

A Cattleman's Thoughts

This is a collection of thoughts from Edward's experiences, ranging over 40 or so years of Brahman cattle breeding and study in livestock function. This is aimed at provoking thought and discussion between current breeders, new or long-standing within the breed. While this has been presented in sections, we hope that the reader starts to realise that an animal is a complex system of inter-related functions, and this introduces the concept that traits such as growth, fertility and adaptability are not independent of each other. A reference list provided at the end of this paper for further reading.

On fertility...

There has been much talk in recent years of the fertility of Brahman females. Fertility is a very complex issue in any animal as so many things can have an effect – environment, genetics, disease etc. One of the biggest influences on fertility is the ability of a good cattleman or woman to read an animal and predict the ability of that animal to be a consistent breeder under a reasonable environmental situation and have longevity of life. A lot of our cows now in all breeds have a short breeding life and we see large numbers of young cows going to slaughter. These cows are culled for different reasons such as failing to conceive, low milk supply, bad udders etc. The sub fertility problem I believe has been happening for many years and is being compounded by lack of understanding of the Brahman breed and understanding its true purpose by many of our breeders.

The relentless determination to have our Brahmans look and perform like other breeds is the major reason we are now in the situation we are in. We now have uncharacteristic problems arising in Brahman cattle, such as calving problems, high birth weights, low fertility, and course hair with the lack of ability to counter parasites such as ticks. We now see Brahman cattle with tick infestations comparable to British and Euro breeds. The original Brahmans never had this problem so where have we gone wrong?

On pigmentation...

Looking back to the early years of the late 70's and early 80's when at Brahman sales and saw pastoral managers of big companies turn up at sales with bits of paper with figures on them showing figures on growth rates and all of a sudden we saw a whole new ball game. We started seeing big, plain, high growth bulls which lacked pigmentation and other true Brahman characteristics topping the sales. How many years is it that we have seen dark colour discriminated against at bull sales? How often have we heard a bull breeder say "I don't want those bulls that go black"? Why is it we don't see Brahman calves born black? The reason is that the darkening of the coat is brought on by the development of testosterone in uncastrated male cattle. As pointed out by Dr Jan Bonsma in *Man Must Measure*¹ the darkening of the forequarters and hind quarters and lower body of the male

¹ Bonsma, J. (1983) *Man Must Measure* – Livestock Production. Agri Books.

animal is caused by testosterone development in the testes. If we see a big white bull with few dark hairs in this area, we must ask ourselves: how much testosterone is this bull producing? How often do we hear the phrase “white grey sire” or “even-coloured red”? How many thousands of Brahman females are there who are descendant of these types of bulls? I know from my own experience of using dark pigment sires is that these bulls produce females with tremendous longevity and fertility. The females in our herd by these bulls seldom if ever go black. The castrated male calves also stay a good red colour. One of our most prominent sires of the past, Fairy Springs Red Dollar 1321 was a very dark pigment bull and the talk at the time when we were marketing semen was that he was too dark to use. This bull’s females were outstanding and produced numerous high-priced sires at auction in years to follow. We also retained half-brother Fairy Springs Penne-e-Rama, also a very dark bull and mated more than five of this bull’s sons in recent years. The value of these types of bulls for producing females with calving consistency and longevity is invaluable.

Why is it that early Brangus cattle were such good cattle? It was well known that Brangus bullocks weighed like lead. I believe this was because the early Brangus breeders selected dark pigment or black Brahman bulls. It wasn’t that they were any bigger, they were just better cattle. Furthermore, the Angus cows of that era were outstanding. Superior, I believe, than the Angus genetics of today. This set the solid foundation for the fertility in the Brangus breed today. Look at heavy use of Brangus females as recipients today in ET and IVF programs. It is a shame that our Brahman breed did not go down the same road. The importance of pigment in Brahman cattle, I believe is overlooked because of the lack of knowledge relating to this by many of our stud breeders.

On growth...

The continuing selection on growth is also causing ongoing problems within our breed. This also has to do with hormones. Again the lack of understanding of what growth actually really means is the problem, not growth itself. We need quick early growth in our cattle. This is an indicator of the animal’s ability to thrive in its environment and an indication of the metabolism of the animal. It is the animal’s ability to produce sex hormones which slow down growth and bring on reproduction that is important. I believe by breeding for high growth and bigger cattle all we have done is made them taller and reach sexual maturity later. An example is the absence of testosterone in Bullocks. A bullock left to get old will grow to be a massive animal. This is because of the lack of sex hormones to slow down growth. Now we can understand the problem with big, late maturing females. Another example is a popular breed that started selecting for high frame scores. It did not take long for this breed to have major fertility problem in some of the popular genetics. A wide rump coupled with a low flank are an indicators of fertility, we are now seeing the exact opposite in some cattle.

Going forward

I believe we have some big challenges ahead in all breeds of cattle. The big push forward in genomics and the use of DNA markers will have a big impact in the future of cattle breeding, as so much of our industry now looks to science to enhance the way we breed cattle. With this said I also believe as seedstock producers that we must never lose the

ability to read our animals. The feel of the hair and hide and bone shape gives us a clue to meat quality. The look of a feminine cow gives us clues to an animal's makeup and consequently their fertility and longevity. There is tremendous satisfaction in breeding a line of good cattle. Despite what the other breeds with their marketing machines and industry are throwing at us, we must all work together to ensure our Brahman breed stays strong.

Reading List:

Bonsma, J. (1983) *Man Must Measure – Livestock Production*. Agri Books.

Drayson, J. (1982) *Herd bull fertility*. Acres USA.