Boran: the right business decision

The Stein Boran Stud of Werner Steinhöbel and his son Björn initially selected the Boran breed for its hardiness, fast growth, docility and strong herding instinct. It has since discovered that the breed attracts high prices and is establishing a thriving cross-border market.

Johannesburg businessman Werner Steinhöbel and his son Björn (14) started their Stein Boran Stud three years ago. It all began when Björn asked his father if he would buy him ‘a few cows to keep on grandpa’s farm’. After visiting several farms, with different breeds, they came across the Boran and were instantly sold on the breed. “We looked no further,” says Werner, who now farms full time. He explains what made them decide on the Boran:
• They are docile and easy to work with;
• They are resistant to ticks. In fact, the Steinhöbels have never dipped their cattle;
• A strong herding instinct makes them difficult to steal;
• They grow fast and fat on the veld;
• There is a strong demand for bulls and females and both achieve high prices.

The Stein Boran Stud herd currently consists of 60 cows and 40 followers. Some of their cows are valued at over R100 000 each. The best are used in an ongoing in vitro genetic multiplication programme. PB 07 15, bred by Jansen van Vuuren of Bethlehem, is currently at Embryo Plus in Brits having oocytes (immature egg cells) aspirated. Werner explains that this is the only economically viable way to use such a valuable cow profitably, producing the maximum number of calves per cow annually. Natural mating and breeding is just too slow. It costs R1 000 to aspirate, fertilise and incubate an embryo, and R1 000 per surrogate cow that will carry it to term. The success rate is 50%.

As the Steinhöbels do not have enough land to carry all the recipients, Werner contracts selected commercial cattlemen to supply and prepare the recipients and rear the calves. They pay for the embryos and the commercial cattlemen pay for their synchronisation and implantation, as well as growing the calves to weaning age. At weaning, the proceeds are shared equitably: the Steinhöbels get the calves they need and the commercial cattleman has the opportunity of entering the stud breeding sector with top class genetics at a very affordable cost.

HOW IN VITRO WORKS
The Steinhöbels use In Vitro Africa or Embryo Plus to undertake this highly specialised work. In vitro fertilisation has become very efficient and popular among leading stud breeders.

PHOTOS: WAYNE SOUTHWOOD
The Steinhöbels have access to four centres: Foursiesburg, Excelsior, Parys and Brits. These centres are internationally accredited quarantine stations equipped with laboratory facilities, suitable crush pens and handling facilities. Embryos and semen may be exported directly from these centres.

Werner is notified when the vet will be at one of the centres on a specific date. He then decides which cows are ready and transports them to the centre. The procedure has become so popular that the participating cattlemen queue up for their cows to be attended to and, on completion, take the cows home again. Once the oocytes have been aspirated, they are fertilised with semen of a sire of the breeder’s choice, which he also supplies.

Using only the best quality semen, Werner uses several selected sires on each batch of oocytes. In this way, he can simultaneously try different genetic combinations.

The fertilised embryos are incubated for one week, after which they can either be directly implanted into synchronised recipient cows or cryopreserved in liquid nitrogen for later implantation. The Steinhöbels’ latest in vitro exercise with five cows cost them R50 000. The cow PB07-15 on one occasion yielded 32 oocytes.

In vitro insemination can be performed on a cow six weeks after calving, and every second week thereafter even if the cow is in the early stage of pregnancy, as long as the technician can get past the foetus. Werner prefers in vitro to the cheaper option of super-ovulation and flushing of fertilised embryos method, as it uses no hormone treatment. The latter, he feels, can be detrimental to a cow.

**THE FARM**

Mullersvlei is a sourveld farm with an average annual rainfall of 600mm. Of the total area, 124ha is cropped, 80ha is dryland maize, and two centrepivot lands of 20ha and 14ha are under pasture, oats or soya beans, irrigated with water from the Liebenbergsvlei.

This leaves only 76ha of veld grazing for the cattle. Boran are better known for extensive ranching but Werner finds them easy to run more intensively.

There is no calving season, as the cows are bought from studs countrywide and may calve at different times of the year. The embryo programme in any case throws synchronisation out of kilter.

Borans tend to get fat on normal summer veld. They are also excellent in the cold that the afterbirth emerging from her vulva had frozen solid. The calf soon warmed up and survived.

**A TOUGH BREED**

While this may be considered overgrazing, Werner is amazed at the ability of the Boran to survive and get fat on next to nothing. They handle the extreme conditions of Bethlehem well. One day last season, the temperature dropped to -14°C yet a cow calved successfully. It was so cold that the afterbirth emerged from her vulva had frozen solid. The calf soon warmed up and survived.

The Steinhöbels’ market consists of other stud breeders as well as commercial cattlemen. They sell at auctions countrywide and off the farm. Prices of R20 000 for year-old heifers and R20 000 to R50 000 for two- to three-year-old bulls are not uncommon.

Werner stresses there is good demand for quality Boran stock. Females remain in the stud sector, while bulls are being registered and increasing numbers of commercial cattlemen are buying bulls for cross breeding.

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