bulls so it just averages out,” he explains.

If ranchers are not getting a really good premium and are giving up 50 pounds per calf, they can’t afford to not utilize heterosis. “Simplot Livestock understands this. They are running black bally cows and using Charolais bulls. They have one ranch where they just develop heifers, to get that F1 cross. They also started building their own Charolais herd focusing on feed efficiency and it’s amazing what they have done, in producing exceptional feedlot calves,” Romans says.

SIDEBAR: ADVANTAGES OF THE CHAROLAIS CROSS COW – “In commercial herds, the Charolais-cross cow (which very few ranchers are using) as a maternal cross is the best-kept secret in the beef industry,” says Romans. “Not every Charolais-cross cow will be ideal, but we are breeding for a slightly smaller cow with lots of ‘middle’ which makes her very feed efficient. When you select replacement heifers, you should not pick the biggest ones; you want moderate frame size. But with the Char-cross cow you can breed her to a number of different breeds of bulls and have great calves. You can breed her black, or to a Charolais, or whatever you wish,” says Romans.

The advantage of the crossbred cow is her hybrid vigor, hardiness and longevity. “These Char-cross cows have great stayability and are very fertile. Most folks who have straight black cattle know that they are missing out on heterosis, but they’ve been getting a premium for black. Producers who have spent a lot of money on Angus bulls
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have been getting a premium for their heifers as replacements (keeping their best, selling the others as replacements). Yet they all know that they are giving up 50 pounds or more on their steer calves,” he says. Even more importantly, they are giving up the heterosis on their cows. Research has shown that a crossbred cow produces 18% more beef in her lifetime.

“A rancher we know in central Oregon is trying to let his cows do the work and not have to feed much hay, wintering out more. He has kept a few Charolais-cross heifers. He told me 5 years ago that they go through the winter better, and by spring they are two body condition scores higher than the average of his black cows. If you are not running crossbred cows you are missing out on a lot of advantages. Everybody knows this, but most ranchers are not doing it,” says Romans.

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