

Performance Testing on the Farm

by

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A lot of emphasis these days is placed on winning in the show ring. Most of the ennoblement points that most goats receive are from show ring wins rather than production or performance criteria. There are some feeding data compiled by some universities in gain tests but the ennoblement points that result are minimal compared to show ring wins. A lot can be learned from the breeders of Bonsmara cattle in South Africa. They do not have shows. The cattle have to prove themselves through production data that is compiled for each animal. The animals that are the most productive in weight gain with the least feed intake and the most productive in calf production and performance data on the calves are the most prized animals in the breed.

It's production over "pretty" and function over form that truly counts when improvement in genetics of the breed is desired. A pretty goat may not necessarily produce good progeny or offspring. The proof is in production and performance data, survivalibility and sustainability in the pasture that truly counts. At this time in the Boer goat industry in the United States there is not much value put on production data by most breeders. Many breeders are simply chasing blue ribbons in the show ring. Unfortunately chasing blue ribbons can be harmful to the breed as some breeders follow what I call the "purple monkey syndrome". People will breed a purple monkey just to get a blue ribbon. They forget about the characteristics that really make the Boer breed viable. The judges can cause shifts in the breed by the animals they select in the show ring. People will try to breed the type of goats that are winning at the moment and in some cases the trends in the industry are creating animals that look pretty but can not survive or sustain themselves in a pasture setting. Many animals are losing breed character, masculinity and femininity. In some cases you can't tell the boys from the girls - they all look alike.

Those breeders that are keeping production records on their herd are going to find themselves far ahead of the pack in the long run once Boer goat breeders wake up and realize what is really important in breeding Boer goats is performance and production. If people did not eat goat meat there would really be no point in raising meat goats. You can't eat "pretty". What do we mean by production records? It means we are recording birth weights of kids, weaning weights of kids (90 to 100 days from birth), perhaps 220 days weights of kids and other considerations. The maternal traits of does need to get more attention over time and such things as number of kids per kidding, total birth weight of all kids produced per kidding and other production records are beginning to be kept for each doe in the herd. Performance data on kids and identifying which does produce which kids that perform at the top should be a prime consideration if we really hope to improve the breed. The kid weights mentioned above are attached to both the sire and dam in a total record keeping system.

Over time if enough data is recorded in each herd a compilation of data per herd and data between herds can be done to determine the genetic improvement being realized.

Dr. David Notter from Virginia Tech created the NSIP or National Sheep Improvement Program to analyze production data in herds and between herds of sheep. From this analysis superior animals and superior herds can be identified. In addition EPDs or Expected Progeny Differential can be computed for the animals in the study as it done in a lot of cattle breeds.

Furthermore determining genetic markers for various production traits can be determined so that eventually the best producing sires and dams are identified and genetic improvement of the breed can be realized.

The BGIN program was initiated by the ABGA many years ago but never gained much traction. The BGIN program was patterned after the NSIP but few Boer goat breeders sent in production data for their herds. A lot of the ABGA members were never aware that the BGIN program ever existed.

In my opinion if we are to make significant progress in genetic improvement in the Boer goat breed in the future we must consider performance and production data of the stock we select. Surprisingly enough the countries that I have seen working on genetic improvement of Boer goats the most are Brazil and the Philippines. I attended international conferences in both of these countries were several sessions in the conference were devoted to Dr. Notter's NSIP program and its application to meat goats. Representatives from Virginia Tech that work with Dr. Notter were the main presenters at these conferences. The breeders in Brazil and Philippines realize the importance of genetic improvement more than the breeders in the United States in my opinion. At least they seem to want to learn about genetic improvement more. Australia is also keen on performance and production data in their Boer goats as evidenced by hoof and hook classes at their major shows where the carcass merit of the participants is examined in the show ring.

In Australia many of the shows emphasize not only show ring wins but there is a second component to the show where the animals are slaughtered and their carcasses are evaluated, that is, a hoof and hook competition. Perhaps we should consider shows of this type in the U.S. to identify the best carcass producing genetics.

Selecting Boer goats genetics in the future may become like selecting race horses. What criteria do we use to select race horses? It is races won by the particular horse but more importantly in selecting horse that are too young to race we study the performance data for their sires and dams.

I would like to share a short article relative to selecting race horse and bulls. Hopefully this is the direction the Boer goat industry will go in time. We can only hope. This article appeared on the internet and it was not clear where the source of the article came from but I will share this with you anyway as I think the article has merit for Boer goat breeders in the U.S.

“Buying a bull like a race horse

With some of the green-up people are getting antsy, almost like a disease, to get to buying some females or looking at new hay equipment or anything else spring fever can bring. For me it's the anticipation of the Kentucky Derby and watching these young hopefuls try to pass the test to make it to the first Saturday in May. Although their performance is judged a little differently, handicapping that racehorse is not a whole lot different than picking those herd bulls. Everybody knows what the paper says, but there's always the x-factor or those intangibles that bring you back to the favorite. For the horse races it may be a grueling stretch run or something that marks them as “battle hardened” ready for the task. With bulls it's probably something like he's freer moving or he has that “look” that you like or his momma is an awesome cow that will help the bulls sort themselves to the top compared to their counterparts. It's the same with the Derby contenders class is class and once they rise to the top, just like your herd bull selections, will have passed one test, progeny will define their legacy.

Bull Selection Can Help Beef Producers Capitalize on Markets

Beef producers who want to purchase bulls or semen for their spring breeding herds should be doing their homework now, says a Purdue Extension beef specialist. Cow-calf producers can take advantage of high market prices by selecting healthy bulls that will produce calves with more growth potential.

“If we can buy bulls that will produce offspring that will be born with a minimum of dystocia, grow a little bit faster, will produce a little bit higher-quality carcass, and produce replacement females that perform above average, I think our cow-calf producers have the opportunity to capitalize,” said Ron Lemenager.

Producers can do this by looking at what will affect offspring and doing plenty of research before investing.

“Good bulls come from good cows,” Lemenager said, “So if producers can take a look at mom before they purchase that bull, I think it helps minimize some of the risk. But even if the dam looks good and is healthy, a bull's own merit still needs to be evaluated, starting with reproductive soundness. They should have a breeding soundness evaluation that includes both a physical exam and semen quality evaluation. Many seedstock operations offer a breeding guarantee to the buyer.

Lemenager also said it's important to know the health status of the animal. “Know the background of the bull and the vaccination history,” he said. “If you're buying an older bull, be sure the animal doesn't have any venereal diseases that are going to come back into the herd. I really like the idea of buying a virgin bull to minimize the risk.”

Structural soundness plays a large role in whether a bull will be able to get cows bred, so Lemenager suggested inspecting feet and leg structure, eyes and muscle shape, a factor that contributes to calving ease. Also important is genetic merit. Genetic defects have the potential to cause problems in the herd.

“Almost every breed has one or more genetic defects, and they can sneak up on you if you’re not careful,” Lemenager said. “Producers need to study the pedigrees and know which bulls are free of genetic defects, or buy bulls that have been DNA tested and declared free of known defects.”

Producers also need to study up on a bull’s expected progeny differences, or EPDs. Calving ease, maternal calving ease, growth traits, maternal milk and carcass traits can all affect a producer’s bottom line.

“We really need to keep an eye on the EPDs for the economically important traits,” Lemenager said. “We need to stay away from single trait selection and emphasize multi-trait selection to make herd improvement that complements marketing strategy. If you’re saving back replacement heifers, things like maternal calving ease and maternal milk become very important. Growth traits such as weaning and yearling weight affect the pounds available for sale. Carcass traits, such as marbling, back fat and the ribeye area are the main drivers for how these cattle hang on the rail.

“I’d also do an independent cull on frame size, so the cattle don’t get to be too big or too little.”

It’s not until all of these traits have been met that Lemenager recommends producers start looking at the animal’s phenotype, or “look”.

Much of this same advice applies to producers who manage an artificial insemination breeding program. And while commercial AI studs tend to do a good job of screening animal health, AI sires can still perform differently.

“Some bulls produce semen that’s of higher quality or that gets cows bred better than other bulls,” Lemenager said. “So, here again, producers need to do their homework before they start spending a lot of money on semen. They need to know that the bull has been working, that cows have been conceiving to that semen and that the offspring are performing as expected.” “

I think that we as Boer goat breeders can profit from the ideas expressed in the article above. Production and performance data will become more important over time as we all strive to produce a better Boer goat. Show ring wins are not important in the long run for the betterment of the breed. Please think about it and where you want to go as a Boer goat breeder in the future.