Seasonal Variations in Certain Physical and Biochemical Attributes of Semen from Cholistani Bulls

Umer Farooq, Ahmad Ijaz1, Nazir Ahmad2*, Habib Rehman1 and Hafsa Zaneb3

University College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur; 1Department of Physiology, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Lahore; 2Department of Theriogenology, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad; 3Department of Anatomy and Histology, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan

*Corresponding author: profnazar53@hotmail.com

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: December 31, 2012
Revised: June 19, 2013
Accepted: August 07, 2013

ABSTRACT
In the present study, effects of stress-free and stressful seasons on certain physical and biochemical attributes of semen of Cholistani AI bulls were investigated. A total of 382 ejaculates from six bulls were collected at weekly intervals during four seasons viz. stress-free autumn (October-November), stressful winter (December-January), stressful dry summer (May-June) and stressful wet summer (July-August). These ejaculates were evaluated for various physical and biochemical attributes. Overall mean values (±SEM) for ejaculatory volume, number of ejaculates per bull, mass motility, individual sperm motility, sperm concentration, number of doses of semen frozen per bull, percentages of live, morphologically normal sperm and those with intact acrosome were 4.92±0.14 mL, 1.89±0.02, 2.26±0.06, 63.51±1.03%, 989.73±27.4 million/mL, 208.26±8.42, 86.74±0.55%, 86.34±0.51% and 86.64±0.48%, respectively. In general, all the parameters revealed significantly (P<0.05) better results in stressful seasons as compared to stress-free season. Overall mean values for Na+, K+, cholesterol and glucose in the seminal plasma were 102.79±3.95 & 36.65±0.99 mEq/L, 152.02±3.17 & 127.22±3.65 mg/dL, respectively. Amongst these, Na+ was higher (P<0.05) during dry summer, whereas K+ was higher in dry summer and winter. Cholesterol and glucose were elevated (P<0.05) during dry summer season. Correlation analysis revealed significant positive correlations between mass and individual sperm motility, morphologically normal and live sperm and sperm acrosome integrity and live sperm (P<0.01). Among biochemical attributes of seminal plasma, Na+ and K+, cholesterol and K+ and glucose and Na+ were correlated (P<0.01). Considering seminal plasma biochemical constituents and physical attributes, only seminal plasma cholesterol was positively correlated with ejaculatory volume (P<0.01). In conclusion, various physical and biochemical attributes of Cholistani bull semen were better in stressful seasons as compared to stress free season.

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INTRODUCTION
Variation in semen quality of an animal depends upon many intercalated factors such as macro- and micro-climatic conditions (temperature, humidity, rainfall and photoperiod), feeding and management (Mandal et al., 2005), breed (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2010), age, health status (Mandal et al., 2005), genetic make up (Koivisto et al., 2009), and the sexual activity of the animal at the time of semen collection (Bhakat et al., 2011). Season seems to influence the seminal attributes directly through its macro- and micro-climatic factors and indirectly through affecting vegetation, forage quality and soil-plant interaction (Chacón et al., 2002; Bhakat et al., 2009).

Fifteen well recognized indigenous cattle breeds of Pakistan constitute about 43% of the total cattle population in the country and belong to zebu (humped; Bos indicus) cattle. Although their ability of thermo-tolerance and tick-resistance has widely been accepted (Farooq et al., 2010), yet a precise knowledge of their reproductive potentials, particularly in terms of bull fertility under their local climatic conditions, is still a far
were available for analysis. Cholistani breed of cattle is a zebu (Bos indicus) or humped breed, being reared mostly by the nomadic pastoralists of Cholistan Desert of Pakistan. Animals of this breed are the major source of socio-economic uplift in the area. However, there is relatively little information available in the literature on various seminal attributes of this breed.

In a recent study (Faroq et al., 2013), we published preliminary data on semen quality and freezability of six Cholistani bulls collected over a period of three months. In the present study, an attempt was made to assess seasonal variations in certain physical and biochemical attributes of fresh semen and seminal plasma based on the data collected from the same six Cholistani bulls during stress-free and stressful seasons. Moreover, relationships among various seminal attributes were also investigated.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Experimental area:** The present study was conducted at the Semen Production Unit (SPU), Karaniwala, Bahawalpur, located in the Cholistan Desert of Pakistan. Geographical location of this area has been described earlier (Faroq et al., 2012). The climate of this area is arid tropical, May and June (dry summer) are the hottest months with the maximum temperature exceeding 45°C. July and August (wet summer) bring in Monsoon winds with negligible rains. Thus, the area is least influenced by rains and remains water scarce and drought stricken. October and November have temperature of 24-27°C, whereas December and January are the coldest months with temperature of 17-20°C.

The study was conducted in the months of October, November and December, 2011 and January, May, June, July and August 2012. Keeping in view the prevailing climatic conditions of the study area, 4 seasons of 2 months duration each were defined viz. i) stress free autumn (October-November), ii) stressful winter (December-January), stressful dry summer (May-June) and iv) stressful wet summer (July-August). Mean values of temperature, relative humidity and rainfall for four seasons in the study area are presented in Table 1.

**Semen collection and evaluation:** Six adult Cholistani AI bulls with clinically normal reproductive tract and donating semen of acceptable quality were selected. The details regarding feeding and management of these animals have been described elsewhere (Faroq et al., 2013). Semen from each experimental bull was collected at weekly intervals, using an artificial vagina (AV). The final temperature of AV before semen collection was in the range of 41-44°C (Sharma et al., 1957). Two ejaculates were collected from each bull on each collection. However, occasionally some bulls refused to give the second ejaculate. Thus, a total of 382 ejaculates were available for analysis.

All ejaculates were evaluated for physical characteristics including ejaculatory volume, mass motility, individual sperm motility, sperm concentration, percentages of live and morphologically normal sperm and those with intact acrosome. The number of doses to be frozen (0.5 mL straws) was also obtained from the photometer with a final dilution of 40 million spermatozoa/0.5 mL straw. The detail of semen collection and evaluation has been given earlier (Faroq et al., 2013).

**Seminal plasma collection and analysis:** Seminal plasma extraction was carried out fortnightly and 96 samples from six bulls (04 samples per bull per season) were available. Seminal plasma was extracted as described earlier (Pesch et al., 2006) and stored at -20°C till analyzed for sodium (Na⁺), potassium (K⁺), cholesterol and glucose with a chemistry analyzer (Metrolab 1600 DR, Diaton Group, Budapest, Hungary), using commercially available kits.

**Statistical analysis:** Mean values (±SEM) for various physical and biochemical attributes were calculated. Magnitude of variation in these attributes was ascertained through ANOVA, using completely randomized design. Differences between mean values were compared through Duncan’s multiple range test. Pearson’s correlation coefficients were also calculated between various spermiogram attributes, between seminal plasma constitutes, and between spermiogram attributes and seminal plasma constituents.

**RESULTS**

**Spermiogram attributes:** Overall mean values (±SEM) for ejaculatory volume, number of ejaculates per bull, mass motility, individual sperm motility, sperm concentration and total number of doses of semen frozen for the six Cholistani AI bulls were 4.92±0.14 mL, 1.89±0.02, 2.26±0.06, 63.51±1.03%, 989.73±27.4 million/mL and 208.26±8.42, respectively (Table 2).

Results of various spermiogram parameters of Cholistani AI bulls as affected during stress free and stressful seasons are also presented in Table 2. In general, all the parameters revealed significantly (P<0.05) better results in stressful seasons as compared to stress free season, with the exception of number of ejaculates per bull which was not affected significantly by seasons. Ejaculatory volume was significantly higher (P<0.05) in dry and wet summer than stress free autumn. However, the difference in ejaculatory volume between autumn and winter was non-significant. Same was true between winter and dry summer.

Mass motility was significantly higher (P<0.05) during dry summer as compared to autumn and winter, the difference between the latter two seasons was non-significant. In wet summer, mass motility was significantly higher (P<0.05) than that in autumn or winter, while it differed non-significantly from that in dry summer. The individual sperm motility was higher in dry summer (P<0.05) as compared to autumn and wet summer, the difference between the latter two seasons was non-significant. Sperm concentration was lower (P<0.05)
during winter as compared to other three seasons, the latter differed non-significantly from one another.

In terms of semen production, a total of 39778 doses of 0.5 mL straws were frozen during the study period. Significantly higher number of doses per bull (P<0.05) was frozen during dry and wet summer as compared to autumn and winter; the difference between the latter two seasons was also significant, while it was non-significant between the former two seasons.

The subjective analysis of spermatozoa revealed that percentages of live, morphologically normal sperm and those with intact acrosome were 86.74±0.55, 86.34±0.51 and 86.64±0.48, respectively. These values were higher (P<0.05) during stressful winter and dry summer as compared to wet summer and autumn, the difference between the former two seasons was, however, non significant. Moreover, mean values for these attributes were significantly higher during wet summer as compared to autumn.

**DISCUSSION**

**Spermiogram attributes:** The overall mean ejaculatory volume of Cholistani AI bulls recorded in the present study was 102.79±3.95 & 36.65±0.99 mL/E, 152.02±3.17 & 127.22±3.65 mg/dL, respectively (Table 3). Amongst these, Na+ was significantly higher (P<0.05) during dry summer, whereas K+ was higher in dry summer and winter as compared to other seasons. Cholesterol and glucose were found to be significantly elevated (P<0.05) during dry summer season. Na:K ratio was higher during wet summer as compared to winter and dry summer (Table 3).

The correlations: The results of correlation analysis (Table 4) revealed significantly positive correlations between individual and mass motility, morphologically normal and live sperm, and sperm acrosome integrity and live sperm (P<0.01). Among biochemical attributes of seminal plasma, Na+ and K+, cholesterol and K+, and glucose and Na+ were correlated. Correlating the seminal plasma constituents with the spermiogram attributes, only seminal plasma cholesterol was found to be positively correlated with ejaculatory volume (P<0.01).

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Spermiogram attributes: The overall mean ejaculatory volume of Cholistani AI bulls recorded in the present study is relatively higher than the studies published for bulls of various Bos indicus breeds. A preliminary data of three months on the same breed revealed a lower mean ejaculatory volume of 4.45±0.76 mL (Farooq et al., 2013). A mean ejaculatory volume of 4.38±0.09 mL for adult (5-years old) Sahiwal bulls has been reported (Ahmad et al., 2003). Similarly, a lower mean value of 3.4±1.3 mL was recorded for indigenous non-descript zebu bulls in India (Siddiqui et al., 2008). Another study from Brazil
recorded mean semen volume ranging from 4.8 to 5.4 mL for Bos indicus bulls (Koivisto et al., 2009). These differences can be attributed to breed characteristics, as well as the meteorological and nutritional variations (Bhakat et al., 2011).

The results on seasonal variation revealed significantly higher ejaculatory volume in stressful dry and wet summer seasons than the stress free autumn season. Previously, some workers have negated the effect of season on semen volume (Mathevon et al., 1998). However, others have reported a lower ejaculatory volume in dry or humid summer owing to high temperatures and poor grazing quality (Ahmad et al., 2003; Koivisto et al., 2009). The effect of season on ejaculatory volume can be minimal if bulls are fed adequately and well adopted to high temperature (Mathevon et al., 1998). Higher ejaculatory volume recorded in the present study during stressful wet and dry summer suggests an adequate plain of nutrition and management of the animals under farm conditions.

The overall mean mass motility recorded in the present study is congruent with earlier work reported for Sahiwal bulls (Ahmad et al., 2003). Results regarding seasonal variation revealed highest mass motility in dry summer, followed by wet summer which is in line with earlier published results for Bos indicus bulls (Koivisto et al., 2009). The results of the present study are suggestive of the fact that Bos indicus bulls are thermo-tolerant and well adapted to stressful conditions of dry and wet summer.

The overall mean individual motility in the present study is in line with a previous report (Bhakat et al., 2011). Regarding the seasonal influence, individual sperm motility was highest in dry summer and lowest in wet summer. Similar results have previously been reported (Ahmad et al., 2003). However, Mostari et al. (2005) reported deteriorated sperm motility during summer season in Holstein-Friesian and Jersey bulls maintained in Pakistan. Better results in the present study during dry summer can be attributed to an innate ability of these bulls to be well adapted to the harsh, hot desert climate. Furthermore, it has been established that the sperm motility depends more on mating frequency than on seasonal climatic changes (Chacón et al., 2002; Koivisto et al., 2009).

The overall mean sperm concentration in the present study is lower than 106.46±11.92 mg/dL (46.29±2.13 mEq/L) and 90.40±25.10 mEq/L reported for Murrah buffalo and Holstein Friesian bulls by Shukla et al. (2009) and Petrunkina et al. (2001), respectively. Conversely, the overall mean seminal plasma K⁺ levels of the present study were lower than 98.18±11.67 mg/dL (42.69±2.07 mEq/L) and 66.50±7.5 mEq/L reported for Murrah buffalo and Holstein Friesian bulls by the above referred workers, respectively. These variations may be indicative of adaptation of Cholistani bulls to the hot arid environment or a genetic predisposition. The effect of variation in method of estimating these cations can not be ruled out. It is noteworthy that neither Na⁺ nor K⁺ showed any correlation with any of the spermogram attributes in the present study.

Regarding the seasonal influence, seminal plasma concentration of Na⁺ was higher in dry summer, whereas K⁺ was higher during winter and dry summer than other seasons. To the best of our knowledge, none of the previous studies has addressed the seasonal influence on the concentrations of these cations in the seminal plasma of AI bulls. Whether these variations depict an adaptation to the environment or are purely genetic in origin, is yet not clear.

The concentrations of cholesterol and glucose in the seminal plasma were highest during dry summer in Cholistani AI bulls under study. A rise in the level of cholesterol during summer season has been reported earlier (Okab, 2007). Conversely, a study on rams has reported its level to be at a nadir point in dry summer (Zamiri et al., 2010). Higher levels of seminal cholesterol during summer seem to be due to increased thyroid activity and hepatic mechanisms that remove cholesterol from circulation (Shukla et al., 2009). Furthermore, cholesterol is known to be a precursor of androgenic hormones and its rise in summer season indicates its availability for conversion into sex hormones and hence higher sex drive (Shukla et al., 2009). In addition to this, cholesterol has been known for its potential as a protective agent against environmental stress (Jacyno et al., 2009), hence, its increase in summer season in the present study may also be an adaptive mechanism to minimize thermal stress. Similarly, high level of glucose in seminal plasma during dry summer seems to be necessary for meeting the higher sugar demand due to increased thyroid activity during stressful summer season (Taha et al., 2000).

Correlations: Significant positive correlations were recorded between individual sperm motility and mass dry and wet summer seasons, the period when ejaculatory volume and sperm concentration were also higher. Thus, higher semen production during dry and wet summer can be attributed to better semen quality in terms of ejaculatory volume and sperm concentration.

Mean values for spermatological parameters (live and morphologically normal sperm and those with intact acrosome) were higher in winter and dry summer than autumn and wet summer. However, a report on Brahman bulls revealed non significant effect of season on viability and acrosome integrity of spermatozoa (Chacón et al., 2002).

Seminal plasma constituents: The present study revealed that the overall Na⁺ level in seminal plasma was higher than 106.46±11.92 mg/dL (46.29±2.13 mEq/L) and 90.40±25.10 mEq/L reported for Murrah buffalo and Holstein Friesian bulls by Shukla et al. (2009) and Petrunkina et al. (2001), respectively. Conversely, the overall mean seminal plasma K⁺ levels of the present study were lower than 98.18±11.67 mg/dL (42.69±2.07 mEq/L) and 66.50±7.5 mEq/L reported for Murrah buffalo and Holstein Friesian bulls by the above referred workers, respectively. These variations may be indicative of adaptation of Cholistani bulls to the hot arid environment or a genetic predisposition. The effect of variation in method of estimating these cations can not be ruled out. It is noteworthy that neither Na⁺ nor K⁺ showed any correlation with any of the spermogram attributes in the present study.

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motility, normal morphology and viability, and acrosome integrity and viability. A significant positive correlation between Na⁺ and K⁺ was recorded in the present study. This positive correlation seems to be necessary for maintaining osmolarity and metabolic activity of spermatozoa. However, none of the cations was found to be correlated with any of the seminal attributes which is in contrast to earlier reports which have revealed a positive correlation of these cations with mass motility and individual motility in the buffalo (Shukla et al., 2009).

A positive correlation between cholesterol and ejaculatory volume was noticed in the present study. Seminal plasma of young boars from Poland (Jacyno et al., 2009) also presented same correlation along with its additional close correlations with other seminal attributes such as initial motility and sperm count. A positive correlation between cholesterol and sperm count has been reported for bulls being bred in Turkey (Cevik et al., 2007).

Glucose showed no correlation with any of the spermogram attributes, although it was significantly correlated with seminal plasma Na⁺ contents. However, a previous report (Cevik et al., 2007) has demonstrated a close correlation of glucose with various semen attributes and ultimately to fertility due to its importance in spermatozoa energy production. In the present study, only six bulls were included. Further studies with a larger sample size are suggested for better understanding regarding seasonal effects on these seminal attributes.

**Conclusion:** Various physical and biochemical attributes of Cholistani bull semen were better in stressful seasons as compared to stress free season. The acceptable quality of semen of Cholistani bulls recorded during wet/dry summer in the present study is an indicative of the fact that this breed has an innate ability of being well adapted to the harsh, hot desert climate. This adaptability helps them maintain their reproductive abilities at optimum levels even in stressful seasons.

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