**In the Boran business**

**Wessel Meyer** grew up on a cattle farm and his affinity for cattle was passed down to him by his father. Now an Ermelo-based businessman, Wessel farms Boran part-time – but his passion for the breed is decidedly full-time.

There are moments in life when unplanned events seem to happen with a definite purpose in mind. This is what happened when Wessel Meyer and his wife Henriette first came across Boran cattle on the farm of a friend and breeder, Schalk van Oudtshoorn.

“It’s an inexplicable pull,” says Wessel. “There they were in the camp, and I just liked the look of them. When I walked among them, I felt a companionable ease – they are friendly, and I liked that.”

Making use of a piece of land he had previously let out, Wessel acquired the brand QT and set up the Meybor Boran Stud that same year. Boran were selling for high prices that excluded the average commercial cattle farmer, so Wessel decided to buy registered cows and heifers and use them as embryo providers. At the 2007 National Boran Sale, he bought Meybor Stud’s first Boran cow from Tim Ralfe’s well-known Heavitree Stud in the Estcourt district.

In August that year, Wessel bought two in-calf heifers on Simon Hodgson’s Boran Genetics Sale. Simon played a key role in bringing the Boran breed to South Africa.

“To get the kind of quality we wanted, we paid R155 000 and R125 000 for these heifers, both from imported Kenyan genetics,” Wessel explains. He later bought three more heifers from Schalk.

The Meybor Boran Stud now runs 130 head, including bulls, breeding cows, pre-mateable, mateable and in-calf heifers, on 160ha, 20km from Ermelo.

**EMBRYO TRANSFER**

Embryo transfer is a technique which makes it possible to grow embryos in the uterus (in vivo) of an animal, or in the laboratory (in vitro), and then to transfer these embryos to recipient cows.

- **In vivo fertilisation**
  Conventional in vivo fertilisation starts with injecting donor cows and heifers with follicle stimulating hormone. This causes multiple follicular ovulation to take place. At oestrus, or standing heat, the super-ovulated donors are bred to an AI bull and a number of oocytes are fertilised.

- **In vitro fertilisation**
  In vitro embryo transfer (ET) uses trans-vaginal needle aspiration to pick up the oocytes from the follicles and fertilisation takes place in the lab (in vitro). Initial embryo development takes place in the lab, after which standard embryo transfer procedures follow. About seven days after insemination and fertilisation, embryos are non-surgically collected or ‘flushed’ from the donor’s uterus and transferred to synchronous, surrogate recipients. Embryos can also be frozen and stored in liquid nitrogen for transfer at a later stage.

An ET collection can easily be performed on a donor female every 60 days, which gives the cow a resting cycle between each super-ovulation. Through ET, desirable genetics are rapidly expanded and there is a fast increase in progeny. On average, there will be two to four calves per super-ovulated donor, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation’s (FAO) embryo transfer training manual. The FAO manual assumes first- or second-time super-ovulation in normal, fertile donors with excellent management, well-trained personnel, enough synchronous recipients for the embryos, surgical or non-surgical transfer by experienced technicians with proven skills, and fresh (not frozen) embryos.
• Grade 1 embryos will survive well through freezing and thawing, and are often called ‘freezeable’ embryos;
• Grade 2 embryos that can be transferred fresh are described as ‘fair’, and show some irregularities;
• Grade 3 embryos are considered poor, with major irregularities and only 25% of the embryonic mass intact. Pregnancy rates from Grade 3 embryo transfers are lower than those from Grade 1 and Grade 2. Grade 4 embryos are either dead or degenerating and are discarded.

The Meybor cows were transported to the facility in Brits two months after calving. “Animals have a period of adaptation before the programme starts and then stay at the facility for three flushing cycles before they return to the home farm,” says Wessel.

Vets work on-farm if breeders have the necessary equipment. For breeders who do not have the facility, Embryo Plus offers the option of having the procedure done in Brits.

Wessel says he has stopped transferring embryos for the moment as prices are more stable. He has also built his herd to a size that fits his system. “Of course, if you have a very good cow and a bull, you can transfer embryos to advance your genetic base, and it may well be worth it. Farmers flush if they need progress.”

HANDS-OFF MANAGEMENT

“Boran are hands-off animals; they require minimal attention and fit in with my working life.”

Because the breed’s group dynamic is so strong, the cattle are always together and Wessel can start observing them from the road as he drives towards his farm.

The strong herd bond also makes stock theft a lot more difficult, says Wessel, because thieves would be forced to steal the entire group. “You can’t single one animal out. They are always in a group, even when they sleep.”

• Nutrition and disease management

In summer, Wessel puts out a phosphate lick and in winter he uses Molatek Dryveld 46. He says that lick intakes are low in mature cattle, but for weaners up to 15 months he supplements with chop.

Redwater is a constant threat because ticks persist year round. Despite this, Wessel has not dipped his animals for two-and-a-half years. During this time, Meybor animals have not been treated for gall sickness or redwater – and there have been no deaths in the herd.

“The herd is TB-tested according to state regulations.

• Maintaining a stable herd

The Boran cow has an exceptional ability to keep her calf thriving and growing even in the most difficult conditions. Wessel’s weaning average is 220kg; between 45% and 55% of maternal weight. The breed is also known for its calving ease and Wessel says he never has calving problems. The calves are small, at around 28kg, and according to him, Boran are ideal cattle to use in cross-breeding programmes, even with the larger European breeds.

“Bulls reach full potential at about four years. My oldest bull is seven, but they can work well past 10 years of age.”

With a small herd, Wessel needs to turn over his bulls regularly, which he does through lease arrangements or selling and buying in a new animal. He also inseminates with approved semen which is freely available.

Wessel aims for a stable herd with 50 core breeding cows so that he can sell 45 animals a year as stud cattle. “Bulls can be sold as stud or commercial animals and there is encouraging interest from the communal farmers who like to buy direct.” His herd expansion is limited by the size of his farm, but for now he is content. “Easy to handle, easy to manage, profitable and resilient; I couldn’t have wished for better cattle.”

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