

SIMBRA: AN INDEPENDENT BREED OR A GENETIC VARIATION OF THE SIMMENTAL

Dr O F C Herrigel
Windhoek, Namibia

INTRODUCTION

This article is in reaction to the Simmental World Congress of 1996 in Pretoria, South Africa. where the following statement by a Simmental breeder created considerable controversy amongst Simbra breeders:

"it is questionable whether this decision, to develop a new breed (the Simbra) is feasible in the medium to long term. Up to now, it has always been the case that such synthetic breeds reach a dead end with regard to genetic material"

Simbra breeders reacted with disbelief and shock. How could anybody question the decision to develop the Simbra as a new breed - a breed which is, in one form or another, becoming most popular world - wide and is already being considered the breed of the 21st century. The question raised was whether this statement was not possibly motivated by the realisation of the impact that this new breed may have on commercial farming.

I do believe in the value of controversy. I also believe that the above quoted statement has its validity and is most appropriate at this moment in time. Simbra breeders must face this challenge and must be able to reply to the above in a rational and convincing way. The question revolves around the concern of a too narrow genetic base which may lead to "inbreeding or outbreeding.

Let us therefore approach the issue broadmindedly and unbiased, without entering into a debate on the pro's and con's of "inbreeding and/or outbreeding".

WHAT IS THE SIMBRA ?

In Southern Africa the Simbra is being developed by way of a proven F1 to F4 generation breeding method based on a 1/4 Brahman and 3/4 Simmental genetic composition. In America the Simbrah (with an 'h' at the end) is being developed on the basis of 3/8 Brahman and 5/8 Simmental genetic composition. However, the American Simbrah Herd Book registers several other percentages. from 1/4 Brahman and 3/4 Simmental, to 3/4 Brahman and 1/4 Simmental. allowing for the broadest possible genetic base. and allowing breeders to match their cattle to their environment.

In southern Africa the proven method of allowing "phenotype cum genotype" animals to breed from after inspection in reality also allows for a broader spectrum of genetic composition than the stated 1/4 Brahman and 3/4 Simmental. This is sound breeding policy.

Simbra cattle can have any colour and be polled or dehorned, and breeders are allowed the necessary variation for their environment and market. Performance testing forms one of the cornerstones of the breeding program. Simbra breeders believe that their breed is what the commercial cattle industry needs. The continued increasing popularity of Simbra is ample proof that the breeders are right.

WHY SIMBRA ?

Simbra (and its closely related Simbrah) are considered - and not without reason - to be the "World's Breed". because its two parent breeds: Brahman and its Zebu relatives as well as the Simmental, are the two most populous beef and dual purpose breeds in the world. All over the world, in tropical and subtropical regions, Simbra (or its related Simmental times other Zebu breeds) are being developed as the best choice for meat production under environmental stress conditions, e.g. heat, humidity, parasites and insects. The majority of the beef producing regions of the world lie within these areas where cattle need Zebu blood in order to produce at an optimum level, making Simbra types the preferred choice.

In southern Africa, Simmental and Brahman have become the most popular and populous dual purpose and beef breeds and are used extensively in the commercial cross breeding systems. Is it not logical to therefore develop this new breed to satisfy the demand? The belief in the future of the new Simbra breed is well justified because of how well it has retained the most positive traits of both parent breeds. Simmental provide fertility, milk, growth, meat and disposition, while Brahman provide calving ease, mothering ability, pigmentation, adaptability, longevity, heat-, parasite- and insect tolerance.

WHAT ABOUT A TOO NARROW GENETIC BASE?

No doubt the success of the Simbra breed in southern Africa will be directly linked to the size of the genetic pool, as well as to the continuous flow of fresh genetics into the pool. While we in southern Africa were concentrating on developing the breed as fast as possible by stabilising same in a proven four generation breeding program, the Americans were more concerned in developing the largest possible genetic "basis" pool from which stabilisation could follow later. I am personally inclined to support both these approaches simultaneously and further would stress the importance of an open herd book to become an integral part of the Simbra breeding program to ensure an unceasing flow of fresh genetics into the pool. We should continue with our stabilisation breeding program which must, however, run parallel with our aims and programs to create the broadest possible genetic base for the future.

Being based on two of the most populous breeds in the world, we should have no difficulty in following this line - the genetic base of the two parent breeds being almost unlimited.

HOW TO BROADEN THE GENETIC BASE

In southern Africa, the genetic female, F1 base is presently created from using "basis" animals (selected by inspection from phenotype cum genotype half blood - 1/2 Simmental and 1/2 Brahman - crosses) paired with registered Simmental bulls. It is, however, also possible to register so-called "cum F1" females selected by inspection, from phenotype cum genotype 1/4 Brahman and 3/4 Simmental animals. The majority of females tend to come from commercial herds. What should be encouraged is to tap the huge quality resource of registered Simmental and Brahman females, by propagating the mating: of top Simmental bulls with Brahman females on the one hand, and very carefully selected half blood bulls with Simmental females on the other hand. In the first instance we would be breeding the best possible "basis" females (as well as a few carefully selected half blood bulls) to be paired to selected registered Simmental bulls to produce the best possible F1 genetic pool, and in the second instance, we would be directly breeding the best possible F1 males and females.

We should not ignore the potential of using carefully selected half blood bulls for more rapid genetic development and expansion of the genetic base, neither should we be afraid to utilise semen of the American Simbrah type (including half bloods), especially where quick genetic progress is required, e.g. with regard to polled strains. Care should be taken that

the unwanted characteristics like straight hocks (found in America) are not bred into our Simbra via semen import.

It must be emphasised that stabilisation on its own. through the proven F1 to F4 breeding program will not lead to the Simbra breed becoming a success. A multifunctional approach is required by developing part of the herd to continuously broaden the genetic base.

Consequently we must actively encourage shows in southern Africa, not to discriminate against F1 to F3 Simbra. but rather to encourage the broadest possible showing of Simbra.

PEOPLE MAKE A BREED

Undoubtedly the Simbra breed depends on its breeders. In this regard it is wonderful to see the enthusiasm, determination, patience and diligence with which Simbra breeders in southern Africa (and Simbra breeders world wide) attend to the development of their breed. Simbra breeders are friendly, open-minded and progressive. Simbra breeders are blessed with numerous dedicated cattlemen and cattlemen developing their herds from the two largest breeds in the world and therewith guaranteeing the success of the Simbra breed.

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Simbra breeders have a great admiration for the two parent breeds, the Simmental and the Brahman. In actual fact many Simbra breeders also breed Simmental cattle and vice versa. I have however no doubt that the Simbra breed will and must continue as an own independent breed under the umbrella of the Simmentaler Cattle Breeders' Society. Provided the principle of an open herd book is applied, the continuous inflow of fresh genetic material from the two most populous and popular breeds are guaranteed and the future of the Simbra is unlimited. I am firmly convinced that what the Simbra represents cannot be adapted within the Simmental breed without the Simmental totally losing its own identity. SIMBRA (and SIMBRAH) is not without reason considered the breed of the 21st century.

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