

Cows behind every good bull

By INGA STUNZNER

BEHIND every good bull is not just one cow, but generations.

It has been this information that Tom Copley, Salty, Anduramba, has used to build up his herd of Brahman cattle for almost 30 years.

Mr Copley was attracted to the breed initially because of the adaptation it afforded in tick-prone south-east Queensland and resultant hybrid vigour.

However, it was difficult to stabilise those crosses and he searched for more information.

"I went to a seminar in Kingaroy in 1983, led by the now venerated Dr Hans-Ullrich Graser, and it was enlightening," Mr Copley said. Dr Graser came from the world-leading development of BLUP analysis of Fleckvied, in Germany, and brought a new level of research and development for all livestock in this continent."

CBV Brahmans developed from day-one with Dr Graser. By 1983 they had a full BLUP analysis resulting in the later birthing of Brahman Breedplan.

Mr Copley knew from his earlier profession in banking that a profitable cattle business was based on information, systems, integrity, and perseverance.

"If you are going to make continued change, then you need to have the records to do so," he said.

In 1986 Tom's father Jim showed his son a Brahman News ad for Alf Collins, Belah Valley, Marlborough, who had been keeping meticulous records with his herd and had developed a system he coined "reproduction speed bands".

It was a eureka moment. The Copleys travelled to CBV.

"With the cow side of it, it's simple," Mr Copley explained.

"A cow has to have a calf every year and preferably an early calf. If you calve early in the season you get the greatest yield per hectare, thus enhancing your gross margin."

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But to achieve this goal, you need a line of bulls selected for fertility traits.

"The amount of genetic change you can get out of a bull is huge, so making that selection is terribly important," he said.

"That is why information you have about the maternal line of the bulls is so important – and that's why I go to Alf Collins CBV Sale because they furnish reproduction and survival data on four generations, for both sires and dams.

"That's invaluable genetic depth and strength.

"I can look at the fertility data for the entire maternal line which is terribly important."

Each bull from Alf Collins CBV Brahmans has been selected for fertility traits from their maternal side.

"In both of our herds, every cow weans a calf plus a successful pregnancy 'on time', every single year regardless of nutrition or seasonal variation," Mr Copley said.

"A profitable business is based on 70 per cent reproduction, 20 per cent on growth and 10 per cent on markets.

"We are seeing a tough year and our cattle have come through remarkably well. Cows that calve earlier give flexibility for early weaning and an opportunity to preserve cow body weight going into winter."

Steers are consistently sold directly to the feeder market. Although there has been a big push for growth with EBVs, Mr Copley looks for fleshy cattle that are medium to fast growing and are a little above average. Reproduction, however, is still the most



Tom and James Copley with their fertile herd at Salty, Anduramba.

important factor. By joining all the heifers, females are consistently selected for fertility.

All cows are joined mid-October to mid-February, and when they are pregnancy tested all empties are sold.

This system has worked well with the herd currently recording an 86pc pregnancy rate. To be self-replacing, a herd needs 72pc pregnancy.

"A lot of this is about fertility and management. It is not a quick thing and probably to do this in a herd it is a 20-year task based on information, sound systems, integrity and perseverance."



THE COLLINS CBV SYSTEM

The system has grown out of Mr Collins' reproduction Speed Band Systems, which he has developed since the early 1980s.

Contrary to popular genetic and management extension advocacy, Mr Collins noticed various cows calving right up front repeatedly, with some daughters and sisters following suit. This was independent of both weight and age in some tough seasons. In 1990 Mr Collins commenced serial testicle measurement, searching for puberty threshold, encouraged by Dr D'Occhio and Dr Kinder at CSIRO.

"To me, it was apparent that there was some genetic substance there. There were families of cattle starting to shine," Mr Collins explained.

He started analysing his entire heifer group by sire, discovering the range of pregnancy

by sire varied by up to 57 per cent.

Mr Collins then analysed the heifers by age and weight to see if either of these factors had any bearing on pregnancy rates – they didn't.

"I used 12 sons each from two sires whose daughters achieved the most successful early pregnancies under tough seasons." In 1996, Mr Collins' daughter Lara put his entire herd into speed bands – those that would reproduce in the first three weeks of exposure.

"I had been deliberately mating the cows at October 1, since the mid 1980s, when it's traditionally dry to identify truly adapted species. All free-loaders are culled.

"A weaner and a pregnancy every year is our benchmark."

The result is CBV has developed a family of

cattle that have inherited fertility traits that see cows falling pregnant at their first three-week joining.

"Well over 500 wet cows were mated October 1 this year out of 1000 wet cows total."

There is a dollar value cemented in genetics, Mr Collins said.

When calves are born in the first quarter, there will be a \$270 gross margin. If they are born in the second quarter, the margin drops to \$180, but the third quarter it's \$90 and in the last quarter it's \$30.

"This all ties into the sires we have chosen now, using Dr Graser's Days To Calving EBVs."

Last mating season at CBV the 58 sires EBV average was negative 8.8 DTC.

"Another presto!" he said.

Are you curious?

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Contact: Alf Collins, Belah Valley, Marlborough.

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