



The American Livestock

Breeds Conservancy

NEWS

November – December, 2006

Volume 23, Issue 6

Conserving rare breeds since 1977

Fostering the Development of Master Breeders

By D. Phillip Sponenberg and Marjorie Bender

Knowledgeable, committed breeders are essential if breeds are to survive. Continuity of breeds is important and is one of the main reasons behind the founding and continuation of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. As the number of breed stewards declines, a breed loses its security as an agricultural resource.

Breed associations need to assure that new breeders are introduced to the breed and recruited as stewards. New breeders are the only mechanism for providing continuity of a breed, but their recruitment is frequently overlooked as a deliberate and necessary activity for breed associations. Not only must new breeders be recruited, they must also be welcomed and then trained to be able to make critical selection decisions that conserve breed type, heritage, and utility. Failing in this is to fail in effective breed conservation.

In order for a breed to remain viable it is essential that all breeders be seedstock producers. This means that all breeders should be producing animals that will be useful in purebred breeding programs. This broad base of contribution to the pure breed assures that no single breeding program, and therefore single bloodline, dominates the others and narrows the genetic base. For this ideal situation to occur, though, new breeders need to easily and openly be able to receive the fruits of the knowledge accumulated by experienced breeders. Secret techniques for breeding superior animals all too easily pass into oblivion with the deaths of those breeders that zealously guard them. Such secrets are notoriously slow to be rediscovered. Breeders need to set aside extremes of the competitive spirit and instead need to take



Developing an "eye" for breed type and good stock is a subtle but important ability that master breeders possess. Here Phil Sponenberg evaluates a mare in the McKinseys' herd of Marsh Tackys. Photo by Jeannette Beranger.

pride in watching the next generation grow in knowledge and competence. Effective mentoring of new breeders is not only satisfying, it is also invaluable to a breed's survival.

Valuing History

Developing the next generation of breeders has several important facets. One of these is conveying the cultural heritage of the breed, and this is where a rich history of stories about the breed and its breeders becomes useful. Stories, such as boyhood deer chasing in the South Carolina swamps on the backs of Marsh Tacky horses, enrich and inform the continuing use and selection of these horses. The preferential use of four-horned Navajo-Churro rams in certain Navajo ceremonies

similarly puts the maintenance of this variant in an important cultural context. All breeds have a heritage and culture that needs to be collected, safeguarded, valued and preserved in order to maintain the cultural relevance of the breed.

Sharing Skills

In addition to the more historical lore, the fine points of selecting breeding stock need to be taught. The details of what to select and what to cull, and why, are extremely important to convey to the next generation. For standard turkeys the selection of birds that are both large as well as sound and functional is a tough call. The knowledge of how to do this is carried in the heads of poultry breeders such as

Continued on page 6

Developing Master Breeders

Continued from front page

Frank Reese, who have long and effective experience in selecting birds for function in what has become a miniscule (but important) part of modern turkey production. The rarity of the system means that only a few breeders survive with the knowledge to make that system work. Only by having older, experienced, successful breeders eagerly and generously convey the subtleties of points of selection is it possible to assure that this rich knowledge is not lost. Transfer of this sort of knowledge usually takes personal interaction, for much of the detail is difficult to condense into a written format. Breeder training short courses and field days can be very helpful in transmitting important details of breed selection to the next generation.

A great deal of knowledge and observation goes into successful breeding programs, and it is difficult to articulate and share some aspects of these. Breed type, for example, is more easily appreciated visually with live animals than by a written presentation. An appreciation for the interaction of breed type and breed function is also important, and needs to be conveyed to younger breeders so that the conservation of type has an appropriate and logical context rather than being a triviality of purebred breeding that appeals only to fanciers.

Traits of a Master Breeder

Established breeders have responsibilities in training new breeders, but new breeders also have a set of equally important responsibilities. New breeders need to cultivate a combination of attitudes and abilities. To successfully acquire the knowledge that is required to progress towards being a successful breeder, it is ideal to have a passion for the breed, commitment to the long-term success of the breed, adequate financial and other resources to manage and maintain a breeding population, a clearheaded commercial or utilitarian outlook that does not sacrifice breed type or heritage, personal integrity, an "eye" for good stock and for type, pride without arrogance, and an ability to listen and learn from diverse resources and to be reasonably free of assumptions.

Passion for the breed is critical for



Breeder training short courses and field days can be very helpful in transmitting important details of breed selection to the new stewards. Marjorie Bender, Ron Hodson, and Don Schrider evaluate Buckeyes as a part of ALBC's participation in the Renewing America's Food Traditions project. Photo by Jeannette Beranger.

long-term success in the breed. Certain breeds "click" with certain people, and these are the combinations that work best. When new breeders select breeds, or strains within breeds, it is important that they find a project that inherently appeals to them. Passion is difficult to force into a situation where it is not already present, and passion about a breeding program is a key component for the dedication that is necessary for success.

Commitment is important because breeds benefit from long-term programs much more than they do from short-term endeavors. It is almost invariably damaging to breeds when breeders acquire stock and then disperse it after only a few generations of breeding. While dispersals occur for a variety of reasons, a committed breeder will work diligently to place key breeding stock in the hands of other committed breeders rather than dispersing them indiscriminately or sending them to slaughter. Similarly, informing family and friends of wishes for a herd's dispersal may be a final gift to the breed that a breeder has invested so much in. Breeding programs only significantly contribute to breed maintenance when of a long rather than a short nature, and commitment is key to this.

Finances must be adequate in order to

maintain breeding stock. In most cases the products of the breeding program should cover the cost of maintaining breeding stock. Some people, however, find it difficult to deal with outright commercial aspects of breeding most breeds of livestock. When it becomes impossible to send excess animals to slaughter or to other breeders, then animals accumulate and numbers exceed what is needed for breeding programs. These excess animals do not contribute to effective breeding programs, nor do they contribute to positive cash flow that is needed to maintain breeding stock. This can have a decidedly negative effect on a breeding program. This is a very important aspect, and must be carefully considered before embarking on a breeding program for any breed.

Time is another resource critical to successfully maintaining breeding stock. A new breeder must be realistic about how much time is available to invest in a breeding program. Inevitably this time must come from other activities, and careful consideration must be given to which activities can be curtailed or eliminated to devote to a breeding program.

Most breeds benefit from a practical commercial approach that also acknowledges breed type and breed heritage. An extreme commercial approach can ignore

breed type. This results in changing breeds away from breed type rather than a more subtle and productive selection within the constraints of breed type for commercial utility. Morgan horses, for example, have a number of bloodlines that are a park-horse type rather than the earlier, traditional, multi-purpose farm horse type. This change was largely driven by market forces and breeders willing to sacrifice breed type for commercial gain. The uniqueness of the breed was eroded by this change, and the result has not been an effective strategy for breed maintenance.

Moral integrity of all breeders is necessary to safeguard the reputation of the individuals, the association, and ultimately the animals themselves. Records must be honest, and animals must be honestly represented to both registries and customers.

Developing an "eye" for breed type and good stock is a subtle but important ability that master breeders possess. For many people this is almost instinctive, and therefore difficult to describe. It is even more difficult to train other people in how to achieve "eye," but eager young breeders can go a long way by seeking out older breeders and not only talking to them, but also trying to see with their eyes when inspecting animals. It is especially helpful to inspect and evaluate animals alongside an old established breeder, because this activity brings many subtle but powerful details to bear. Livestock judges can help greatly in this by inviting young breeders to evaluate livestock alongside them, asking the young breeders "what do you see?" rather than telling them up front what the experienced breeder sees. Forcing younger breeders to actively inspect and evaluate stock is an essential component of evaluating an eye for type and evaluation.

Taking pride in the fruits of a breeding program without being arrogant is also important. Most successful breeders are reasonably unassuming, and listen effectively to others. They can sort through what is said and can learn something from just about anyone. They put this stored knowledge to good use. Arrogance precludes the receipt of much information and defeats many breeders because they are missing important bits of information or technique.

Summary

Becoming a master breeder is slow, complicated work, but deliberate cultivation of these abilities and attitudes by older breeders and associations can help



Frank Reese leading participants in one of ALBC's Turkey Breeder Clinics. Photo by Marjorie Bender.

greatly in the process. The greatest master breeders have all of these attributes, but these true masters are few indeed. Nevertheless, knowing what is needed for the breed to carry on is important to associations. Knowing what is needed can enable associations (and breeders) to identify and nurture young breeders with potential to succeed. Both associations and experienced breeders can help young enthusiasts understand the level of personal commitment needed for the personal and intellectual education they need to master the

breeding of livestock or poultry.

Breed associations can encourage and facilitate the development of all these strengths that breeders need. To do that, they first need to identify and recognize master breeders from within their ranks. They then need to engage in good communication and develop educational mechanisms that assure the opportunity for the masters to be able to impart both their knowledge and their wisdom to the next generation of breeders. Recruitment and training of the next generation is the best of all options for breed security. ❖

Excerpted and adapted from Managing Breeds for a Secure Future, a soon to be released book about the role of breed associations in breed conservation by D. P. Sponenberg and D.E. Bixby.

ALBC has developed a number of tools to aid breeders and associations in pursuit of mastery. A Conservation Breeding Handbook by Sponenberg and Christman, and, soon, Managing Breeds for a Secure Future by Sponenberg and Bixby both provide detailed technical information about breed conservation. Breeder clinics for turkeys and chickens provide hands-on opportunities to develop one's eye and feel under the guidance of a master breeder. Assistance from ALBC is always available and is only a phone call away.

Why Join My Breed Association?

By D. Phillip Sponenberg and Donald E. Bixby

A recent discussion with the association secretary/registrar of one of the more successful conservation breeds revealed a disturbing fact. Each year she looks at the *ALBC Breeders Directory* for breeders that overlap both associations. She knows most of the member breeders ALBC lists, but not all are members of the breed association. Usually, she sends ALBC members a brochure for the association she represents, but over the years few join. We are concerned that ALBC members, who undoubtedly consider themselves conservation breed stewards, would not also support their breed association.

In ALBC's experience, strong breed associations are essential to successful breed conservation. Conversely, weak and ineffective breed associations can be a serious threat to the well being of a breed.

Breed associations are groups of people with a shared interest in a specific breed. Issues involved in breed associations are vitally important to the maintenance and conservation of pure breeds of livestock. Each member brings to an association certain strengths, needs, and perspectives. All of these must be managed effectively to assure that individual member needs are met, while also meeting the shared goals of the group. Many breeds are rare because of political and organizational failure on the part of breed associations. Breeds must not only survive the physical environment, they must also survive the political environment of their own breeders!

Three important purposes for associations are communication, education, and usually registry documentation. While the importance of communication and education

Continued on next page

Why Join My Breed Association?

Continued from previous page

are not to be dismissed, for breeds with a registry this function is essential if a breed is to persist into the future. The most basic function of a registry is to validate individual animals as being of a specific breed. This is usually based on recorded pedigrees. Registration assures breeders, regardless of where they are, that animals with the validation of registration are *bona fide* members of the breed. That knowledge allows breeders to confidently include such animals in purebred mating programs. When a registry exists for a breed, it is impossible to be a conservation steward without providing this documentation for the animals that are produced as breeding stock. Without pedigree documentation these animals are lost to the breed.

It must be noted that some livestock breeds, especially feral and landrace populations, may not have the support of an association or a pedigree registry system. This makes genetic documentation difficult and adds to the challenges of conservation. Poultry, while not registered and usually not pedigreed, still benefit from strong breed associations that foster purebred breeding, breeder communication, and breed promotion.

Management and promotion of the breed are at the core of an association's purpose. Management and promotion are both served by the essential components of education and communication. An important goal of associations that serve rare breeds is to locate and include all breeders of purebred animals in the association, and to include all purebred animals in the registry, while excluding all non-purebred animals. This requires the cooperation and participation of breeders. Details of genetic management of breeds are especially relevant to rare breed associations. While associations for common breeds tend to focus more on improvement of production genetics, associations for rare breeds must also pay close attention to genetic aspects of breed population viability. This takes the participation of all breeders.

Breed associations can work only if breeders are truly engaged and involved in the best interests of their breed. The breed



It is imperative that older stewards share their knowledge and experience with the next generation of stewards. Pictured discussing Mulefoot hogs are RM Holliday and Bret Kortie. Photo by Arie McFarlen, courtesy of Maveric Heritage Ranch Co.

association and breeder members should be working for common goals. In order for a breed to remain viable all breeders should be producing some animals that will be useful in purebred breeding programs. This broad base of contribution to the pure breed assures that no single breeding program, and therefore single bloodline, dominates the others and narrows the genetic base of the breed.

One obvious benefit of association membership is to gain education about purebred breeding and breed characteristics as well as access to action plans or at least a network of breeders to rescue herds that are in peril of being disbanded through commercial (and this generally means slaughter) channels. Associations can help to build a breed culture of informed awareness concerning dispersals. This should ideally result in each breeder having a plan for the dispersal of his or her herd in case of accident or other disaster. Association rescue plans should only be a last resort when breeder plans fail.

Breed conservation cannot reach full potential without the help of every breeder. This means documenting breeding stock by registering your animals and supporting your breed association with your membership and participation. Usually we are inviting breeders to join ALBC to support conservation of rare breeds, but we

also invite, even urge, that if you are not a member of your breed association, please join today. Breed association contact information will be found in your ALBC Breeders Directory. ♦

Excerpted and adapted from Managing Breeds for a Secure Future, a soon-to-be-released book about the role of breed associations in breed conservation by D. P. Sponenberg and D.E. Bixby.

Books Donated to the ALBC Library

Donations of interesting books continue to fill the shelves of the ALBC Library. Bill Hadlow sent *Grass-fed Cattle* by Julius Ruechel, *Farm Stock of Old* by Sir Walter Gilbey, *Commercial Poultry Raising* by H. Armstrong Roberts, *96 Horse Breeds of North America* by Judith Dutson, *Animal Science* by M.E. Enslinger, *Applied Animal Nutrition* by Peter Cheeke, and *Biology of the Domestic Pig* by Wilson Pond and Harry Mersmann. Ann Brown and Letty Klein set a copy of *The Shepherd's Rug: A Braided Wool Rug From Roving*. ALBC appreciates these generous gifts!