

Volume 5 Issue 2: Do Old Shorthorn Genetics Have A Future?

Farm Update

This winter has been very mild here in Oregon with moderate temperatures and decreased rainfall. With the drier conditions our cows went back on pasture full time on March 17th which is the earliest ever. Obviously both the cows and I were very pleased. Hay consumption decreased by 20% which was a substantial saving in these trying times. Given the evolving tragedy of Covid-19, farmers everywhere have had to modify their plans and try to conserve their resources in the hopes that the world will return to a sense of normalcy soon. The question for all of us is when?

Quarterly Topic: Do Old Shorthorn Genetics Have A Future?

What are Old Shorthorn Genetics?

Discussing the usage of Old Shorthorn Genetics (OSG) encompasses three factors: time frame, quality, and artificial insemination. Time frame and quality are issues because almost all Shorthorns in the 1950's were the pony/dwarf/belt-buckle variety. There were a few "pockets" with quality Shorthorn genetics but most Shorthorn beef breeders had embraced the Shorthorn Show model which was short legs and compact bodies. Blame for this development can be placed on breed societies, judges, and breeders themselves as everyone became infatuated with the concept of "Baby Beef". The early 1980's were a turning point in the Shorthorn breed as tall became the dominant selection trait in beef Shorthorns with Maine Anjou creeping into the Beef Shorthorn Herdbook. Milking Shorthorns became intoxicated by the single pursuit of milk quantity and they allowed Illawarra/Red and White Holsteins to enter the Milking Shorthorn Herdbook. Artificial insemination started to emerge in the 1950's as way of quickly spreading positive genes in the Shorthorn breed. Fortunately it also ended up preserving semen from top quality Shorthorn Bulls which we still have available today. Many excellent Shorthorn Bulls that were born between the late 1950's to the early 1980's are still preserved in semen tanks. That semen may be in ampules, "Magic Wands", or straws.

Why are Old Shorthorn Genetics Important?

Crossbred/Composite cattle have come to dominate both the beef and dairy industries. There are a plethora of reasons for it but I think it all comes down to the pursuit of profits while ignoring the bigger picture and other beneficial genetic traits. What do I mean? It is totally understandable that commercial cattle producers take different qualities from different breeds to maximize their financial returns. Historically "Black Baldies" (Hereford Angus crosses) were considered a great maternal cross. Recently the popularity of the "Pro Cross" in dairy cattle and "SimAngus" in beef cattle are two examples of commercially rewarding crosses. What most breeders forget about is there is an ongoing need for a stable pure gene pool to maximize the positive heterogeneity of that cross. As the Milking Shorthorn has morphed into Red and White Holstein/Shorthorn cross and the American Shorthorn Association has embraced the Shorthorn Plus concept pure Shorthorn Genetics are becoming increasingly scarce. Many Registered Milking Shorthorns are now more than 50% Red and White Holsteins while 30% of the registrations recorded by the American Shorthorn Association (ASA) are Shorthorn Pluses i.e. Angus composites. The breed changing decisions made by AMSS and ASA have actually

decreased Shorthorn value in the commercial cattle market be it dairy or beef. Why? Modern Milking Shorthorns have little to offer the dairy industry that Red and White Holsteins cannot provide. The March 25, 2020 Hoard's Dairyman article on "Bull Proofs" details how Modern Milking Shorthorns continue to lose ground when compared to all other dairy breeds. Beef Shorthorns with the Angus Shorthorn Plus are actually offering less when it comes to the traits commercial cattlemen value than SimAngus and diminishing the maternal qualities that were once prized in the beef industry. It is also important to mention that Old Shorthorn Genetics do not carry the burden of modern genetic defects that have come from the introduction of Red and White Holsteins or Maine Anjou. It's still important that all bulls be tested, but the chances of discovering any of known genetic defects is remote in Heritage Shorthorns. Old Shorthorn Genetics can be the salvation of the Shorthorn breed because it has the genetic reservoir that made Shorthorns the dominant breed in the world for a hundred years. There is a reason Shorthorns were called the "Mother Of All Breeds".

How Can Old Shorthorn Genetics Be Utilized?

I am constantly amazed at the variety, quality, diversity, and amount of semen still in existence from old Heritage Shorthorn Bulls. It seems, almost, that New "Old" Shorthorn semen is being routinely discovered in old semen tanks. There are literally several hundred bulls still available. This presents a tremendous opportunity for Heritage Shorthorn breeders to seize the moment and use this semen to reinvigorate both dairy and beef Shorthorns. With the knowledge of how and why many of these bulls "worked", I believe discerning, insightful Heritage Shorthorn breeders can rectify some of the missteps of AMSS and ASA and return Shorthorns to being significant niche players in the cattle industry rather than slowly fading away or just becoming another composite cattle breed. Based on the feedback I am receiving from many Heritage Shorthorn breeders, especially in the USA and Canada, I anticipate an explosion of New "Old" Shorthorn Genetics in the next 5 years. This will dramatically increase both the quality and diversity of Heritage Shorthorn offspring, as well as increase their usage to replace lost, beneficial qualities in modern beef and dairy cattle.

What is the Future of Old Shorthorn Genetics?

With the expanding availability of quality Heritage Shorthorns comes the challenge of getting the word out and demonstrating they are a viable alternative to what is currently available in Shorthorn genetics. The keys moving forward are quality, diversity, and relevance. The quality issue reigns supreme. Just because a Shorthorn bull is old does not guarantee he is any good. Heritage Shorthorn breeders must research and develop Shorthorns that fit the modern cattle business, not the cattle business of years ago when Shorthorns started to lose their "mojo". Diversity is important because, as Heritage Shorthorn breeders, we must be committed to constantly improving our "product". That can only be achieved through the utilization of proper selection of quality animals rising above "barn blindness" and realizing it is the ticket to success. With a diversity of Heritage Shorthorn genetics at our disposal, we should be able to improve our own herd. and supply a variety of end markets. Relevance will only happen if Heritage Shorthorn breeders start "tooting" their own horns instead of kowtowing to conventional cross breeding trends. This can be accomplished via: Promotion! Promotion! Promotion! Only by actively reaching out in a multitude of venues from the local fair to social media can we achieve recognition. I think it is extremely important to embrace the usage of the term "Heritage Shorthorn", not only because of the marketing opportunities it opens up,

but because it moves every Heritage Shorthorn breeder beyond the negative image of “native” that courses through both the cattle industry and the general public. In addition, I think there are a wide variety of opportunities for Shorthorn breeders in other countries to embrace “the back to basics model”. Yes, they may not have the diversity of Heritage Bull semen that is available in the USA and Canada. However, I know that searches in old semen tanks may reveal “hidden treasures” that can be used to develop Heritage Shorthorn lines in other countries which can then be used to exploit new markets. I am extremely optimistic about the opportunities that await those who embrace the Heritage Shorthorn (Old Shorthorn Genetics) model.

Shorthorn Bulletin Topic For Volume 5 Issue 3: Lies, Damn Lies, Statistics, and EPDs

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