

BY JAIME PULLMAN

White-out

How the Black Charolais breed blew down from Canada

The Burt family has tried a lot of different cattle over the years. “We started out using White Charolais and had great success with the breed,” says Heath Burt. “They showed great growth, the conversion ratio was excellent and they could stand the hot dry summers, and they endure the harsh winters we get. But we moved away from the breed in the mid to late 90’s due to the market wanting a black-hided animal.”

The Burt Cattle Company is a family-run operation located in Concordia, Kansas. It began in 1983 with Dennis Burt, Heath’s father, and has grown to include about 5000 acres and 350 head of cattle.

“We experimented with many different breeds

through the years depending on the premium we would receive in the sale ring”, Burt explains. “We were consistently looking for an animal that showed the growth the Charolais breed did. We tried Sim-Angus, Limousin, Hereford, and Angus breeds and were unable to duplicate the overall growth that we had when we raised Charolais.”

That’s when they heard about Black Charolais. In Canada, a pure black version of Charolais had been developed with success. Only a couple of producers in the U.S. had the breed. The Burts ended up buying their first bull from Brant and Lester Laue, of Laue Charolais Ranch in Kansas, nearly four years ago. The Laues were the first to travel to Canada and bring Black Charolais to the United States.



The Black Charolais breed was developed in Canada back in the 1980’s. While the Canadian Charolais Association recognizes the breed, the American International Charolais Association currently does not.

ANOTHER OPTION

Charolais originated in France and came to North America in the 1930s. The breed is known for growth, hardiness, grazing ability, and the ability to raise heavy calves. Charolais bulls have also earned a positive reputation for grading-up herds, particularly for size and ruggedness.

"The bulls are easy to work with, and we have noticed that the bulls can handle a large amount of cows," Burt says. "The last two summers our bulls have bred over 100 cows each summer between our commercial operation and registered cattle. They don't shrink and can handle the hot summers, especially this past summer when we had the worst drought since the 1950s. The breed is just hardy, I don't know how else to put it."

Burt says the big challenge he has with Black Charolais is that people don't



Black Charolais cows typically weigh between 1250-2000 lbs.

LAURE CHAROLAIS RANCH, KS

BLACK CHAROLAIS

BREED: Black Charolais

COLOR: Predominately black - may display some white undermarkings.

ANCESTRY: Charolais originated in the Charolles and Nizure regions of France. Though some evidence suggests that Charolais were present as early as 878 A.D., the first official recordings of the breed date from the 16th and 17th centuries. Breeding up with an Angus base and using **Red Charolais** genetics to eliminate the genes and interactions that create smoke-colored calves developed Black Charolais or cream colors. Black Charolais and White Charolais will result in some smoke and cream-colored offspring. Purebred Black Charolais on Red Charolais will result in the potential for heterozygous black offspring, and when Black Charolais are crossed with other black breeds only black calves will result.

HISTORY: The breed became popular after the French Revolution and had spread across Europe by the turn of the century. The Charolais first came to North America when a Mexican industrialist, Jean Pugibet, shipped several groups of bulls and heifers to his ranch in Mexico during the 1930s for a total herd of 8 bulls and 29 cows by 1937. The first Charolais came to the United States in the mid-1930s. In 1940, an outbreak of Hoof and Mouth Disease in Mexico led to quarantine. No additional Charolais entered North America until

1965, when Canada accepted some cattle from France under strict quarantine rules. The first Black Charolais, a heifer calf, was developed in Canada during the 1980s though selective breeding. The first purebred Black Charolais bull in the U.S. was Eclipse 204H, son of Doctor Joe 500E, who was the first son of the first Black Charolais female. Eclipse 204H's dam was the second purebred Black Charolais in history.

BREED CHARACTERISTICS: Black Charolais are almost exclusively polled, heavily muscled, especially in loins and haunches, large to medium frame, adaptable to different environments, known for high yields of red meat and leaner meat, and impressive growth ability; bulls typically weigh 2000-2500 lbs, and cows weigh 1250-2000 lbs.

REGISTRY: Currently, the **Canadian Charolais Association** recognizes the Black Charolais as a breed, but the **American International Charolais Association** does not.

QUALITY AND YIELD: Charolais average 1 and 2, 58%-64.7% Choice, 37%-49% Prime (purebred).

BIRTH AND WEANING WEIGHT: Charolais average 88.42 lbs birth weight and 501.2 lbs weaning weight.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT

THIS BREED: Call the **Canadian Charolais**

Association at (403) 250-9242 or visit their website at www.charolais.com.

The average Black Charolais BW is 88.42 lbs, and the average WW is 501.2 lbs.



LAUE CHAROLAIS RANCH, KS

know they exist. That's something the Laues have encountered as well.

"The best thing about Black Charolais is that they give cattle breeders another option to reach their breeding goals — in this instance, they can retain the black color in their calf crop while also getting the traditional Charolais performance traits," says Brant Laue. "The worst thing about them is all of the explaining required to overcome the disbelief that a traditionally white breed could have a black component!"

The Laues became Black Charolais producers after hearing from some customers that they would like to diversify their white herds and, in an effort to offer all their customers wanted, Lester and Brant investigated adding other breeds to their herd. During the late 1980s, Brant attended Canadian Charolais events at the Calgary Stampede and learned that several Canadian breeders had successfully developed a strain of Red Charolais, and had even gotten a black heifer calf. The first red factor Charolais came to

the Laue Ranch from Canada in 1994 and since then the number of Black Charolais have only grown.

NOW IN BLACK!

About one-third of the Laue's herd is currently Black Charolais and the rest are Red or White. The ranch operates on about 2500 acres and they calve between 125 and 150 females annually. They have found that Black Charolais can bring the best of both worlds to producers.

"Our Black Charolais offer all of the traditional breed characteristics of Charolais cattle, with one addition — we have added coat color to the list of relevant traits for which we are breeding. As a consequence, bull buyers who have used Charolais will find the growth and carcass performance characteristics very familiar, as well as the across-breed comparisons — what's new is that they come in a black package," says Laue.

Both producers have noticed a significant impact on their bottom line as a result of adding Black Charolais.

"You can literally see which calves were bred to the Black Charolais bulls and which ones were not. In the feedlot, they outgrow our Angus breed by about 100 lbs when we take them to market. Our records show the calves can be born on the same day, exposed to the same feed mix, and the Black Charolais calf will weigh over 100 lbs when we take them to market. The math is simple. The same amount of feed gets 100 lbs more, equals more money in our pocket," says Burt. "We use the three F words on the ranch. They are *feed*, *fuel* and *fertilizer*, and they continue to go up. We need our cattle to work as hard as we do to have a fighting chance, and I would go to battle with the Black Charolais breed against any other."

"I understand the disbelief with the breed," continues Burt, "but we are all trying to consistently improve our herds, and I can only speak to our experience which has been nothing but great. My advice is to give it a try, get a bull and put him on 10-20 cows and let the results speak for themselves." **WR**