

# bottom line traits that **SHINE**

*The “Business Case” for the Breed*

*Written by Catherine Brown*

**J**ordan Underhill of Guelph, Ontario, got a call in the winter of 2011 from a local feedlot operator asking Jordan if he could take on a heifer that unexpectedly calved in the feedyard. Jordan obliged, not knowing the impact that heifer would have on his operations going forward.

Jordan eventually put that heifer amongst his own cows in a yard with feedbunks which were visible to him 24-7 by camera surveillance. What he noticed was how little this new mother went up to the bunk relative to her herdmates of more conventional beef breeds. And yet she kept her condition through the winter months and later on grass. It impressed and intrigued Underhill enough to look into the breed.

Underhill SPECS was founded by Jordan and his family in 2012 and grew to its current size of 60 foundation Speckle Park females. This operation was the first in Eastern Canada to win a championship banner at Agribition and the first to host an Eastern Speckle Park Breed production sale. Underhill has since hosted 20 breed production sales, both for themselves and as a marketing outlet for other Eastern breeders. Their program keenly focusses on maternal, wide-pinned females with above-average milk production.

Underhill, who owns an agricultural management company that owns and operates the Canadian Dairy XPO, has a sharp business sense and expects optimum efficiency from his beef herd of Speckle Parks. Milking ability, he says, converts to protein. And Speckle Park cows not only have that ability, he says, but they excel in production into their senior years, demonstrating exceptional longevity. A full 40 per cent of Jordan’s herd are eight years of age and older.



Underhill SPECS Farm

“My cows’ output is maximized at eight to 13 years of age,” he says, believing Speckle Park cows to have about a five-year lactation advantage over most conventional beef breeds. He calls it his “business case” for the breed and has run the numbers to illustrate that extra five-year advantage.

The Economics of five extra lactations, assuming at least a \$2,000 annual calf value, is illustrated below. It’s the kind of math that Jordan believes will both attract new breeders to the breed and keep the ones in it sustainable for generations.

“It’s the Speckle Park breed’s biggest selling feature,” he says. And the economics are the same across multiple regions of the country and around the globe, in different management scenarios, he says, whether it’s minus 40 in Saskatchewan winters, plus 10 and damp in Ontario, or 100+ degrees Fahrenheit in Brazil or Australia. Their dark hide and pigmented teats and testicles play a big factor in that resilience, he says.

Speaking to current economics, Jordan believes full-time farmers and ranchers need economics of scale to survive, while those with other business operations or jobs must cap their cowherds at fewer cows. Either way, he says, the reality is

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Jordan Underhill judging the 2023 National American Junior Speckle Park Show at Cattlemen's Congress, Oklahoma

| Cowherd Numbers | Potential Extra Gross Income + 5yr/cow @ \$2,000/calf | Potential Extra Gross Income +5yr/cow @ \$5,000/purebred calf |
|-----------------|---|---|
| 5 cows          | \$50,000  | \$125,000   |
| 50 cows         | \$500,000   | \$1.25 million  |
| 100 cows        | \$1 million   | \$2.5 million   |
| 500 cows        | \$5 million   | \$12,500,000  |

less time per cow. The Speckle Park cow, he strongly believes, is a “breed for the future” because of their resilience across environments and their longevity in the herd. A productive but older Speckle Park cow is justifiably more valuable herself, at selling, than most cows, Jordon believes, due to that longevity. And the number one reason for that longevity, in his opinion, is “lifetime production lactations.” He says that some of his best calves are produced by cows that are past their 10th lactation.

“They just keep pulling, despite age,” he says. “And the number one reason for that longevity is structural balance and udder conformation and quality.

Aside from production sales, Underhill SPECS also markets frozen genetics online into international markets and more recently, Jordon’s connections inside the dairy industry have led to selling substantial semen into the dairy market. Semex’s first Speckle Park bull on offer was purchased from Underhill Specs and that bull’s semen is still selling worldwide. Whereas a Canadian dairy producer would normally sell a week-old calf for \$100, their Speckle Park-cross calves bring them closer to \$400, according to Jordon, which justifies higher semen prices, particularly for sexed semen (i.e. \$20 - \$25/straw vs. \$8 - \$10/

straw conventionally).

Jordon has pushed birthweights on his females from a window of 65 – 75 lbs up to 80-95 lbs without sacrificing calving ease, partly by strict culling of replacement females and bulls. The calves have exceptional vigour, he finds. And this is not sacrificed in any of the beef or dairy breeds they are crossed with.

Jordon’s close work with the dairy industry in Canada has made him a big believer in supply management for the long-term sustainability of families on-farm. He equates the philosophy of supply management to the Speckle Park breed’s closed herd book.

“We all know what happens to price when we over supply a market and it’s up to us as breeders to set the highest quality standards that are appropriate in this developing infant breed,” he says.

Investment in the breed has been rewarding one for him, having experienced other conventional breeds in a commercial cow-calf set up. Because the Canadian commercial meat grading system doesn’t reward producers financially for meat quality, the next best thing, according to Jordon, is cows with longevity that can efficiently produce pounds of meat protein well past 10 lactations. He believes this to be the best path to “profitability for all” in the chain from farm/ranch to plate.

**J**ustin Johner of Johner Stock Farms near Maidstone, Saskatchewan, resides at precisely the address where the





Underhill SPECS Cows

Speckle Park breed originated. He has purchased bulls from Christine Pike that were direct sons of the Lamont herd; the Lamonts being the family who developed the breed. Justin's family and parents Dave and Arlinda, are well established Hereford breeders, having founded their seedstock and grain farming operations in 1965 on 5,000 acres of land. Justin, who says he likes to think outside of the box of convention, added purebred Angus to their operations, and later yet, Speckle Park, after hearing local butchers rave about the meat quality and marbling of the Speckle Park cattle, regardless of how they were fed or finished.

And like Jordon Underhill, Justin was surprised at the efficiency of this breed of cattle. He talks about a piece of grass that his now 74-year-old dad has managed cattle on since he was 18. Justin was running 10 to 11 Angus cows on this native grass and later found he could run up to 15 to 18 Speckle Park cows on that same piece of land.

While Justin admits that grass management plays into efficiency, he says he can now graze 40 head per quarter section (160 acres), versus the previous 25 head per quarter. Their cows are turned out May 1st and come back in October.

**Some producers balk at the potential discounts for smaller framed Speckle Park-influence calves, he says. But the potential 5-10 cents that might be lost due to frame size of marketed calves is easily made up by the feed savings, he says.**

Justin started experimenting with the breed by incorporating Speckle Park herdsires and while he thought he might be compromising on calf size, his calves weaned at comparable weights to the previous Hereford and Angus-sired calves. They were just typically a lower framed calf. Some producers balk at the potential discounts for smaller framed Speckle Park-influence calves, he says. But the potential 5-10 cents that might be lost due to frame size of marketed calves is easily made up by the feed savings, he says.

The Johners' Speckle Park cows actually weigh as much as some of their Herefords.

"They are just lower to the ground and have more capacity," says Justin, who now uses combinations of Simmental and Speckle Park genetics in their commercial herd. Calves are sold directly off the farm in the fall and have been involved in many feed trials, from Ontario to Saskatchewan. While some Speckle Park have a tendency to finish too fast (at 1,100 – 1,200 lbs), he finds that the 50 per cent Speckle Park crosses finish at an ideal 1,500 – 1,600 lbs and what's more, they finish well on grass.

Many of his calves sold into Ontario in October are hanging by the end of May.

The Johners have selected for the Leptin gene for the past 10 years and have noticed a tremendous gain in efficiencies. The difference between those carrying the gene and those not, is demonstrated on their ranch, in cows thriving in cold temperatures versus those failing under the same conditions. Those with the Leptin gene also thrive better in extreme heat.

The Leptin gene is believed to positively influence fat deposition, weaning weight, feed efficiency, milk production, meat quality and cow longevity.



Justin Johner and wife Amber and children Casey, Tate and Tess



Justin explains that because there is little to no outcross opportunities in the Speckle Park breed, breeders must carefully match complimentary pedigrees. His family takes advantage of embryo transfer in order to multiply the outstanding females. And this contributes to consistency within the herd which is also a big selling point.

Spoken like a life-long, experienced cow man, Justin says every breed has longevity within it and that longevity can also be attributed to management. Johners make culling decisions based on udder quality and feet, colour consistency and beef quality. Last year, they kept back 35 purebred heifers and know they will ultimately breed just 20 of them. Of those 20, Justin says they'll likely end up with 8 of them in a few years' time and those eight are the kind that will contribute to longevity of the herd in the long run.

That being said, Justin adds that he has 10 W-model cows that will calve this year and one X-model that was flushed last year and will calve again this year.

The Johners currently hold a Private Treaty Speckle Park Bull Sale annually. And while quite humble in conversation, have accumulated multiple national championships over 50 years of attending Agribition and other local shows. Their genetics are marketed nationally and internationally.

Justin underlines that his Speckle Park herd measures up to any other good beef cows he's had the opportunity to work with to-date, and then some.

**D**ustin McAleer of McAleer Ranching, south of Unity, Saskatchewan, is the fourth generation of McAleers running a century-old operation with his parents Curtis and Terri and his wife Brittany and two-year-old son Clayton. His home place is where his mother's grandfather ranched. The only land that is cultivated there is land used to grow green feed. Otherwise, it is a grass, hay and cattle operation running purebred Speckle Park, purebred Red Angus and a commercial herd. They host the Integrity Speckle Park Bull Sale annually at the end of March and their Red Angus bulls are sold out of the yard in February & March by private treaty. They also host a purebred Speckle Park female sale from the ranch in the first week of December via DLMS.

It was Dustin that introduced Speckled Park cattle to the ranch in 2012 and he did so to improve ranch efficiencies but also to profit from the breed's fertility, mothering and milking ability.

What ultimately "wowed" Dustin was the natural feed efficiency they added to the commercial herd. He learned quickly that he could run more cows per acre.

What surprised him about the breed was what he describes as incredible calf vigour at calving. This inevitably translates to more live calves per cow. Calving assistance is rare, says Dustin, who adds that they assist less than one per cent of the cows calving.



Dustin McAleer and wife Brittany and son Clayton

And some of his best calves are out of 13-year-old cows, he says, adding that he also has some 14 and 16-year-olds calving this year. This underlines the longevity or "stayability" of his cows, much like the experience of his fellow breeders, above. Dustin says he continues to use a 10-year-old herd bull and another seven-year-old bull, which are still breeding efficiently for them for two breeding seasons a year and neither have these bulls' attitudes gone sour, he says.

The cowherd was previously Charolais-Hereford and Simmental-Angus based. But now Dustin says they are running smaller cows without sacrificing weaned calf weights. In some cases, he even has heavier weaning weights.

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"Before introducing Speckle Park, we were feeding our cowherd 2.4 per cent of their bodyweight in hay [pre-calving]," says Dustin. "We are now feeding two per cent of their bodyweight in dry matter in a bale grazing feeding system."

Dustin explains that this forage is 60 per cent hay and 40 per cent barley or pea straw, which is their pre-calving feed. The hay is an alfalfa-Brome mix. The waste is included in the two per cent that gets fed to them. Post calving, they take out the straw.

The purebred herd calves from January 15 to March 15, while the commercial herd calves on grass in April. But even the purebreds go back to bale grazing after calving through the winter months.

The Underhill, Johner and McAleer cows speak for themselves.

"This is not a hobby breed," says Justin Johner. "I see so much good in these cattle."