FUNDAÇÃO UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MATO GROSSO DO SUL
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM CIÊNCIAS VETERINÁRIAS
CURSO DE MESTRADO

FATORES QUE INFLUENCIAM AS TAXAS DE PRENHEZ E PERDA GESTACIONAL EM FÊMEAS NELORE SUBMETIDAS À INSEMINAÇÃO ARTIFICIAL EM TEMPO FIXO NO BRASIL

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FACTORS INFLUENCING PREGNANCY PER ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION (AI) AND PREGNANY LOSS IN NELORE FEMALES SUBJECTED TO TIMED-AI IN BRAZIL

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Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Veterinárias da Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, como requisito à obtenção do título de Mestre em Ciências Veterinárias.

Campo Grande – MS
2023

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RESUMO

SILVA, L. G. Fatores que influenciam a taxa de prenhez e mortalidade embrionária em fêmeas Nelore submetidas à inseminação artificial em tempo fixo no Brasil. 2023. MESTRADO – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Veterinárias. Faculdade de Medicina Veterinária e Zootecnia, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, Campo Grande, MS, 2023

A inseminação artificial no Brasil vem evoluindo com aumento o de vacas inseminadas com taxa de prenhez média esperada de 50%, e para que a cadeia seja produtiva, é desejável que a matriz entregue um bezerro ao ano, tornando aquela matriz que perdeu o bezerro um animal com custo alto na propriedade. Porém, a fertilidade bovina é um processo multifatorial, dependente da qualidade do sêmen, fertilidade da fêmea, manejo, tempo preciso, anestro pós-parto e escores de condição corporal (ECC). Outro ponto importante, alguns estudos com avaliação de perdas gestacionais, observaram grande variação nos índices e que foram também influenciados pela raça, ECC, categoria, fazenda, porém são poucas fazendas que avaliam e conseguimos identificar as perdas somente após o primeiro diagnóstico de gestação, com aproximadamente 30 dias. Uma maior compreensão dos fatores que influenciam a fertilidade é essencial para melhorar as taxas de prenhez e reduzir a ocorrência de mortalidade embrionária em rebanhos de corte. O objetivo do presente estudo foi avaliar dados retrospectivos de gestação por inseminação artificial (P/IA) e perda de gestação em fêmeas Nelore submetidas à IATF em tempo fixo (IATF) no Brasil. Foram analisados dados de 40.104 IATF coletados em seis estações reprodutivas (2016 a 2022) e os efeitos da categoria do animal (por exemplo, classificação baseada em idade e paridade), fazenda, mês de parto, pai, raça do pai (Nelore vs Angus). Foram avaliados a expressão de estro na IATF, o temperamento dos animais e o ECC. P/IA e perda de gestação foram afetados (P < 0,001) pela categoria da matriz. Houve também efeito da fazenda (P = 0,0013) sobre P/IA e perda de prenhez (P = 0,001), pois P/IA variou de 49,28% e 55,58% e perda de prenhez de 3,37% a 6,89% nos rebanhos avaliados. O mês do parto também afetou (P < 0,001) o P/IA e foi maior para vacas que emprenharam no início da estação reprodutiva anterior. Animais mais calmos, apresentando menores escores de velocidade na saída do corredor após a IATF, obtiveram maior P/AI (P < 0,001). O menor ECC na IATF foi associado (P < 0,001) ao aumento da perda gestacional, e o ganho do ECC após a IA foi associado (P < 0,001) à redução das taxas de mortalidade embrionária. Houve um efeito importante (P < 0,001) do touro no P/IA e na perda de prenhez, pois o P/IA variou de 11 a 79%, e a mortalidade embrionária de 0 a 40% para os touros utilizados no estudo, destacando a importância da fertilidade do touro no sucesso geral da gestação. Os resultados do presente estudo reforçam categoria dos animais, o ECC no início do protocolo de IATF, o ganho do ECC após a IA, a expressão do estro na IATF, o touro e o mês do parto são fatores importantes que influenciam a P/IA e taxas de mortalidade embrionária em rebanhos de corte.

Palavras-chave: bovino, fertilidade, IATF, perdas gestacionais

ABSTRACT

Artificial insemination in Brazil has been evolving with an increase in inseminated cows with an expected average pregnancy rate of 50% and for the chain to be productive, it is desirable that the mother delivers one calf per year, with the mother who lost the calf a high cost on the property. However, bovine fertility is a multifactorial process, counting on semen quality, female fertility, management, precise timing, postpartum anestrus and BCS. On the other hand, semen fertility, often neglected, must be considered, due to the great impact it can have on pregnancy rates. On another important point, some studies evaluating pregnancy losses observed great variation in rates and were also influenced by breed, BCS, category, farm, but there are few farms that evaluate and we were able to identify losses only after the first diagnosis of pregnancy, with approximately 30 days. A greater understanding of the factors that influence fertility is essential to improve pregnancy rates and reduce the occurrence of embryonic mortality in beef herds. The objective of the current study was to evaluate retrospective data of pregnancy per artificial insemination (P/AI) and pregnancy loss in Nelore females subjected to timed-AI (TAI) in Brazil. Data from 40,104 TAI collected from six breeding seasons (2016 to 2022) were analyzed, and the effects of animal category (e.g., classification based on age and parity), farm, month of parturition, sire, sire breed (Nelore vs Angus), estrus expression at TAI, animal temperament, and body condition scores (BCS) were evaluated. P/AI and pregnancy loss were affected ($P < 0.001$) by animal category. There was also an effect of farm ($P = 0.0013$) on P/AI and pregnancy loss ($P = 0.001$), as P/AI ranged from 49.28% and 55.58% and pregnancy loss from 3.37% to 6.89% across the herds evaluated. Month of parturition also affected ($P < 0.001$) P/AI and was higher for cows that became pregnant at the beginning of the previous breeding season. Calmer animals, presenting lower velocity scores while exiting the chute following TAI, achieved higher P/AI ($P < 0.001$). Lower BCS at TAI was associated ($P < 0.001$) with increased pregnancy loss, and BCS gain following AI was associated ($P < 0.001$) with reduced rates of embryonic mortality. There was a major effect ($P < 0.001$) of sire on P/AI and pregnancy loss, as P/AI ranged from 11 to 79%, and embryonic mortality from 0 to 40% for the bulls used in the study, highlighting the importance of the sire fertility on overall pregnancy success. Results from the current study reinforce the idea that animal category, BCS at the onset of estrous synchronization, BCS gain following AI, estrus expression at TAI, sire, and month of parturition are important factors influencing P/AI and rates of embryonic mortality in beef herds.

Keywords: cattle, fertility, FTAI, pregnancy losses.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

A inseminação artificial no Brasil vem evoluindo com aumento de vacas inseminadas, alcançando em 2021, aproximadamente 27 milhões de protocolos comercializados (Baruselli, 2022). Em relação à técnica de IATF, a taxa de prenhez média esperada é próxima a 50%. A fertilidade bovina é um processo multifatorial, contando com qualidade do sêmen, fertilidade da fêmea, manejo adequado do rebanho e tempo preciso ao usar a inseminação artificial (IA).

Os fatores inerentes à fêmea, salienta-se o anestro pós-parto e a baixa condição corporal no início dos protocolos. Por outro lado, a fertilidade do sêmen, muitas vezes negligenciada, deve ser considerada, pelo grande impacto que pode promover nas taxas de prenhez.

Em outro ponto importante, alguns estudos com avaliação de perdas gestacionais, observaram grande variação nos índices (3,3%-32,3%), que foram também influenciados pela raça, ECC, categoria, fazenda (REESE et al., 2019). Vale ressaltar que este é um índice difícil de ser avaliado rotineiramente, devido ao aumento de manejo nas propriedades, porém muito impactante na eficiência reprodutiva do rebanho.

Bamber et al. (2009), estimaram a herdabilidade e variabilidade genética de perdas gestacionais e a variação do valor genético dos efeitos embrionários foi três vezes superior a variação do valor genético dos efeitos maternos, indicando que, do ponto de vista genético, a capacidade de sobrevivência do embrião tem um efeito maior na perda da gestação do que a capacidade da vaca de manter a prenhez.

O uso da ultrassonografia pode ser uma ferramenta de auxílio na avaliação de perdas gestacionais, porém suas conclusões são certamente mais demoradas devido ao diagnóstico inicial ser realizado com 30 dias (DISKIN et al., 2016).

Portanto, é fundamental desenvolver ferramentas para conhecer a relação da prenhez de perdas gestacionais com a paternidade, sobretudo em bovinos Nelore jovens, com genética superior, que não apresentam informações suficientes para predizer taxas de prenhez e morte embrionária. Dessa forma, otimizando a utilização desses touros nos programas de seleção e acasalamento que utilizam a inseminação artificial ou IATF.

2 REVISÃO DE LITERATURA

Para que a cadeia produtiva da bovinocultura de corte proporcione bons retornos econômicos para o produtor, o desempenho reprodutivo é um dos principais fatores (SANTOS et al., 2009) associado ao elevado índice de produção (VASCONCELOS E MENEGHETTI, 2006).

Para o aumento produtivo, é desejável que cada vaca produza um bezerro por ano, diminuindo o intervalo entre partos e aumentando o número de vacas prenhes no início da estação de monta (MORAES et al, 2001). Uma vaca que não produz um bezerro ao ano devido a perda gestacional ou mortalidade neonatal, o custo médio de produção se torna uma despesa sem retorno (JUNQUEIRA E ALFIERI, 2006; REESE, et al 2019)

2.1 Taxa de prenhez de touros

As taxas de prenhez na IATF são dependentes de diversos fatores relacionados a matriz, ao ambiente e ao touro (THUNDATHIL et al., 2016). Entre os principais fatores podemos destacar o escore de condição corporal da matriz (valor 3 é ideal numa escala de 1-5), a expressão do cio e a taxa de concepção do touro, podendo este, ainda ter efeitos da partida utilizada no momento da IATF (MARTINI et al., 2022)

Exames andrológicos e avaliação do sêmen congelado identificam touros grosseiramente anormais e servem de controle, mas existem touros que se mostram bons nos exames e com classificações satisfatórias e seus índices são ruins, levando a questões genômicas envolvidas. Isso mostra a importância de identificar marcadores moleculares para fertilidade, onde poderíamos eliminar os touros ou seu sêmen ou até mesmo pensar em soluções para preservar sua fertilidade (THUNDATHIL et al., 2016).

2.2 Efeitos genéticos na fertilidade

Utilizando touros com características para altas taxas de mortalidade embrionária, Ortega et al. (2018) identificaram que estes bovinos apresentam problemas durante a fertilização, implantação e até mesmo durante a embriogênese, pensando em fatores envolvendo o genoma dos animais.

Capra et al. (2017), identificou a presença de alguns miRNAs expressos de forma diferentes de acordo com a motilidade espermática. Esses miRNAs estão associados a à apoptose celular, potencial de membrana mitocondrial e alteração da espermatogênese e isso afeta diretamente sua fertilidade.

Hermisdorff et al. (2021), destacaram a importância de estudos no cromossomo x, pois identificou genes que indicam baixa fertilidade em touros que também são presentes em vacas na mesma região com variâncias genéticas maiores que 1%.

Nogueira et al. (2022) encontraram uma mutação em touro da raça Angus que apresenta defeitos na formação da manchete, levando a formação de espermatozoides com defeitos e consequentemente baixa fertilidade. Além disso, essa mutação pode ser passada pelo gameta e quando acasalado com fêmeas portadoras do mesmo alelo, podem comprometer o desenvolvimento embrionário.

Ao avaliar características fenotípicas relacionadas com fertilidade de touros, Carvalho Filho et al., (2020), verificaram uma alta correlação entre perímetro escrotal e qualidade seminal, o que acarreta em animais de alta fertilidade. E perímetro escrotal foi uma característica de alta herdabilidade e sua correlação com as características seminais foi maior do a morfologia e características visuais dos touros. Motilidade e morfologia espermática também são características com altas correlações genéticas para fertilidade (Butler et al., 2020)

De acordo com Taylor et al. (2018) poucos polimorfismos específicos estão associados a fertilidade e menos ainda a perdas gestacionais, porém sabemos que existem e podemos utilizar como ferramenta para seleção. Ainda salienta sobre o uso de biomarcadores como citometria ou imagens para facilitar e identificar as causas genômicas de formas visuais.

2.3 Perdas Gestacionais

A morte embrionária pode acarretar prejuízos econômicos significativos para os produtores em relação à produção de ruminantes, pois altas taxas de concepção vêm acompanhadas de perdas gestacionais, diminuindo assim o número de bezerros nascidos na propriedade (DISKIN et al., 2016). Ayalon (1978) publicou uma das primeiras revisões sobre perdas gestacionais, a partir de então poucos trabalhos foram executados a fim de revisar esse conteúdo de extrema importância para a produção pecuária.

Denomina-se como morte embrionária precoce aquelas ocorridas entre a concepção até 24 dias de gestação, depois até 50 dias como morte embrionária tardia e aquelas ocorridas após 50 dias como aborto e considera-se taxas aceitáveis de até 5% no geral da produção (Santos et al., 2004).

A morte embrionária precoce é mais variável devido ao menor número de avaliações, que normalmente ocorrem no diagnóstico de gestação com 30 dias (DISKIN et al., 2016). Já a morte fetal, por ser de mais fácil avaliação, mais conhecida, e pode ocorrer devido a mutações genéticas, irreconhecimento fetal, insuficiência placentária ou algum tipo de doença (POPE, 1988; FARIN et al., 2006; DISKIN E MORRIS, 2008; CHENG et al., 2016; POHLER et al., 2016; ABDALLA et al., 2017).

Os valores das perdas gestacionais, destacados por Barbosa et al. (2006), afirmam que a mortalidade embrionária precoce pode chegar até 40% e é o principal momento da perda gestacional. Reese et al (2019) destacaram a ausência de estudos que comprovem quais os principais fatores que estão ocasionando essas perdas gestacionais de forma fidedigna.

Pensando nessas taxas aceitáveis para perdas gestacionais sem atrapalhar o desempenho produtivo do rebanho, Reese et al. (2019) identificaram em sua meta-análise uma perda gestacional total de 4.9%, com valor maior para as novilhas (8.1%), seguindo das primíparas (5.4%) e multíparas (5.1%).

Pessoa et al. (2012) selecionou 658 matrizes sendo 283 Multíparas, 91 primíparas e 284 nulíparas, de bom ECC e com atividade ovariana, realizando um diagnóstico de gestação aos 30 dias e outro como confirmação aos 90 dias após a IATF. Obteve os resultados de 5,30% para multíparas, 3,30% para primíparas e 5,99% para nulíparas.

Fernandez-Novo et al. (2020), fizeram um estudo retrospectivo para a prevalência de perdas gestacionais com 19.437 vacas Holandesas em 3 anos. Os fatores estação, protocolo de IA de tempo fixo, tempo de lactação, touro, inseminador ou tipo de sêmen não foram significativamente associadas com as taxas de perdas gestacionais. Havendo diferença apenas para categoria com primíparas (10,8%) e multíparas (15,3%) maior do que novilhas (6,9%), IATF obtendo um valor menor que IA (IA 12,7 vs. IATF 11,9%) e o primeiro serviço perdendo mais que o segundo (IATF 13,8% vs. RESSINC 11,2).

2.4 A matriz nas perdas gestacionais

O escore de condição corporal (ECC) da matriz, que quando baixo apresenta maiores perdas gestacionais, embriões de baixa qualidade e muitos deles imaturos (BRIDGES et al., 2012; PERRY et al., 2013; KRUSE et al., 2017), sendo um fator crítico na redução da fertilidade de vacas primíparas (DeROUEN et al., 1994; CICCIOLI et al., 2003) e é uma variável correlacionada com taxas de prenhez (RICHARDSON et al., 2016).

A maturidade fisiológica de um folículo dominante na indução ovulação pode afetar manutenção da gestação (POHLER et al., 2012), sendo assim hormônios como o estradiol contribui para manutenção da gestação com a preparação do ambiente uterino (PERRY et al., 2007) e a progesterona como principal hormônio regulador dessa gestação (BRIDGES et al., 2010).

A progesterona é responsável por manter a prenhez, com isso, baixas concentrações séricas resultam num ambiente uterino incapaz de manter o embrião (STONE et al., 1978, ZELINSKI et al., 1982; ING E TORNESI 1997; FIELDS et al., 2012) e a suplementação após a inseminação pode ser uma alternativa para acréscimo de até 5% nas taxas de prenhez de vacas que apresentam esse déficit (MANN E LAMMING, 1999).

2.5 Efeitos genômicos nas perdas gestacionais

No momento que o reconhecimento materno e a proteção do embrião contra o sistema imunológico materno ocorrem, são os fatores mais críticos na manutenção gestacional (ROBERTS E SCHALUE-FRANCIS, 1990; BAUERSACHS E WOLF, 2013; YANG et al., 2014). Porém esse período ainda é pouco avaliado devido ao tempo gestacional, o diagnóstico de gestação ocorre com 30 dias e os métodos de diagnósticos mais precoces envolvem genes estimulados por interferon e tornam inviável a avaliação (GREEN et al., 2010; PUGLIESI et al.,2014, DISKIN et al., 2016).

Fatores genéticos podem estar associados durante esse período inicial da gestação. Segundo Bamber et al. (2009), a herdabilidade e variabilidade genética de perdas gestacionais tem prevalência geral de 14,4%, com o modelo pai-avô materno produzindo uma herdabilidade para efeito direto de 0,489 (PSD = 0,221) e para efeitos maternos de 0,166 (PSD = 0,113). Neste estudo, a variação do valor genético dos efeitos embrionários foi três vezes a variação do valor genético dos efeitos maternos, indicando que, no nível dos valores genéticos, a capacidade de sobrevivência do embrião tem um efeito maior na perda gestacional do que a capacidade da vaca de manter a prenhez.

Franco et al. (2018) utilizou 9 diferentes touros, sendo 3 da raça Nelore e 6 Angus, dividindo-os em grupos de alta perda embrionária e baixa perda embrionária. Após isso inseminou em dois lotes, e ao avaliar a taxa de prenhez e perda gestacional verificaram que os touros da Raça Nelore apresentavam maior taxa de prenhez e maior taxa de perda gestacional e aqueles touros que apresentavam altas taxas de perdas gestacionais continuaram com essa característica nessa estação de monta.

Numa análise genômica integrativa para entender a base genética e biológica da perda de prenhez em gado leiteiro e favorecer a taxa de prenhez por meio de marcadores moleculares, SIGDE et al. (2021), identificaram sete regiões genômicas ligadas a crescimento feto-placentário, modulação imune, sinalização de cálcio, vascularização e organogênese que explicaram mais de 0,5% das variações genéticas aditivas para perda fetal.

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Artigo Submetido e aceito após revisões na Revista Animal Reproduction Science

4. FACTORS INFLUENCING PREGNANCY PER ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION (AI) AND EMBRYONIC MORTALITY IN NELORE FEMALES SUBJECTED TO TIMED-AI IN BRAZIL

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4.1 Abstract

A greater understanding of factors influencing fertility is essential to improve pregnancy rates and reduce the occurrence of embryonic mortality in beef herds. The objective of the current study was to evaluate retrospective data of pregnancy per artificial insemination (P/AI) and pregnancy loss in Nelore females subjected to timed-AI (TAI) in Brazil. Data from 40,104 TAI collected from six breeding seasons (2016 to 2022) were analyzed, and the effects of animal category (e.g., classification based on age and parity), farm, month of parturition, sire, sire breed (Nelore vs Angus), estrus expression at TAI, animal temperament, and body condition scores (BCS) were evaluated. P/AI and pregnancy loss were affected ($P < 0.001$) by animal category. There was also an effect of farm ($P = 0.0013$) on P/AI and pregnancy loss ($P = 0.001$), as P/AI ranged from 49.28% and 55.58% and pregnancy loss from 3.37% to 6.89% across the herds evaluated. Month of parturition also affected ($P < 0.001$) P/AI and was higher for cows that became pregnant at the beginning of the previous breeding season. Calmer animals, presenting lower velocity scores while exiting the chute following TAI, achieved higher P/AI ($P < 0.001$). Lower BCS at TAI was associated ($P < 0.001$) with increased pregnancy loss, and BCS gain following AI was associated

($P < 0.001$) with reduced rates of embryonic mortality. There was a major effect ($P < 0.001$) of sire on P/AI and pregnancy loss, as P/AI ranged from 11 to 79%, and embryonic mortality from 0 to 40% for the bulls used in the study, highlighting the importance of the sire fertility on overall pregnancy success. Results from the current study reinforce the idea that animal age and parity at the beginning of the breeding season, BCS at the onset of estrous synchronization, BCS gain following AI, estrus expression at TAI, sire, and month of parturition are important factors influencing P/AI and rates of embryonic mortality in beef herds.

Keywords: Embryonic loss; Bos indicus; pregnancy rate.

4.2 Introduction

The number of cows subjected to timed-artificial insemination (TAI) in Brazil is increasing and has reached approximately 27 million in 2021 (Baruselli et al., 2022). The expected pregnancy rates of herds undergoing TAI is close to 50% in Brazil and is significantly affected by sire, female fertility, herd management, estrus expression at TAI, rates of embryonic loss, and compliance during the implementation of TAI protocols (Nogueira et al., 2019; Reese et al., 2020). The paternal influence on pregnancy success (Ortega et al., 2018; Sanches et al., 2023) and pregnancy loss (Franco et al., 2018) are often overlooked, despite the substantial impact sires can exert on breeding outcomes.

Among factors inherent to the female that influence herd reproductive performance, resumption of postpartum fertility along with body condition scores (BCS) at the onset of estrous synchronization plays a major role in the success rates of TAI programs (Kim et al., 2023; D'Occhio et al., 2019). Reduced BCS and inadequate nutrition have been associated with diminished pregnancy rates, increased pregnancy loss, and the development of low-quality embryos (Richardson et al., 2016, Kruse et al., 2017, Bridges et al., 2012; Ciccioli et al., 2003) underscoring the importance of maintaining appropriate BCS levels at calving and ensuring proper postpartum nutrition to optimize fertility outcomes. Animal temperament and behavior, independently of breed (Bos t. taurus and Bos t. indicus) have also been shown to affect reproductive outcomes in beef cattle (Cooke et al., 2009, Cooke et al, 2011).

While the success rate of fertilization in beef cattle can be as high as 90%, embryonic mortality following conception is especially high during the first month of gestation (Maurer and Chenault, 1983; Santos et al., 2004; Diskin and Kenny, 2016). In the context of embryonic and fetal losses in cattle, early embryonic mortality has been defined as those occurring between conception and day 24 of gestation, late embryonic losses between days 25 and 50, and fetal losses manifesting after day 50 of pregnancy (Santos et al., 2004). Regarding rates of pregnancy loss in beef herds, Reese et al. (2020) reported in a recent meta-analysis that 50% of pregnancy failure occurred prior to day 16, around 15.5% from days 16 and 32, and less than 6% after the first month of gestation. Of note, cow breed, parity, and breeding method were associated with early or late rates of embryonic/fetal losses.

The objective of the current study was to identify factors influencing pregnancy rate and embryonic mortality in Nelore heifers and cows subjected to TAI in central-west Brazil.

4.3 Material and Methods

4.3.1 Animals

Data was collected from six herds located in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. All farms perform a complete cycle with breeding, rearing, and finishing. All animal procedures used were approved by the Committee of Ethics and Animal Use of Embrapa under the protocol number (Ceua Protocol N° 006/2022).

All animals enrolled in the study were maintained on pasture with *Urochloa humidicola* and *Urochloa brizantha* grass and received mineral supplementation and ad libitum water. Vaccination for foot-and-mouth disease, and against respiratory and reproductive diseases were administered before the initiation of TAI protocols.

The experiment included 40,104 Nelore females from six breeding seasons expanding from 2016 to 2022. Cows and heifers enrolled in the study were categorized based on age and parity at the start of the breeding season into 9 distinct categories (1) precocious heifer, (2) precocious primiparous, (3) precocious secondiparous, (4) precocious multiparous, (5) conventional heifer, (6) conventional primiparous, (7) conventional secondiparous, (8) conventional multiparous, and (9) non-lactating. The description of each category is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of cows and heifers according to age and parity.

Category	Description
Precocious Heifer	Heifers with breeding starting up at 15 months of age
Precocious Primiparous	Cows from precocious heifers with first calf
Precocious Secondiparous	Cows from precocious heifers after their second calf
Precocious Multiparous	Cows from precocious heifers with more than two offspring
Conventional Heifer	Heifers with breeding starting at 15 to 26 months of age
Conventional Primiparous	Cows from conventional heifers with first calf
Conventional Secondiparous	Cows from conventional heifers after their second calf
Conventional Multiparous	Cows from conventional heifers with more than two offspring
Non-lactating	Cow without any offspring at the time of TAI

4.3.2 Description of the breeding seasons, TAI programs, and Body Condition Scoring

All breeding seasons began in November and ended in February, lasting 120 days. For primiparous, secondiparous, and multiparous categories (precocious and conventional), cows were subjected to TAI protocols after at least 30 days postpartum following the calving season (July-December).

The TAI protocols utilized (Figures 1, 2, and 3) were based on Meneghetti et al. (2009). For multiparous, primiparous, and secondiparous cows [precocious and conventional] (Figure 1), on the first day of the protocol (D-0), cows received 2 mg (IM) of estradiol benzoate (Gonadiol®; Zoetis, São Paulo, SP, Brazil) and an intravaginal progesterone insert (CIDR ®, 1.9 g progesterone; Zoetis). On D9, progesterone inserts were removed and injections of 0.6 mg (IM) of estradiol cypionate (ECP®, Zoetis, Brazil), 12.5 mg (IM) of PGF2α (Lutalyse®; Zoetis), and 300 IU (IM) of eCG (Novormon®; Zoetis) were administered. Non-lactating cows received the same protocol, but with no application of ECG at P4 device removal. Furthermore, at the time of intravaginal devices removal on D9, all dams were painted in the sacrum-caudal region with marker sticks (Raidl-Maxi; RAIDEX GmbH, Dettingen/Erms, Germany) to aid in the visual detection of estrus. Cows were inseminated on D11, 48h after implant removal. At the time of insemination, the occurrence of standing heat was evaluated based on the visual appearance of the estrus patches. Heat was scored as (1) all ink present (no heat); (2) partial removal of the ink (low heat); (3) all ink removed (high-intensity heat). For analysis, scores 2 and 3 were considered evidence of standing heat (Nogueira et al. 2019). Pregnancy diagnoses were conducted on days 30 and 150 following breeding.

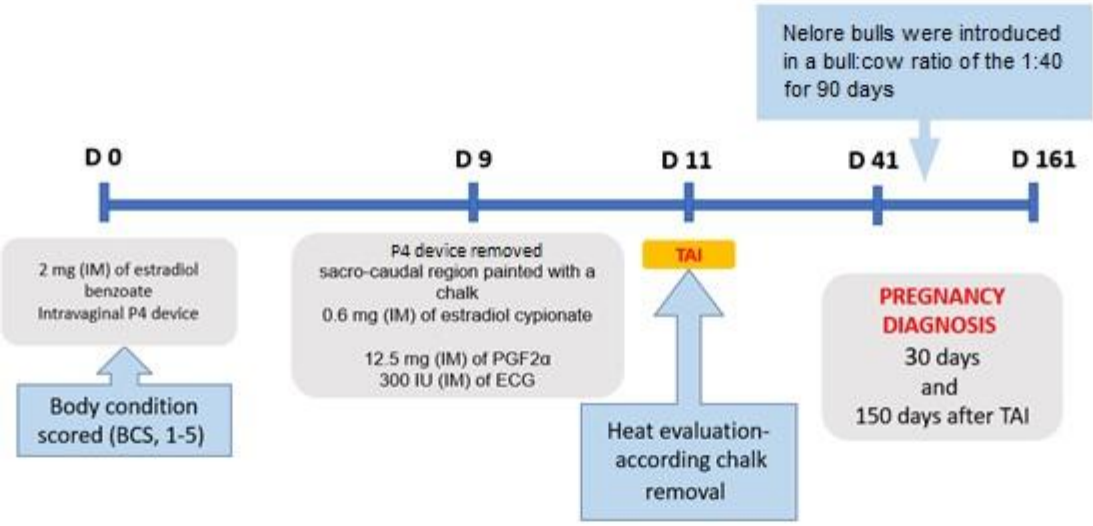

Figure 1. Artificial insemination protocol used for multiparous cows. On day (D0), multiparous cows received 2 mg (IM) of estradiol benzoate (Gonadiol®; Zoetis, São Paulo, SP, Brazil) and an intravaginal progesterone insert (CIDR ®, 1.9 g progesterone; Zoetis). Body condition was scored on D0. On D9, progesterone inserts were removed and injections of 0.6 mg (IM) of estradiol cypionate (ECP®, Zoetis, Brazil), 12.5 mg (IM) of PGF2α (Lutalyse®; Zoetis), and 300 IU (IM) of ECG (Novormon®; Zoetis) were administered. Furthermore, on D9, cows were painted in the sacrum-caudal region with a marker stick (Raidl-Maxi; RAIDEX GmbH, Dettingen/Erms, Germany) to aid on visual detection of estrus. On day 11 (D11) multiparous cows were examined for chalk removal (e.g., as an indication of standing estrus) and AI performed. Pregnancy diagnoses were conducted on days 30 and 150 following breeding.

For conventional heifers (Figure 2) cyclicity was induced (prior to the initiation of the 11-day synch program) with an injection of 150 mg (I.M.) of P4 (Sincrogest ®, Ouro Fino, São Paulo, Brazil) on D-24, followed by 0,6 mg of estradiol cypionate on D-12. The induction protocol was followed by the 11-day synchronization program as described for the multiparous cows, with changes only in the dosage of estradiol benzoate on D0 (1 mg, IM) and eCG (200 IU, IM) on D9.

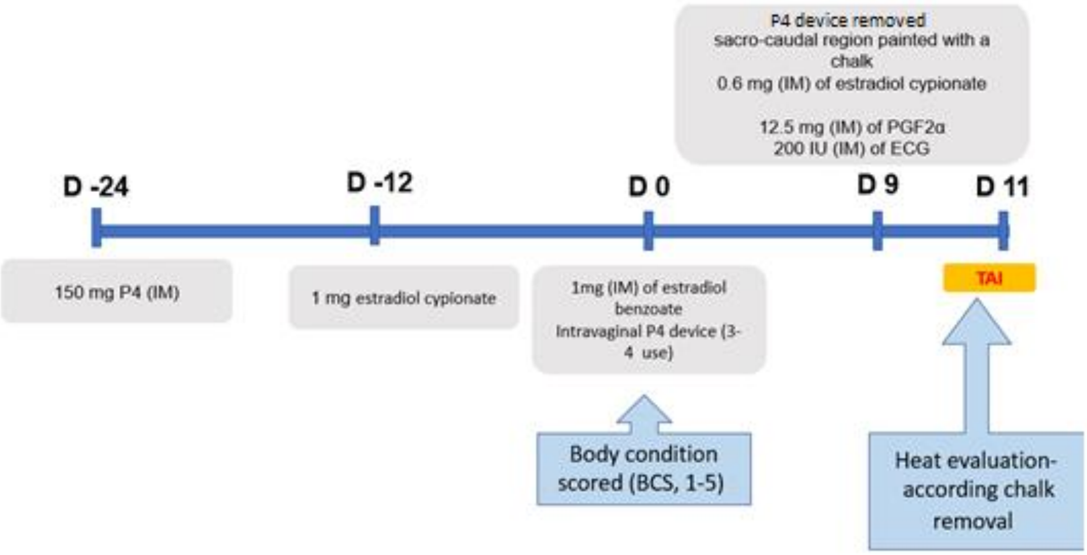

Figure 2. Artificial insemination (AI) protocol for heifers. Cyclicity was induced with an injection of 150 mg (I.M., Sincrogest ® - Ouro Fino, Brazil) of P4 on D-24, followed by 0,6 mg of estradiol cypionate on D-12. On day (D0), conventional heifers received 1 mg (IM) of estradiol benzoate (Gonadiol®; Zoetis, Brazil) and an intravaginal progesterone insert (CIDR ®, 1.9 g progesterone; Zoetis). Body condition was scored on D0. On D9, progesterone inserts were removed and injections of 0.6 mg (IM) of estradiol cypionate (ECP®, Zoetis, Brazil), 12.5 mg (IM) of PGF2α (Lutalyse®; Zoetis, Brazil), and 200 IU (IM) of ECG (Novormon®; Zoetis, Brazil) were administered. Furthermore, on D9, heifers were painted in the sacrum-caudal region with a marker stick (Raidl-Maxi; RAIDEX GmbH, Dettingen/Erms, Germany) to aid on visual detection of estrus. On day 11 (D11) conventional heifers were examined for chalk removal (e.g., as an indication of standing estrus) and AI performed.

For precocious heifers (Figure 3), induction of cyclicity was performed with oral administration of melengestrol acetate (MGA®, Zoetis, Brazil) from D-24 through D-12 at the dosage of 2.28mg/head/day. On D-10, precocious heifers received 0.6 mg of estradiol cypionate. The induction protocol was followed by the 11-day synchronization program as described for the conventional heifers.

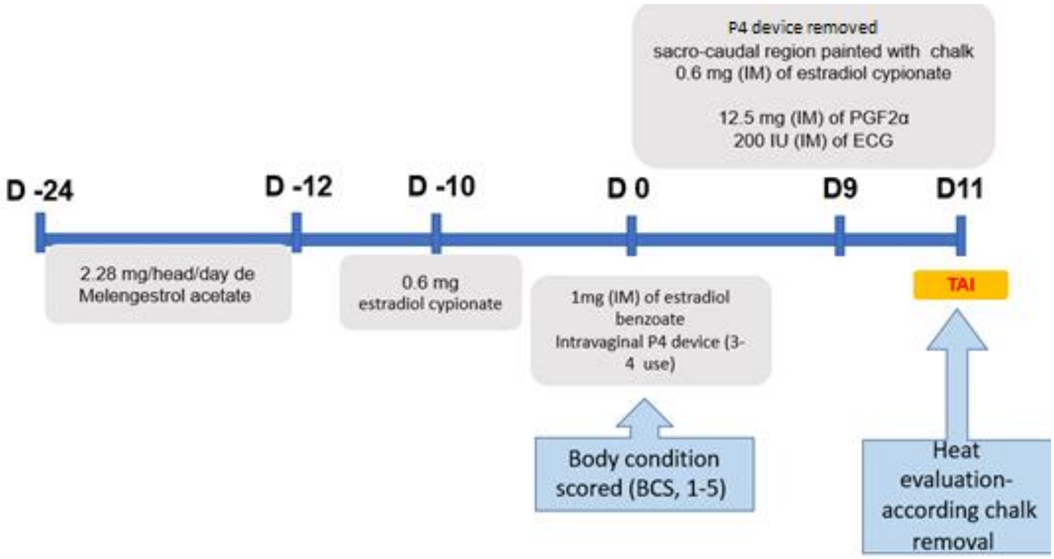

Figure 3. Artificial insemination (AI) protocol used to synchronize ovulation in precocious heifers. Induction of cyclicity was performed with oral administration of melengestrol acetate (MGA®, Zoetis, Brazil) from D-24 through D-12 at the dosage of 2.28mg/head/day. On D-10, precocious heifers received 0.6 mg of estradiol cypionate. On day (D0), heifers received 1 mg (IM) of estradiol benzoate (Gonadiol®; Zoetis, Brazil) and an intravaginal progesterone insert (CIDR ®, 1.9 g progesterone; Zoetis). Body condition was scored on D0. On D9, progesterone inserts were removed and injections of 0.6 mg (IM) of estradiol cypionate (ECP®, Zoetis, Brazil), 12.5 mg (IM) of PGF2α (Lutalyse®; Zoetis, Brazil), and 200 IU (IM) of ECG (Novormon®; Zoetis, Brazil) were administered. Furthermore, on D9, heifers were painted in the sacrum-caudal region with a marker stick (Raidl-Maxi; RAIDEX GmbH, Dettingen/Erms, Germany) to aid on visual detection of estrus. On day 11 (D11) heifers were examined for chalk removal (e.g., as an indication of standing estrus) and AI performed.

All animals enrolled in the study were scored on D0 by a trained technician for body condition (1 = emaciated and 5 = obese; 0.25-unit increments as described by Ferguson et al. 1994).

Angus (n=35) and Nelore (n=191) sires were used for breeding. All batches of semen selected underwent evaluation for motility and vigor, spermatic pathology, and thermoresistence test. All semen used was required to have a minimum of 30% motility and vigor 3 after thawing, with a minimum of 6 million viable spermatozoa presenting a maximum of 30% of sperm pathologies (Barth and Oko, 1989).

On the day of the AI, the speed which each animal exited the chute was evaluated by a trained technician performing only this role. The observed behavior of each animal was evaluated, and the speed which each animal exited the chute was recorded and classified as (1) walking, (2) trotting, or (3) running (Gomes da Silva et al., 2020).

The first pregnancy diagnosis was performed approximately 30 days after AI by ultrasonography (SD 2200, Mindray, China). Pregnant cows were sorted at this point to facilitate management. Approximately 7 days after insemination, Nelore bulls were turned in, maintaining a bull:cow ratio of 1:40. Bulls were kept with the cows until the end of the breeding season. Cows were re-evaluated by ultrasonography at 120 to 150 days after the first pregnancy diagnosis, to confirm pregnancy or detect pregnancy loss.

At the end of the breeding season, sires were classified based on average pregnancy rates as low- pregnancy rates equal or less than 39.9; average- pregnancy rates between 40% and 49.9%; high- pregnancy rates between 50% and 55.9%; and top- pregnancy rates equal or above 56%.

4.3.3 Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc.). The effects of animal category, farm, month of parturition, breed of sire, standing heat at TAI, and chute speed score were evaluated using generalized linear mixed models using the GLIMMIX procedure. Means were separated using the LSMEANS PDIFF option with Tukey's adjustment.

The relationship between pregnancy loss, BCS, and BCS gain from the beginning of the TAI protocol to the day of the pregnancy diagnosis was determined using linear regression models, and when significant ($P < 0.05$), a probability graph was generated using the REG procedure of SAS. Statistical significance was defined as $P \leq 0.05$ and statistical tendencies as $0.05 < P < 0.10$.

4.4 Results

The overall results of P/AI and pregnancy loss are summarized in Tables 2 and 3. Considering all the data collected, the average P/AI and pregnancy loss were 53.11% and 5.78%, respectively. P/AI was significantly ($P < 0.001$) affected by animal category. Precocious secondiparous (64.65%), precocious multiparous (60.00%), and multiparous (57.09%) had the highest P/AI, whereas precocious heifers (44.50%), precocious primiparous (46.43%) and conventional heifers (47.90%) had the lowest P/AI (Table 2).

Table 2. Pregnancy per artificial insemination (P/AI) and pregnancy loss according to female category and farm.

	P/AI (%)	Pregnancy loss(%)
Category (n)		
Heifer (7,348)	47.90[d]	5.03 [c]
Primiparous (8,181)	51.41 [bc]	7.11 [b]
Secondiparous (2,914)	56.59 [b]	6.44 [c]
Multiparous (17,151)	57.09 [ab]	4.93 [c]
Non-lactating (722)	49.45 [c]	7.19 [ab]
Precocious heifer (2,582)	44.50 [e]	7.11 [b]
Precocious Primiparous (812)	46.43 [d]	10.94 [a]
Precocious secondiparous (314)	64.65 [a]	8.13 [ab]
Precocious Multiparous (80)	60.00 [ab]	4.26 [c]
P	<0.001	<0.001
Farm (n)		
A (923)	55.58% [a]	4.71% [b]
B (8,570)	51.06% [b]	5.77% [b]
C (5,313)	55.51% [a]	4.44% [b]
D (416)	49.28% [b]	3.91% [b]
E (3,936)	54.17% [a]	3.37% [b]
F (20,946)	53.11% [a]	6.89% [a]
P	0.0013	<0.001

Rates of pregnancy loss were also affected by animal category ($P < 0.001$), with higher rates of pregnancy loss detected in precocious primiparous (10.94%), precocious secondiparous (8.13%), and non-lactating cows (7.19%), and the lowest rates of pregnancy loss was detected in precocious multiparous (4.26%), multiparous (4.93%), heifers (5.03%), and secondiparous (6.44%) cows.

There was an effect of farm ($P = 0.0013$) on P/AI. The average pregnancy rates ranged from 49.28% and 55.58% among the herds enrolled in the study. Regarding pregnancy loss, there was also a significant effect ($P = 0.001$) of farm on embryonic mortality, as rates of pregnancy loss varied from 3.37% to 6.89% across the herds evaluated.

Animals with a low chute speed score (e.g., walked out of the chute as opposed to ran) had higher ($P < 0.001$) P/IA (54.42%) than those who trotted

(52.19%) or ran (50.32%) out of the chute. However, the speed which animals exited the chute did not influence rates of pregnancy loss (P = 0.2558).

There was a significant effect (P < 0.001) of month of parturition on P/AI and pregnancy loss. Animals calving in July had the highest P/AI, whereas animals that calved in December (50.50%) or January (50.53%) had the lowest P/AI. Regarding the effect of month of parturition on embryonic mortality, pregnancy loss was highest in animals calving in December (14.29%), and lowest in animals calving in January (2.08%).

Table 3. Pregnancy per artificial insemination (P/AI) and pregnancy loss (%) according to month of parturition, sire breed, expression of estrus, and velocity score for exiting the chute.

	P/AI (%)	Pregnancy loss(%)
Parturition Month (n)		
JULY (165)	68.48% [a]	7.21% [b]
AUGUST (3,333)	57.67% [b]	5.90% [d]
SEPTEMBER (5,127)	56.33% [b]	5.55% [d]
OCTOBER (5,331)	55.00% [c]	6.01% [c]
NOVEMBER (4,286)	54.01% [c]	6.80% [c]
DECEMBER (1,705)	50.50% [d]	14.29% [a]
JANUARY (190)	50.53% [d]	2.08% [e]
P	<0.001	<0.001
Sire breed *(n)*		
ANGUS (9,089)	52.24%	5.31%
NELORE (30,988)	53.37%	5.92%
P	<0.001	0.6886
HEAT		
0	40.9%[b]	6.7 [a]
1	58.5%[a]	5.7 [b]
P	<0.001	0.030
Chute velocity score *(n)*		
1 (20,367)	54.42% [a]	5.43%
2 (6,611)	52.19% [b]	5.33%
3 (3,283)	50.32% [b]	4.78%
P	<0.001	0.2558

There was a significant effect of BCS at the onset of estrous synchronization on P/AI (P < 0.001) and pregnancy loss (P < 0.001). The probability of embryonic mortality decreased as BCS increased (Figure 4; P <

0.05). Interestingly, BCS gains during the subsequent 30 days following the first measurement were associated with a reduced probability of pregnancy loss (Figure 5; P < 0.05).

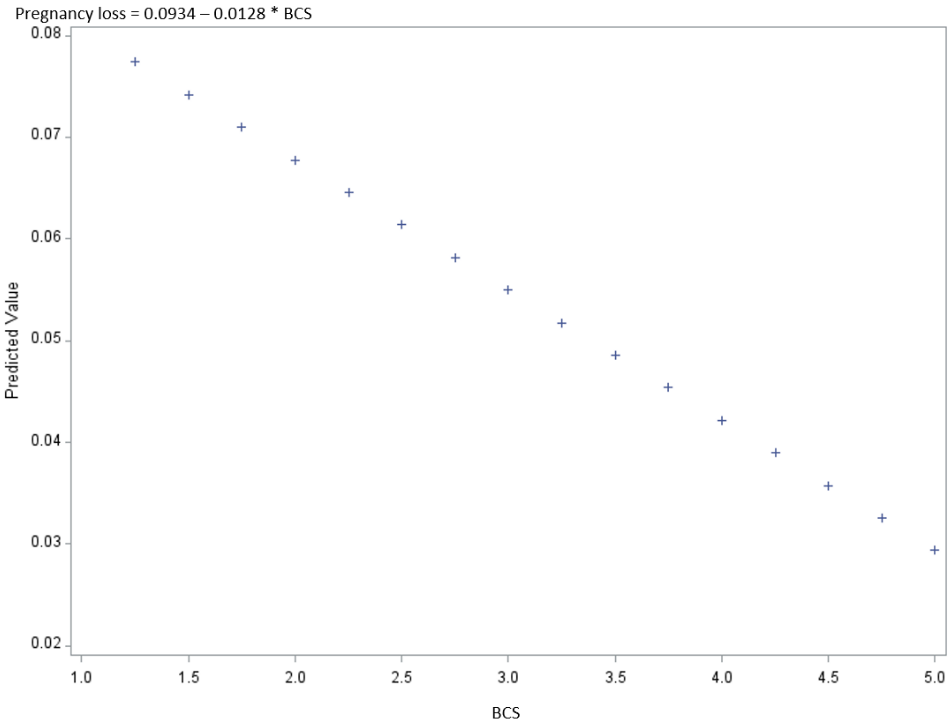

Figure 4. Association of pregnancy loss and body condition score (BCS) in Nelore females subjected to timed- artificial insemination (*P*<0.05).

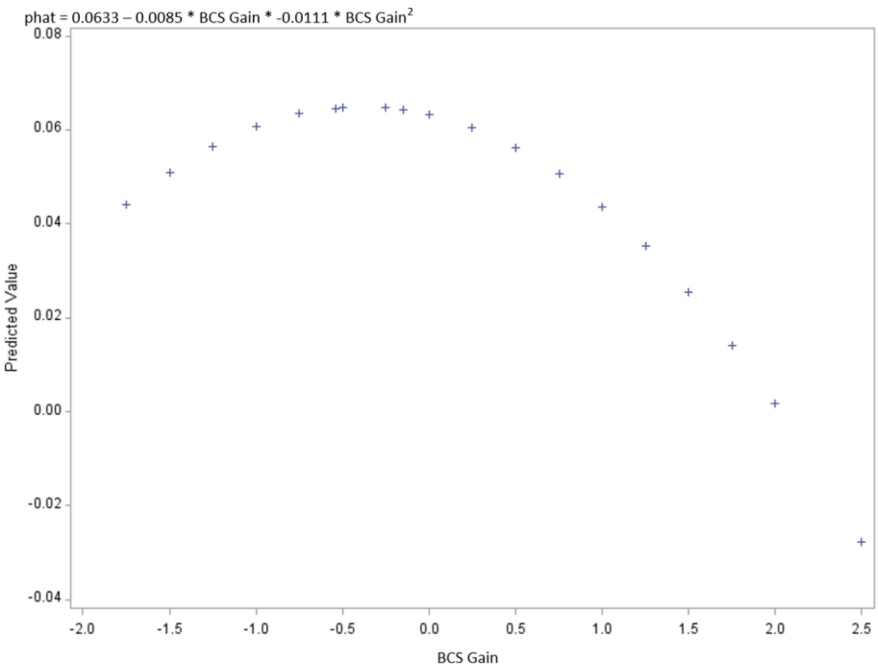

Figure 5. Pregnancy loss as a function of body condition score (BCS) gain during the period from the initiation of the timed- artificial insemination (TAI) protocol to the day of pregnancy diagnosis conducted 30 days following breeding in Nelore females (*P* < 0.05).

There was no association (P = 0.408) of sire classification based on fertility (e.g., P/AI at the end of the breeding season: low, average, high, and top) on rates of embryonic mortality (Figure 6). As expected, P/AI was significantly different (P > 0.001) among sires allocated to the distinct fertility classification (Figure 6).

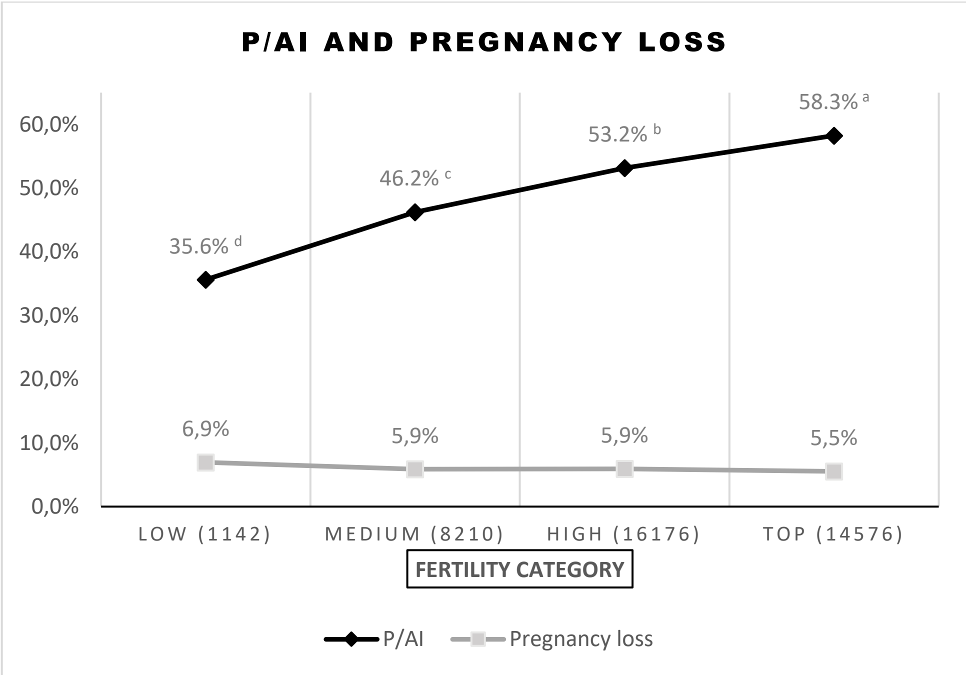

Figure 6. Pregnancy per artificial insemination (P/AI) and pregnancy loss according to sire fertility category. (P/AI, *P* < 0.001; Pregnancy loss, *P* = 0.408)

Regarding the breed of the sire used for AI, Nelore bulls had higher (P < 0.001) P/AI than Angus bulls, with a difference of 1.13% between them. However, the breed of the sire did not influence (P= 0.4089) the rates of pregnancy loss. Furthermore, there was an effect (P<0.001) of sire on P/AI, as P/AI ranged from 11 to 79% among the bulls used in the study. Similarly, there was an effect of sire on pregnancy loss (P < 0.001), as rates of embryonic mortality ranged from 0 to 40% for the bulls used in the study.

4.5 Discussion

Similar to the current investigation, Sá Filho et al. (2010) examined factors associated with P/AI in beef herds. Interestingly, they observed that heifers, as well as primiparous and non-lactating cows, displayed notably lower pregnancy rates, with only multiparous cows achieving pregnancy rates that exceeded 50%. Our results align with these findings, as heifers and primiparous cows had the lowest P/AI, while cows beyond their second calf exhibited the highest pregnancy rates. Primiparous cows are still growing at time of parturition and thus reproductive efficiency in the subsequent breeding season is often compromised (Vasconcelos et al., 2014). As noted by Pilau and Lobato (2009), primiparous cows typically experience a period of reduced body condition postpartum, which hinders their return to estrus and consequently impairs fertility.

The average pregnancy loss observed in the current study (5.78%) was slightly higher than the average pregnancy loss reported in a recent meta-analysis investigating rates of embryonic mortality in beef cattle (4.9%; Reese et al., 2020). The current study and the aforementioned meta-analysis concurred on the observation that the highest rates of embryonic mortality were identified in heifers (8.1%), followed by primiparous (5.4%) and multiparous (5.1%) cows. Likewise, in a study conducted by Pessoa et al. (2012) with 658 Nelore females, heifers (5.99%) exhibited the highest rates of embryonic mortality. Primiparous cows, however, experienced lower rates (3.30%) of embryonic loss compared to their multiparous counterparts (5.30%).

Regarding the effects of cattle temperament and stress at time of insemination on fertility outcomes, the findings of our study align with those of Cooke et al. (2011) who reported that calm heifers, presenting lower velocity scores while exiting the chute following TAI, achieved higher conception rates. One strategy to reduce stress during handling is the adoption of cattle training, which involves positive reinforcement and gradual habituation of management practices (Rueda et al. 2015). Another effective strategy involves selecting animals with calmer temperaments and implementing farm-personnel training to improve human-animal interactions and reduce overall stress during handling (Hemsworth et al. 2000, Barbosa et al. 2006, Sato, 1981, Fordyce, 1984, Boivin et al, 1992).

When considering the influence of the month of parturition on reproductive performance, cows calving in July displayed the highest P/AI, followed by those calving in August and September. Cows calving in July and August are the ones that conceived earliest in the breeding season, and consequently, calved early in the calving season, having a longer interval to rebreeding. This extended postpartum interval is beneficial to reproductive success (Cushman et al., 2012).

The reduced incidence of pregnancy loss in cows calving in January can be attributed to the fact that confirmation of pregnancy following the first pregnancy diagnosis was conducted within a shorter interval compared to other months. The highest rates of pregnancy loss in cows calving in December might be attributed to the higher temperatures observed in the Brazilian mid-west region during the summer months.

In the current study, lower BCS was associated with increased pregnancy loss, and BCS gain after AI was associated with reduced rates of embryonic mortality. The negative effects of low BCS on reproduction are well-established (Meneghetti et al., 2008). Subjecting cows to nutrient restriction immediately following AI, during a period of 6 days, resulted in production of lower-quality embryos with delayed developmental competence (Kruse et al., 2017). Furthermore, superovulation of cows with low BCS resulted in reduced response to the superovulation protocol, reduced size of ovulatory follicles, reduced corpus luteum size and postovulatory progesterone concentrations, and impaired embryo recovery rates and quality (Bridges et al., 2012). Postovulatory progesterone concentrations play a major role regulating conceptus development and uterine receptivity (Stone et al., 1978, Zelinski et al., 1982, Ing and Tornesi, 1997, Bridges et al., 2010, Fields et al., 2012). The effect of BCS on reproduction is especially important for primiparous cows, due to the concomitant demand for growth and reproduction (DeRouen et al., 1994, Ciccioli et al., 2003, Richardson et al., 2016).

Expression of estrus on the day of AI was associated with higher P/AI and lower rates of embryonic mortality as previously reported by Nogueira et al (2019) and Rodrigues et al. (2018). Estrus expression occurs as a result of high circulating concentrations of estradiol produced by the dominant follicle. Preovulatory estradiol concentrations play a major role in pregnancy success, through its effects on the oocyte, follicular cells, oviduct, and uterus for the establishment of uterine receptivity (Pohler et al., 2012, Perry et al., 2007)

There was a major effect of sire on P/AI and pregnancy loss in the current study, as P/AI from individual bulls ranged from 11 to 79% and embryonic mortality from 0 to 40% despite only using semen that had passed a thorough evaluation. This underscores the significance of conducting additional research into the genetic and molecular mechanisms that govern the paternal influence on pregnancy establishment and pregnancy loss. Of note, Ortega et al. (2018) reported significant effects of sire conception rate (SCR) on preimplantation embryo development using semen that had passed all the standard quality control procedures before being tested in the field. Currently, the quality parameters commonly employed in semen evaluation do not offer complete reliability in predicting bull fertility (Capra et al., 2017). The identification of new genetic variants in the bovine paternal genome governing fertility and early embryonic mortality is highly desirable (Butler et al., 2020). Nogueira et al. (2022) identified a deleterious non-synonymous point mutation in the autosomal EML5 gene that when present in homozygosis resulted in prominent abnormal sperm phenotypes. Future studies should focus on identifying new genetic variants to accurately predict sire fertility to improve reproductive efficiency (Taylor et al., 2018). Selection for scrotal circumference has great potential to improve sire fertility, due to its high heritability and positive association with semen quality traits (Carvalho Filho et al., 2020).

In cattle, successful fertilization (or conception) generally occurs following breeding, but embryonic mortality is especially high during the first month of gestation. Fertilization rates have been estimated to be around 90% or higher in heifers, beef cows, and moderate-producing dairy cows (Diskin and Sreenan, 1980, Diskin and Morris, 2008, Maurer and Chenault, 1983, Sreenan and Diskin, 1986, Ahmad et al., 1995, Sartori et al., 2002), ~80% in high-yielding dairy cows under thermoneutral conditions, and ~60% in high-producing dairy cattle under heat stress (Wiltbank et al., 2016, Sartori et al., 2010, Ribeiro et al., 2016, Santos et al., 2004). Conception rates, however, range from 35-40% in dairy (Lucy, 2001, Walsh et al., 2011, Norman et al., 2020) and 50-70% in beef cattle (Perry et al.,2011). Thus, under thermoneutral conditions, there is a high rate of embryonic death following fertilization, which is especially high during the first two weeks of gestation in both beef (Ealy, 2020) and dairy cattle (Wiltbank et al., 2016).

Important biological events take place during the first couple weeks of preimplantation development, such as the formation of a blastocyst from a one-cell zygote, and the process of conceptus elongation, marked by trophectoderm cell proliferation and an exponential increase in conceptus length. Because embryonic mortality is a major factor limiting reproductive efficiency in cattle operations (Ealy, 2020), future efforts should focus on understanding the paternal and maternal influence on embryonic mortality particularly during the first two weeks of gestation.

4.5 Conclusion

Results from the current study reinforce the idea that animal age and parity at the beginning of the breeding season, BCS at the onset of estrous synchronization, BCS gain following AI, estrus expression at TAI, sire, and month of parturition are important factors influencing P/AI and rates of embryonic mortality in beef herds. Notably, there was a wide variation in P/AI and pregnancy loss among sires used in the study, reinforcing the importance of sire fertility in the success of breeding programs. The observed major effect of sire on fertility outcomes highlights the importance of further understanding the molecular basis orchestrating the paternal effects on pregnancy success and embryonic mortality. Collectively, this work provides foundational knowledge for future studies aiming to identify factors influencing fertility and pregnancy loss in beef herds.

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5 Considerações finais

Os resultados nos indicam que existem fatores fenotípicos relacionados a matriz, assim como fatores relacionados ao meio, que influenciam da P/IA e taxas de mortalidade embrionária no rebanho e que podem ser corrigidos na propriedade. Consideravelmente, o efeito do touro, foi muito importante nessa variação em relação a P/IA e perda gestacional, ressaltando a importância dos estudos relacionados a fertilidade e identificação dos fatores genéticos que modulam essas variações ou as expressões genicas. Coletivamente, este trabalho fornece conhecimento fundamental para estudos futuros com o objetivo de identificar fatores que influenciam a fertilidade e a perda de prenhez em rebanhos de corte.

6 Impacto econômico, social e inovação

Com a identificação dos fatores ambientais e fenotípicos que causam efeito sobre a prenhez e a mantença dessa gestação, conseguimos minimizar esses fatores que diminuem as taxas de ganho por ano de uma propriedade. Com isso, conseguimos impactar positivamente na produção de mais bezerros e principalmente da diminuição de matrizes que perdem a gestação e permanecem na fazenda por um longo prazo sem produzir.

Além dos ganhos econômicos com a identificação dos fatores que somam esses prejuízos, podemos identificar os indivíduos subférteis dentro do rebanho. Com maiores estudos, a identificação de fatores genéticos correlacionado a fertilidade aumentará a nossa capacidade de identificar indivíduos que, além de diminuir as taxas de prenhez ou aumentar as perdas gestacionais, também transferem essa genética para seus produtos.

Outro fator importante é na identificação de indivíduos jovens e com alto potencial genético, que com essas identificações de fertilidade, conseguimos utilizá-los de forma mais eficiente, além de identificar de forma precoce os indivíduos subférteis.