

The Savannah Goat in South Africa:
Preserving a Proud Heritage
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The Savannah goat in South Africa was first recognized as a distinct breed with the formation of the Savannah Goat Breeders Society on November 21, 1993. At this time a Breed Standard was drawn up and the Society joined the South African Studbook Association (Campbell, Origin and Development of Savannah Goats).

A common misconception in North America is that Savannahs are “white Boer goats”. Nothing could be further from the truth! Mr. Keith Ramsay, Registrar of Livestock Improvement in the South African National Department of Agriculture, suggests that **“the breed is phenotypically different to the Improved Boer Goat...my main criteria when I recommended that they be recognized as a separate breed. Initial genetic distancing also supported this. The Savannah is a more compact animal – shorter legs.”** (personal communication)

History scholars also suggest that the Savannah goat’s origin is distinct from that of the Boer. The origin of “the Savannah White Goats of Olierivier” is described in “The Indigenous Sheep and Goat Breeds of South Africa” by Dr. Quentin Peter Campbell. Dr. Campbell was part of the development team as well as “the officer in charge” of the South African National Mutton Sheep and Goat Performance Testing Scheme. South African Dorper sheep and Boer goat stud breeders have recognized his contribution to the development of these fine breeds through his leadership of this program as well as his academic and judging pursuits.

Dr. Campbell suggests that the Savannah probably developed from goats belonging to the Khosa people of the Ciskei and Transkei of the Eastern Cape. “These indigenous goats were mostly white or roans or piebalds” while “the most accurate description

of the ancestors of the Boer Goat” was provided by Barrow (1801) who wrote that “near the Hartebees river in the Northern Cape he encountered some Namaqua Hottentots who possessed a herd of small handsome goats that were spotted like the leopard.”

Dr. Campbell gives credit to this very early description of the indigenous ancestors of the modern Boer goat by referencing the first edition of the South African Boer Goat Breeders’ Association Journal (1959). In this issue; Mr. T.B. Jordaan, a pioneer breeder, declared that “a big, robust, dapple-coloured male goat” was important in the development of the Buffelsfontein stud. Dr. Campbell then suggests that this stud “influenced the development of the Boer Goat (breed) to a marked extent.”

Even though a breed’s history is interesting and its appearance important in setting it apart from others of the species, the key question for all goat ranchers to ask is: Why farm with Savannahs?

Dr. Campbell suggests the following reasons:

- 1) Savannah goats are **hardy and adaptable with natural resistance against tick born diseases** such as heartwater and against other external parasites.
- 2) Since natural selection played a big role in the development of Savannah goats they are **heat and drought resistant and easily endure cold and rain as well. Fully pigmented skin** provides protection from strong ultra-violet rays.
- 3) Savannah goats have relatively **simple and low nutritional requirements and can survive and reproduce where other small stock breeds can not exist. Savannah goats produce a higher net profit because of lower input costs.**
- 4) Savannah goats **breed year round**, exhibit early sexual maturity and have **long productive lives. Does aggressively defend their kids and milk well.** Kidding on pasture with no assistance and no need for bonding pens is to be expected.

- 5) **Savannah goats require minimum handling and care.** Range performance trials (Veld tests at Ellisras) indicated that indigenous goats like the Savannah did not develop mouth or hoof problems as was the case with some Boer goats. Overdeveloped or “overshot” lower jaws do not occur.
- 6) **Savannah goats have been selected for rapid growth and good carcass conformation.** Their pure white colour makes them much sought after for religious slaughter.

Savannah breeding, from Dr. Campbell’s perspective, is fundamentally important because of the crucial role it plays in indigenous breed preservation. On a global scale “indigenous genetic material is being swept away on a wave of breed substitution and crossing” (J.P.Gibson, 1993, Animal Breeding has much to offer livestock productivity). The importance of maintaining breeds with a unique ability to perform in harsh environments is pointed out by Dr. Laurie Hammond (1985), director of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization as follows:

“Breeds of cattle, pigs and poultry, once the backbone of farming economies in many countries, were being replaced by a few super breeds which only performed in ideal conditions. Irreplaceable genetic resources are being lost. Many of these native breeds have maintained humans for more than 10,000 years. Their loss is not just a matter of heritage. It’s very much about our future”.

The process of domestication and the critical importance of breeders and breed societies in shaping the appearance of the animals that they tend is described by Valerie Porter (1996, Goats of the World):

“Domestication is not simply a matter of taming individual animals...Domestication involves breeding in captivity for several generations, so that human beings can select...the traits within the species that are useful or pleasing to them – in

terms of behaviour, productivity and general appearance – and can control such factors as where and when the animals feed and where they live. **That is to say, the animals become dependent on...human beings...juvenile characteristics persist into adulthood: the brain may be smaller, the senses generally less acute as the dependence increases....Thus, gradually, different types evolved for different situations in various localities, formed as much by the demands of humans as of the environment.”** (p.3 & 4)

It is this process of human intervention that created the Boer goat as we know it today:

“By means of selection white farmers have eliminated throat tassels, speckled colour, dappled colour and the piebald markings of the indigenous goats in the modern improved Boer Goat....The spotted or speckled goats (skilder bokke) were described by Barrow (1801)...When the goat farmers of the Eastern Cape started improving the conformation and meat producing capabilities of the Boer Goat they selected for a red-head goat with a white body...As a result of this, indigenous goats of other colours were eliminated or ‘graded up’ with red-head Boer Goats.”

From Dr. Campbell’s perspective the association of this white body and red head with productivity lead to the virtual extinction of most of South Africa’s indigenous goats through the wide spread crossbreeding of indigenous goats with improved Boer goats (and also with Angora goats):

“Eventually only a few flocks of speckled goats survived....White as well as black farmers claim that the speckled goats are **better adapted to unfavourable extensive Savannah grazing conditions** than Boer Goats. They also claim that **the survival rate of ‘Skilder’ kids is higher than that of improved Boer Goats.** Perhaps extreme

environmental conditions will ensure the survival of this old historic strain of goats.” (Campbell, p.38)

Dr. Campbell’s insistence on the critical importance of natural selection in the development of the Savannah breed, the importance of private breeders in preserving the breed and the importance of the environment in dictating the breed standards are illustrated in the following quotations from his 1995 publication, “The Indigenous Sheep and Goat Breeds of South Africa”.

“The indigenous white goat stud of Messrs DSU Cilliers and Sons was started in approximately 1957 from a mixture of coloured indigenous ewes and a white ram....**Selection was aimed at breeding a white heat and parasite resistant functionally efficient meat producing goat. These white goats which are kept in a Savannah type camp close to the Vaal river had to survive under extremely unfavourable conditions....natural selection.....survival of the fittest, played a big role in the development of these fertile easy care heat and drought resistant animals.**” (p. 36)

“Three factors – temperature, humidity and light – rule supreme and in South Africa they are generally stern masters who are apt to go to extremes, and cause shocks to vegetation and animal life. Sometimes these shocks are difficult to endure and therefore **indigenous animals are of a definite and distinctive pattern... (a fundamental standard).**

Characteristics and qualities... (of indigenous game animals)...such as light-footedness, mobility, lively posture, a short smooth glossy covering of hair...a roomy loose, relatively thick skin and dark pigmentation; lean long, shapely flat legs; a lean skull; strong large and well-developed back, loins and buttock muscles; a slightly hanging rump – all these are very definitely apparent”. (citing Opperman, p.9,10)

In a video-taped interview with Dr. Campbell in South Africa (B. Payne, Bloemfontein, 1999), he further explains that the essential difference between Boer goats and the less improved indigenous goats like the Savannah can be seen from specific conformation traits. **Dr. Campbell concurs with Keith Ramsay's contention that the Savannah goat is phenotypically different from the Boer goat. Rather than criticizing the breed for its "slab sides and a tendency towards hockiness", Dr. Campbell suggests that like the South African game animals, these are the conformation traits that nature had selected. He further suggests that if we try to create too round a rib and an animal that is too wide and heavily muscled we "put at risk the animal's adaptability. Their hardiness and survivability under unfavourable climactic conditions and their ability to convert low quality browse into high quality red meat."**

In short, Dr. Campbell states quite emphatically that the Savannah Breed Standard was created by observing survivor animals in the field NOT by "sitting in a room around a table". The integrity of the Savannah breed; its distinct appearance and unique history, is thus firmly tied through the Breed Standard to its proud South African heritage and the demands of the South African environment. **Clearly, preserving this heritage demands an association that adopts the South African Standard.**

