Selection made simple: Pick the 8-in-5 package

By ALAN NEWPORT

T he renowned grazier and livestock breeder Johann Zietsman has a simple way to describe efficient cows or bulls. They should look like 8 pounds of sugar in a 10-pound package — a “9-in-10 package.”

In contrast, he says most modern cattle look more like 9 pounds of sugar in a 10-pound package — an “8-in-5 package.”

Zietsman can explain at some length the physiology that makes this true, but let’s back into his explanation slowly. Most simply, he says cattle, which are truly efficient on a natural plane of nutrition without being fed a lot of purchased energy, will produce a very muscular profile under those conditions and will also demonstrate a thick profile under stress.

Zietsman is known for becoming one of the first in the world to master ultra-high stock density grazing, often known these days in the U.S. as mob grazing.

He says great grazing management and great livestock are critical to profitable ranching. A higher sustainable stocking rate has been proven the most important factor in profit. Cattle that can tolerate a variety of grazing methods with minimum inputs and still achieve reproductive efficiency are the key component for harvesting the forage.

But to reiterate his point about simplicity, Zietsman says even without knowing anything about the animals — other than how they’ve been grazed and fed — the fuller and more muscular appearance of the cattle is the fundamental knowledge needed.

Know too, they will be much shorter in stature, albeit shorter-legged and smaller-framed, than the cattle most people today prefer and select.

Student of Bonsma

As a young man Zietsman studied under South African scientist Jan Bonsma, and he largely agrees with Bonsma’s visual appraisals. However, Zietsman reiterates the visual signs of performance — a very full appearance — by the animal in its natural environment is the first and most important criteria.

Zietsman uses the terms “fuller” and “rounder” when discussing what he’d like to see in many of today’s cattle. In most cases he says neither bulls nor cows are showing the easy fleshing ability that indicates high efficiency and a good fit to their environment.

He says when he began to change his Beemaster herd nearly 30 years ago by down-framing and adding indigenous African genetics, his goal was to develop a smaller, harder type that would thrive on his grasses and have natural resistance to parasites and disease.

Zietsman produced a beef animal that was smaller and heavier, with “higher intake relative to its size.” This is a key description in the science behind his reasoning. Simply put, however, he needed and developed an animal that can take in a lot of forage in a short grazing period and use it to gain weight and reproduce.

The problem with large-framed cows is they require more energy for body maintenance and only after their maintenance needs are met, can they gain weight, he explains. Therefore, those bigger cattle also lose body condition more quickly in difficult conditions.

Instead, he says beef producers desiring profitability should make early selection of shorter, stockier animals with early sexual maturity.

“I lost my herd 11 years ago, and I’m going to breed up a herd again. I’ve thought a lot about it, and I can do it very quickly,” Zietsman says. “What took me 30 years the first time, I can do in four or five years now.”

What I’m going to do, and what I suggest other people do, is buy as many heifers as you can — stocker heifers. At the appropriate time, put a bull to them for 21 days, and the ones that are pregnant you keep back and the rest you just sell them again. And you use a very good bull on those heifers.

“Think about it: What other breeder has the ability to be so strict in terms of selection. It’s impossible.”

Small and thick

That’s his blueprint. Small-framed, thick bulls breed to heifers at 14 to 15 months, and preferably as many short, stocky heifers as possible, under what Zietsman calls “difficult conditions,” in that very limited time frame.

It will force the cream to rise to the top. Since reproduction is about last on the list of priorities for long-lived animals such as cattle, everything else must be in order for it to happen.

In addition, Zietsman says this is a great way to produce your own bulls.

“Using homebred bulls is a very good thing,” Zietsman says, "particularly if you have a reasonably sized cow herd and you are quite confident that you have the genetics that you require.

“Because where else can you go to and be confident that the bulls you select are adapted to your environment? It’s very unlikely with the selection criteria being used today.”

We’ll write in more detail about Johann Zietsman’s selection and breeding ideas in the Beef Breeding issue in February.