

A group of F1 cows with their F2 calves



The luxury of hybrid vigour

by Izak Hofmeyr

Eloff and Christelle Muller represent the sixth generation of Mullers farming in the vicinity of Herbertsdale, close to Mossel Bay. Their son, Stephen, is already doing his bit and represents the seventh generation of this family-run enterprise.

For close on forty years, the Mullers' stud consisted of large-framed European breeds. But not anymore. Today they are Boran people. And, they tell me, they haven't looked back once.

"We realised that we would have to seriously reconsider our farming practices in this part of the country, gearing ourselves for a more sustainable farming enterprise," explains Eloff. "We farm in a very erratic environment where things

change quickly. The area is tough and I realised more and more that the changing circumstances required a change in our approach to farming."

The mountainous area coupled with the increase in game farming, led to a drastic increase in the number of predators in the vicinity. It became less profitable to farm extensively with small stock.

From sheep to cattle

"Traditionally we have always been mainly sheep farmers, but over time I had to make a mind shift regarding our farming goals. In the end it is your ability to adapt to changing circumstances that is key to your ability to farm sustainably. And we are definitely experiencing change.

"One such change entails the climate, which in our area is definitely felt. Then there is the problem of predators and increasing input costs that pose serious consequences for our sustainability. Yet another factor is changing consumer preferences regarding the consumption of meat which, we believe, will play an even bigger role in future."

New plans

And with all these factors in mind, the Mullers started to reconsider and re-plan their farming goals. The first change they made, was to replace the large-framed European breeds (which required high inputs) with an easier, more extensive breed.

“It was clear to me that we would have to expand the cattle farming branch in order to utilise the veld we had at our disposal. Our veld varies from mountainous sourveld, which forms the largest portion of our grazing, to sweeter veld closer to the coast. Rainfall varies between 400 and 600 mm per year.

“We have a number of portions of land under artificial pastures – dryland lucerne grazing on the deeper red soil closer to the coast, and mostly oats in the sour, mountainous areas.

“In order to ensure sustainability, we switched from conventional to minimum till practices. But although the sheep did utilise the grazing, we were also looking for a cattle breed that could utilise the veld efficiently.”

A good combination

“Initially I switched to Nguni cattle and, believe me, Nguni are good cattle, but I really needed a heavier weaning weight. In my search for this combination of traits – hardiness and good growth – I came across the Boran.

“Auctioneer, Johan van der Nest, introduced me to the Boran. I first bought a bull from Tim Ralfe of Estcourt in KwaZulu-Natal, as I wanted to cross-breed with my Nguni herd. The result with those F1 calves was excellent. And this is when I decided to switch to Boran completely. I started upgrading my Nguni herd and bought a herd of pure Boran cattle.”

Hybrid vigour

The Boran, he explains, has immense hybrid vigour, specifically due to its genetic composition. It consists of 66% *Bos indicus*, 24% European *Bos taurus*, and 12% African *Bos taurus*. As far as is known, the Boran is not related to any other breed, making it an ideal breed to cross-breed with. It can be crossbred with equal success with either *Bos indicus* or *Bos taurus*.

So there are different options to follow. You can produce weaner calves for the feedlot or you can use the Boran's hardiness to serve the niche market for organic meat

“It is a hardy, early ripe breed that is very fertile. Their cow-to-calf weaning ratio is phenomenal. They easily achieve 50% or more. Furthermore it is an easy



The Mullers. Stephan (left) with mother and dad, Christelle and Eloff

animal to farm with, requiring few inputs in terms of tick control.

“Since stocking Boran cattle, we have had no cases of redwater or gallsickness – and we are situated slap bang in the middle of a region that is severely affected by both diseases.”

When they decided to switch to the Boran, Eloff realised, based on his experience in the stud farming industry, that if they wanted to be successful, they would have to be counted under the top 3% of Boran breeders in the country. This meant purchasing the best genetics available.

And at this point Terry McLintock of Vryburg sold out his Keta Boran stud.

The very best

“Terry had some of the best Boran genetics in the world, which he brought in by way of embryos. His selection focus was specifically aimed on early-ripe medium-framed animals with good sheaths. He also selected for red animals, as this is what South African farmers prefer.

“I was able to obtain some of these animals and they formed the basis of our

Tambaraine stud. Our stud now consists of the best genetics from Kenya (65%), Zambia (22%) and Zimbabwe (3%). The

remaining 10% is made up of our own breeding.”

The Mullers quickly made their mark in the Boran world when one of their bulls, TLM05-526 (Koning) fetched R900 000 at a production sale – then the highest price ever paid for a bull in South Africa. Koning was bought as a month-old calf together with his mother, TLM02-17, at the McLintock auction. At the time she also fetched the highest price for a Boran cow, when Eloff bought her for R160 000.

Interests

Eloff is currently serving as president of the Boran cattle breeders' society. The growth of the society, he says, is unbelievable.

“When I joined as a member in 2006, I was the thirtieth or so member. Currently we have 300 members and interest in the breed keeps growing. Farmers are now starting to really notice what these bulls can achieve in the commercial sector. I believe that this is the reason why prices remain stable and high.”

Due to their hybrid vigour, the breed is exceptionally well-suited for cross-breeding.

“I regard the breed as a dam line *per excellence*, but it will take some time before Boran cattle are farmed on a large commercial scale – at the moment they are simply too expensive. But farmers do buy Boran bulls and then breed up to F2, which is 75% Boran. These cows are



The bull, TLM02-12, chief sire in the Tambaraine herd

then the ideal dam line for crosses with large-framed breeds, or for breeding up to pure Boran.

“So there are different options to follow. You can produce weaning calves for the feedlot or you can use the Boran’s hardiness to serve the niche market for organic meat.”

The Mullers also run an AI- and embryo station on their farm. The reason being, says Eloff, that the demand for genetic material is so big and will probably remain

as such for a long time to come.

A system that makes sense

When they reconsidered their farming operation, they also had to look at their sheep, which currently make up some 70% of their business.

“Also in reaction to our variable environment, we switched from Merino to Dohne Merino. The Dohne Merino’s meat:wool ratio makes it a more sustainable breed for our conditions. And looking at the real

growth of the meat price as opposed to the wool price over the last few years, it makes sense to me to concentrate on meat rather than wool.”

They are also in the process of implementing an eight-month lambing system.

“An eight-month lambing system implies that you can now market 50% more lambs per year. The financial benefits are astronomical.”

In order to address the predator problem, they started to employ herdsmen and night watchmen with the sheep.

“The effect was dramatic. Suddenly we had no more problems! The herdsmen walk around with vuvuzelas and make some noise every now and then. This keeps predators away from the sheep completely. And the sporadic killings for the pot have also ceased completely.”

Sustainability

All these changes to their farming system, says Eloff, are about sustainability.

“Our vision is to see to it that not only our family business, but also food production in the country, can be maintained and sustained. This means constantly having to be ready to make changes at the right time.

“The versatility of the Boran puts us in a position to be able to do exactly this.” **SF**

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