

Whenever the breeding goals or the benefits of using Red Dairy genetics are discussed, the conversation settles to the fact that Red breeds are a middle of the road breed which avoids production and conformation extremes, but delivers strong efficiencies through low maintenance inputs, positive health and easy management. Hence the term invisible cow.

Like all livestock breeders, Red Dairy cattle breeders devote a great deal of time toward constant breed improvement and therefore have a good product to sell to commercial dairyfarmers who are largely focused on other aspects of dairyfarming. It is therefore helpful to continually update ourselves about farm ownership and farm management trends, so that our Red Cow product will continue to meet the needs of commercial dairyfarmers. After all, if commercial dairyfarmers have no desire for our genetics, then Reds will quickly fall in to the antique category. We must direct our efforts toward commercial utilisation, rather than breed maintenance.

Farm ownership is taking new directions, with many families passing their dairy farm to a new generation of farmers with new priorities. One model has an enthusiastic young farmer entering a business partnership with a commercial investor and operating similarly to traditional family operations, although decision making does include an investor perspective. Another model is being led by a fund manager who invests capital from private and superannuation funds, to acquire many farms and employ managers to operate them with centralised administration. Thirdly are some very successful dairyfarm families who have grown much bigger than their peers and are adopting corporate management methods.

Another change is the transition from “visual appraisal decision making” method of previous generations, to “data based decision making” which the new generation of farmers are adopting. This change should have been expected because all through the education system, data analysis is taught as the gold standard for decision making and thus data has become the currency of genetic choices. But the problem for Reds is reliable data is only available in some countries.

So what are we doing to gain this data and how are we communicating with the whole range of herd sizes which are practicing data based decision making? From where I am looking, our communication to date is limited mostly to small and medium size operations, which are a stewarding a dwindling proportion of the world’s dairy cow population. Perhaps the situation is different where you live, or maybe these investor farms are not part of your farming landscape, below you will read about the situation in South America, where “hands-off-farm-owners” remain loyal to our competitor breeds.

There are a number of AI companies and distributors who are purposefully targeting herds with planned cross breeding systems and Reds usually form part of a cross breeding triangle. Cross breeding proponents agree that the system works best when elite genetics from each breed are utilised, rather than the haphazard low grade genetic cross breeding systems from history. Purposeful cross breeding has delivered many advantages to its devotees and the merits of Red cross-breds have convinced some to breed a group of their cows to become purebred Red.

But there are countless herds where Reds do not have a market share at all. To conquer this mountain we must have data and yet there are still Red herds which do not measure cow performance through herd recording. This is the foundation of all genetic dairy cow data! We must possess the best dairy genetic material and we must communicate that message effectively.

For Reds to rise above just being a competitive breed, they must deliver all the positive capabilities of other breeds, PLUS extra tangible benefits to a range of production systems. Being equal will never be enough, Reds must be measurably better to become the first choice breed for commercial milk producers.

Having a large, diverse range of farms around the world consistently using red genetics will build a revenue stream and genetic companies will invest more into their Red programmes. Research and new technologies will be applied more readily to reds and the genetic base could become broader, if we manage diversity well in the early stages of growth and perpetuate it with good policies. For these policies to be adhered to, the IRDBF must maintain close contact with all its members and the companies which market our genetics. If not, the company directors will make commercial decisions for the benefit of the company rather than necessarily considering the future of Reds. The present situation varies markedly from one country to another, but we must spread the international workload of managing our unique genetics from our present small committed group, to a broader cross section of scientists, companies, breed groups and farmers. The focus must include new aspects in breed management and marketing if we are to move from just maintaining market share, to reinvigorating Reds with enthusiasm and growth. I am sure this must include larger and more reliable datasets which will improve breeding decisions and marketing confidence.

Here comes a tricky dilemma for Reds: How do we balance the opposing needs of improving breed performance while maintaining diversity? A degree of line breeding or inbreeding will deliver more consistent lines of replacement heifers but it threatens diversity, one of the valuable assets of Red breeds. Must we look for new ways to deliver consistency? Can we maintain several purer strains of genetics within the Red group without affecting subjective performance comparisons? Can genomic selection help, or does it simply manifest the strain of genetics it knows best, at the expense of all the others, thereby reducing diversity?

Comments from Holstein breeders suggest that genomic selection has increased inbreeding to a large degree. Does this mean that breeders should utilise genomic information differently to current practices? Data systems rank animals with high reliability data more highly, because reliability provides greater confidence in the results, while animals with low reliability data but equal performance struggle in the rankings.

To maintain diversity, how should breeders use the less common genetics at their disposal? One way which is used more commonly than some might expect, is to search old semen stocks and use proven bulls from history, their individual trait performance can be accessed easily. While many would say this is a retrograde step, there are a few breeders who do have such genetics producing competitively and Hilltown Ayrshire breeder Mark Nicholls spoke of doing exactly this in the December 2020 newsletter.

What would happen if a breeder sourced genetics from a country or strain which are not closely related to the genetics of their peer herds? Similarly, a breeder could systematically avoid particular strains of genetics in their selections. These strategies will build unique herds but as with using genetic antiques, unless the performance of the resultant progeny is recognised and rewarded with competitive breeding values, they are not likely to contribute significantly to the wider gene pool.

Another strategy to incorporate unique genetics into the mainstream red breed profile is, to mate a “highly ranked” with a “unique” for one generation, then revert to a high breeding value mating next generation. Some might call this a shot of “new blood”. It is possible that the performance of some low breeding value individuals is better than predicted and they become mainstream, while others will continue to be unique. Could the “out and back in” strategy actually increase the rate of improvement by overcoming particular breed weaknesses? Selecting unique genetics can be like finding hidden gems and breeders would need to include new parameters or criteria for their searches.

Some breeding enthusiasts might say that OMAN was the biggest contributor to health trait improvement in the Holstein breed, but initially many breeders feared he would have too many negative effects on their herds. In hindsight we can see that any poor progeny were quickly removed from breeding programmes and OMAN’s contribution to Holstein breed improvement has been largely positive.

In Australia, the Viking bull RDAVID was used widely and there are numerous daughters which have persisted for many lactations, but somehow the bull never reached the highlights of his peers. But now there is one rising star on the Australian scene: ARBYOGIBEAR, whose dam was sired by RDAVID! Another example is AXBLACKWOOD, whose dam was sired by FYN AKS, the sire of RDAVID.

I am not suggesting that using unique genetics is for everyone, nor is it a whole herd strategy but does it have a place? After all, we now have the polled gene available to us in increasing quality, because decades ago some breeders considered the trait so important that they were prepared to utilise breeding animals with the trait in their herds. Some endured years of low performance, or low breeding values, or both, until the polled gene became proliferated through enough high performance daughters for the trait to become mainstream. Was it worth it? Are there be other traits which warrant such effort? Will there be new traits in future which will require this effort? Will modern breeding techniques assist with the selection and introduction of traits from outside the mainstream red breed genetics?

I hope this discussion can continue, but one big question remains in my mind: How do we reward and maintain the range of diverse and unique Red genetics, in a world of intense selection pressure to proliferate the best for the greatest economic gain? Placing slightly unusual genetics in a museum to be periodically screened for some long lost trait is not the solution. They must be actively managed in commercial operations where selection pressure will maintain their rate of performance improvement. Their breeders must receive both an economic and a breeding value reward for their effort, or they will discontinue this important work.

The time of greatest risk for the future of unique genetics is at the point of generational farmer change over, when the data analysing farmer generation begins to make breeding decisions for the herd.

Read on now for the observations and experiences of Elisabeth Avendano, who writes from her home in Argentina.



Fourth calver by own bull by Orkko x T Bruno

The first Swedish Red doses arrived in Argentina only a short time after the future Aussie Red breeders had made their first importations of the red breed semen from Northern Europe. Unfortunately the results in South America have not have not been as fabulous or visible as compared to Australia. And this is not because the breed or the selection program are less suited to our country, our climates being very similar....

Of course we had no red breed to build on, but had to start from scratch, the Holstein breed of North American origin was reigning supreme in Argentina, the old Dairy Shorthorn having been totally eradicated decades before.

The type of Holstein cow advocated by argentine breeders was the tall, high producing show type animal, utterly unsuitable for the type of grazing based production system mostly used here. The cows did poorly in the heat of the summer, their sheer size and weight, often combined with not always great legs, made walking long distances especially difficult and heavy during the rainy periods, or in the extreme heat. And adding to this are the difficult calvings and the often low female fertility...

Although many Holstein breeders of course would never even LOOK at our smaller Red Ladies, and still won't, quite a few - smaller farmers principally - did like the sound of easy calvings, female fertility, healthy udders and male calves good for fattening.... so, all in all, we found a growing interest among farmers wanting to use Swedish Red semen - or bulls - to try to improve on those traits.

We ourselves started out on a Holstein herd, rapidly assembled by some investors that offered my husband to put up our land to house and milk these 300+ Holstein heifers. We were just coming out of a devastating flood and having lost everything : crops, animals, this seemed as a great opportunity to move on, my husband having been advisor and administrator of a neighbouring farm where they milked very good Holstein cows, knew what problems the dairy production entailed .

When the first of these newly acquired heifers started to calve, the results were disastrous: obviously they came from different farms and had been bred to anything, just to get them pregnant for sale. We lost too many heifers that first year, due to enormous calves, some of which we were able to get out, but many we were unable to deliver without hurting the mother - we kept the vets busy and still lost a lot of young heifers...

A most unfortunate beginning, but one that gave my husband the opportunity to suggest the use of bulls of an unknown breed that he had seen in Sweden, that was supposed to give very easy calvings....



Third calver by VR Leroy x Ullimulli x Backgård

So, our first import of Swedish Red semen became a reality and already the next season calving difficulties dropped from 17 % VERY DIFFICULT calvings to 4 % "slightly assisted" calvings in the Holstein heifers. Today in our Swedish Red heifers we don't have to assist at all, unless the presentation is bad or entwined twins, which is very seldom....

In the beginning it was not easy to reach farmers, although advertising in a technical magazine did help some. During 10 years we also were able to show our cows each year on a special Dairy Show in Northern of Cordoba. It was far away, tiring for the cows and for us, but that really helped to us reach a lot of farmers who found what they were looking for in our healthy and fertile reds. We still have the majority of our clients in the province of Cordoba, but our bulls are mostly used for crossbreeding. Unfortunately, due to unstable political situation this show ceased to be held, nor did another appear to replace it.

We do have some farmers who have decided to go all red, often smaller farmers who milk and pull calves themselves and so were able to value the advantages of cows that are easy going and trouble free, but we also have some larger farms, mostly ecological production who find the health of our cows a great advantage. The ecological production has had a huge upswing here over the last years as Nestlé is paying a lot more for "ecological milk" than for "normal" milk.... Some time ago they also offered a much better price for A2A2 milk, unheard of here until then, so now lot of companies are offering bulls that are A2A2.

From the very beginning, many farmers contacted us wanting to buy BULLS, not semen. But of course at the time we only had the first cross, many were black and we had to insist they buy semen. That way we lost many interested clients, for a lot of Argentine farmers simply don't want to get into the hassle of heat detection and insemination. So, not being able to get a Swedish Red bull from us, they opted for using Jersey bulls instead, to ensure easy calvings. This was 30 years ago. Now our Reds are in their 5th, 6th or even more generation and can thus be considered "pure" by our and even by Swedish standards.



Fourth calver by VR Hambo x Gunnarstorp x G Ross x Ekeslunda.
Great udder health: 6.000 SCC in her last recording.

However, in spite of some farmers going all red, although most still crossbreed, there is no real interest for breeding or even keeping genetic registers: the record was held by a huge dairy-farm of over 1,000 cows. They bought 17 young bulls from us and rotated them in pairs of 3 or four in the milking herd and next year came back for 12 more... The next year they wanted 1,000 doses of the least expensive bull we had, were going to try insemination instead.... Very few of our clients, even those who buy purebred heifers from us, and then get good bulls for inseminating, register the inseminations.

During the 30 years that we have been importing the Viking bulls and also been using some Norwegian polled bulls, we see an enormous improvement in the general conformation, particularly udders and also in production of course, particularly solids. We don't see too much of the production increase, as our management is mostly pasture based, but I am a great admirer of the Nordic selection programs and feel humbly grateful to be able to work with those genetics and also being part of the spreading of the breed in South America.

It is a bit lonely not having others interested in genetics, but at least the breed continues spreading and the interest for healthier cows that live longer and are more adapted to the grazing systems that we can use here is continually growing.

Also it is sort of a "genetic luxury" I feel to be able to both breed and sell our own bulls. It enables us to add more descendants of our very best dams to our herd, something that in Sweden would be done with embryo transfer, but in our case we find natural breeding easier to manage and more effective. By using the sons of our very best cows by Viking or NRF top sires, we are very happy about some really great daughters. And it does make an old genetic nerd feel extremely thankful for those who work on the other side of the world to make so many fabulous animals available to us to work with...

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