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 Big operators: Jeanne Seifert and Ian Stark from Seifert Belmont Red Stud at Jandowe in Queensland.

Seifert Belmont Reds: Queensland beef producers Jeanne Seifert and Ian Stark breed for the future

JAMES WAGSTAFF, The Weekly Times

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WHEN Jeanne Seifert says she was born to breed Belmont Red cattle, she's not joking.

The 55-year-old entered the world at the Belmont Research Station, near Rockhampton in Queensland, where the tropically adapted breed originated, as the daughter of one of its key architects.

Not that sentiment has ever clouded her judgment.

"If any other breed was the best breed for northern Australia I'd be just as passionate about it," Jeanne said.


At the time of Jeanne's birth in 1963, her father, Dr George Seifert, was the principal research scientist with the CSIRO, which had been directed by the Queensland Government to develop a more robust beef breed for northern Australia.

It followed a tough period during the 1950s for the national beef herd when a combination of drought, heat, ticks and flies devastated numbers.

While a Hereford-Brahman cross became widely popular among northern producers, the CSIRO looked into how other tropically adapted strains, including the Africander, from the *Bos Taurus africanus* subspecies, could stack up in the paddock and on the plate.

Researchers undertook a breeding program involving crossing Brahmans and Africander with the British-bred Shorthorn and Hereford, and Jeanne said while the initial Brahman-British cross produced an “amazing” F1, increased Brahman influence in successive generations presented fertility, temperament and meat quality issues.



 Jeanne and Ian run a herd of 2300 cattle across 6678ha in two districts, and sell about 150 bulls a year.

On the other hand the fertility, weight gain, temperament, heat tolerance and tick resistance, as well as good meat quality, offered by the 50 per cent Africander 25 per cent Hereford and 25 per cent Shorthorn cross impressed scientists.

RED ROAR

RESEARCHERS released the Africander-Hereford-Shorthorn cross to industry as the Belmont Red breed in 1969. At this stage Dr Seifert was studying his PhD in animal genetics and statistics at Iowa State University in the US. On his return to Australia in 1970, he started his own herd by joining Belmont Red bulls to Brahman cows.

Jeanne said her hands-on involvement with the breed began in 1999 when she bought 30 cows and a bull from her father and started a small herd on 40ha on the outskirts of Brisbane.

In 2004, with a desire to get more involved in cattle breeding, she sold the Brisbane block and bought 2000ha at Emu Creek, near Crows Nest, north of Toowoomba, capable of running 500 breeding cows.

She later met and married Ian Stark, who also had properties around Crows Nest, they combined their landholdings and three years ago bought 3400ha about 150km west at Jandowae in Queensland's Western Downs region.

Jeanne and Ian are in the final stages of buying another 5600ha of "eastern country" north of Chinchilla, which they say will be partly funded through the sale of 2400ha at Emu Creek. It will take their total land size to about 9800ha.

At Jandowae, the country is mostly brigalow and belah, with some influence of bottle tree, box and wattle, running up to some spotted gum ridges. At Emu Creek it is spear grass and ironbark, with decomposed granite and lots of lantana and cattle ticks.

Both properties, theoretically, work on an annual average rainfall of 700mm.

HERD TIME

JEANNE and Ian work on a "no bulls--t" philosophy with all animals required to perform — or they're out the gate. They are currently running about 2300 head including cows and calves, replacement heifers and bulls, across their existing five properties.

"We don't have a philosophy of showing and artificially propping cattle up, so they really are tough," Jeanne said.

She said the Belmont Red was a highly profitable breed despite not being well known and "not all that well accepted", which she partly attributes to their culture of objective measurement.

Jeanne and Ian are big adopters of Breedplan and strive to have every trait of economic importance — including fertility, growth, carcass, and temperament — above the 50th percentile.

This year they are focusing a bit more on muscling and yield, having succeeded in influencing favourable high scrotal size and negative days to calving. When it comes to joining yearling heifers at 13-14 months, they select bulls for low birthweight and negative gestation length. This year, for the first time, Jeanne used Breedplan's MateSel tool, which can select the best sires to go with the most suitable females to deliver the best-possible matings.



BREED TO SUCCEED

MOST years Jeanne and Ian conduct an artificial insemination program.

Last year, for the first time, they used in-vitro fertilisation technology, which Jeanne said had some very distinct advantages over ET in that females didn't require to be super-ovulated, which presented a risk of subsequent infertility and, in their breeding system, would mean the cow could miss a natural mating season. Joining starts late November for a spring calving. At Jandowae, one-year-old heifers are joined for nine weeks while two-year-old heifers too young or light to join the previous year are joined for six weeks. In the poorer eastern country, joining is for 12 weeks.

Jeanne said mob sizes were usually dictated by mating groups. Young yearling bulls, weaned in April then semen tested for a percentage of normal morphology and motility in November, are used at 13-14 months of age. Depending on the paddock size, one yearling bull will run with 40-60 - females.

Two-year-old bulls are used with one bull capable of serving 80, 90 or even 100 females. Jeanne said pregnancy rates varied from 78-82 per cent during the toughest year at Emu Creek to a mind-blowing 98 per cent on first calf lactating yearling mated heifers in a good season at Jandowae.

In a CashCow research project looking at fertility in northern Australia, involving 72 commercial producers, the Seifert Belmont Red return-to-calf rates were an impressive 45 per cent above the average.

CALF MUSCLE

CALVES are weaned between five and eight months old. This year Jeanne and Ian weaned during April in the east and in May at Jandowae.

"You don't do your calves or your cows any favours by keeping them on their mothers until they're nearly one, because calves need starches to get their rumen developing," Jeanne said.

While Jeanne and Ian aren't cell graziers they were "obsessional about rotational resting" paddocks and growing grass. Every summer, after a rainfall event and when soil temperatures are warm, they rest paddocks for a minimum of three weeks.

The best calves are kept as replacement females and bulls. Temperament is Jeanne and Ian's No.1 selection criterion.

Surplus steers and heifers are sold to feedlots or processors after being fed to 400kg.

Any cow that has lost a calf or failed to get in calf again is sold to meatworks while those in poor condition after weaning suffer the same fate after being fed pellets for six weeks.

GO FIGURE

JEANNE and Ian are very focused on recording every trait, including flight speed, birthweights, 200-day, 400-day and 600-day weights, mature cow weights, scrotal size, female fertility data and live and dead carcass scanning.

They involve themselves in "any research project we can", including currently the Northern Beef Genomics Project, and DNA test all their male calves for poll and horned gene and sire verification.

Focused on meeting Meat Standards Australia specifications for eating quality, they participate in carcass competitions to benchmark their cattle against the industry.

They have won or placed in every carcass competition they have ever entered steers in.

At the Beef Australia 2018 carcass competition in Rockhampton this year they were placed fourth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, 10th, 11th and 12th in the trade steer class.

Seifert Belmont Reds sells up to 150 bulls in an average year to a client base spread as far north as the Victoria River district of the Northern Territory and south to Victoria.

Jeanne said they had exported genetics to New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea and, more recently, developed a relationship with cattle producers in Paraguay.

Looking forward, the acquisition of extra land will see them producing 250 bulls annually in the not-too-distant future.

