

# THE HORMONAL MAIL

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## EDITORIAL

We have again recently seen the powerlessness that humans have over Mother Nature when she decides to show some of her many sides. Over the years we have developed strategies to assist in offsetting some of these extremes that she challenges us with. However, when she becomes fully determined to have her way, there is little that we can do about it. In Australia in recent years we have seen many of our pastoral areas ravaged with drought and have had to bear the pain this causes in so many ways. Then to seemingly add insult to injury, some of the worst drought areas in the northern regions of Australia have had monsoonal floods that have resulted in up towards a million head of the nation's cattle herd being lost.

These losses have hit producers hard who were already struggling to keep their stock alive through the drought and then to suddenly be hit by flooding rains on parched earth has been a devastating and bitter blow for them. Certainly, rain was most welcome and sorely needed in so many areas, but not to the extent it saturated some areas.

Cattle that were already weakened by drought conditions suddenly found themselves being swept away in creeks that had become raging torrents only hours after they had laid dry and bare for many months and years in some places. If they weren't swept away in the flooding waters, they found themselves knee deep in mud without the strength to lift one foot after the other and so just perished where they collapsed from exhaustion.

As I write about these events in Australia, I am also aware that many of you in other countries have seen or experienced similar acts of nature that have caused severe destruction and devastation in your own countries. Regardless of where we live, there are times when there is nothing we can do to withstand the fluctuations that Mother Nature exhibits in her behaviour. Accepting that it is inevitable that there will be times in our lives that we have to accept her vagaries or otherwise is part of what we accept when we live on the land regardless of where it is in the world.

It also highlights the fact, and maybe she does it as a reminder to us, that we do not control all our world despite the huge amount of research and information that science has given us to do so.

## **WHAT'S (BEEN) HAPPENING**

\*We were planning to hold another 5 day course at Bundick Murrell near Young in Central NSW from the 25<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup>. March. We had a suitable property and nearby hall for power point etc. presentations all arranged with night sessions in the Young Services Club. Bendick Murrell is about 15 - 20 minutes from Young. Despite having quite a lot of positive interest, when the crunch came we did not have enough registrations to justify going ahead with the course. Whilst this is very disappointing for us, we can fully understand the predicament that so many producers are currently in with the very harsh seasonal conditions and the need to feed and care for their stock. We hope that things turn around very soon.

\* I would like to thank those who responded either to register or to advise that they couldn't get away at this difficult time, but are interested in doing the course in better times. Please keep in contact and let us know of your interest in future courses. We have been offered 2 on property facilities in Qld to hold future courses so we will be planning these when the seasonal conditions improve in more regions.

\* We are still very keen to hold more field days in localised areas over the next few months, so if you would like one in your area, please let myself, Albert Hancock (0267334666) or other company directors know and we will get it under way. We would like to be as flexible as possible in our future planning and would welcome and appreciate any input that you can provide for us in this regard. We may hold a one day workshop at the Charters Towers saleyards in the next few months as well to assist us to gauge interest in future longer courses in that region.

\*Any suggestions for suitable dates in other areas would be appreciated. We don't, however, want to clash with major local attractions. We are also planning to attend more shows and field days in the near future to assist in promoting what we do and sharing our findings with others in the industry who are interested in improving their productivity.

\*We remain keen to get some marketing of graded cattle going and are happy to advertise for any of our clients here in the newsletter or on our website.

\*If any other clients are having sales etc. and would like me to put them in the newsletter, please let me know the details.

\*We now have linear measuring callipers available for sale for \$100.00 plus freight so if you are interested, please let me know.

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## **BREED OF THE QUARTER**

### **SANGA**

In this newsletter, as something a little different, rather than focus on a specific breed, I thought I would provide a little information about a group of closely related cattle collectively known as Sangas. It may explain a little of the development of some of the older breeds of cattle. Some of you may also have thought that the Sanga is a specific breed of African cattle.

However, Sanga is the collective name for the indigenous cattle of sub-Saharan Africa. They are sometimes identified as a subspecies with the scientific name *Bos taurus africanus*. These cattle probably originated in East Africa on the western shores of Lake Victoria, and have spread up the river Nile, with depictions on Ancient Egyptian murals. Sanga are an intermediate type, probably formed by hybridizing the indigenous humpless cattle with Zebu cattle. However, archaeological evidence indicates this cattle type was domesticated independently in Africa, and bloodlines of taurine and zebu cattle were introduced only within the last few hundred years. Although the timeline for their history is the subject of extensive debate, some authors date the first Sanga cattle to 1600 BC. They are distinguished by having small cervicothoracic humps instead of the high thoracic humps which characterize the Zebu.

Humped cattle breeds of southern Africa are classified into zebu (thoracic hump) and Sanga (cervico-thoracic hump) types. Sanga-type cattle constitute the bulk of the cattle genetic resources in this region

The main breeds that we are familiar with today that are included under the title of Sanga cattle include Abigar, Afrikaner, Ankole-Watusi, Bonsmara (a breed developed in the 1930s in South Africa), Nguni, Red Fulani, Tuli, Drakensburger and Tswana. Some of you won't be familiar with all of these breeds as they have stayed pretty much within the part of Africa where they originated from. Probably the most common and certainly the newest of the breeds classified as

Sangas are the Bonsmara along with the Nguni, Tuli, Drakensburger and Africaner.

Other historical evidence suggests that the Sanga group of cattle resulted from the crossbreeding of African taurine and zebu cattle around 700 AD in Ethiopia, followed by migration to southern Africa with tribesmen via the tsetse-free Mozambique corridor. Natural adaptation to a range of diverse environments and careful breed-oriented selection led to genetic and phenotypic differentiation into various ecotypes and breeds.

Sanga cattle have developed and adapted over many years so that they have the following characteristics:

- \*Very adaptable to conditions,
- \*Resistance to local disease epidemics, ticks and tick-borne diseases,
- \*Diversified production ability
- \*Great genetic diversity
- \*Adaptability within traits that make them valuable resources for breeding programmes in regions of similar biological stresses,
- \*Local Sanga genotypes can be used in various pure and cross breeding programs
- \*Because of their size their maintenance requirements are lower than those of many other breeds.

In many instances their use has expanded to that of draft animals, impacting on long-term nutrient requirements. Western Sanga cattle seem to be among the smallest of the beef breeds and to those farmers obsessed with size, the Western Sanga seemingly have nothing to offer. However, it is due to their size that their maintenance requirements are lower than those of other breeds. As most of us are aware, larger frame animals require higher maintenance in the less favourable conditions that is traditionally the natural environment of the Sanga.

The most accurate measure in any beef cow operation is the gross margin and this is directly determined by cow performance and productivity. Factors such as fertility, leading to higher reproductive rates in the indigenous Western Sanga support the fact that these cattle should be seriously considered to reap maximum benefit from farming operations. The breed's adaptability means that production can become more cost-

effective as input costs are lower, resulting in increased unit sales. Cattle producers have been led to believe that bigger is better, and that if it comes from overseas, it is better.

What many producers in Africa are now realising is that this is not necessarily true when they take all their costs and end market into consideration. Whilst the Sanga doesn't wholly fit the description of the ideal feedlot calf and many producers have gone to the bigger, lean beef European-type cattle that are not truly adapted to Africa's harsh environment. Again, these imported cattle, because they are not historically linked to the harsher environment, require higher inputs and more sophisticated management and this then usually reduces the gross margin of these breeds in comparison with the native cattle. We have discussed in earlier newsletters the importance of matching specific breeds with their historical environment when establishing them in another country. If you are interested in any of the Sanga breeds, check their original environment with your own to ensure they are similar. However, the adaptability of the Sanga cattle does mean they can do well in a wider range of environments than most breeds.

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## **GRAZING CHOICES**

I realise that I discuss grazing practices quite a lot in these newsletters so I hope you don't find this comparison too boring or irrelevant.

When we consider if there are different ways to do things in our business that may be better, we usually weigh up a range of options and then consider the pluses and minuses of each to assist us with making a final decision. Sometimes, we will decide that change won't be beneficial. Other times, we will decide to bite the bullet, so to speak, and do something differently. If all the details add up to making a different decision, also confirm with yourself that this new direction is one that you are committed to and are even excited about.

It is often practical when you decide on change to start by just doing it on a small scale, maybe just on a small area and with only part of your herd. You can certainly do this in the case of changing your grazing management strategies by using a small area with only part of your herd for the time you need to see any changes. Then you can make adjustments or consider something else totally

different.

Just as an aside, another change that you can consider which can be done on a small scale that doesn't take a lot of work is by using selective mating to improve the quality of your herd. Select your elite cows and a bull that is at least as good and ideally better than your cows and put them together away from the rest of your herd for mating. Now this only needs to be for about a month because your best cows will cycle and get in calf in that time. You can then put them back with the rest of the herd. The ones that didn't get in calf in that first month are probably not your most fertile cows anyway. The ones that did get in calf in that time are going to produce your future breeders and especially on the male side. I am confident that there will be considerable savings for you when you start breeding at least some of your own bulls and especially if they are the type that you are aiming for in your herd. Consider what you could save in time and travel cost going to sales, freight and then being at the whim of the auctions.

Anyway, back to grazing.

A number of names have been given to the broadly-based grazing methods that specifically focus on high density, short term grazing practices. Names such as cell grazing, block grazing, planned grazing etc. are fairly common place these days. For simplicity in this section I would just like to refer to them as controlled grazing.

I would like to say though that the term, controlled grazing covers a range of similar, but different grazing systems and the most important thing to remember is that you choose the system or parts of it that are going to work best for you.

Most of these gazing methods originated with the dairy industry in New Zealand in the early to mid 1970's. Other people such as Alan Savoury in Africa were also experimenting with grazing management practices although on more range type country around that time or possibly a little later.

These grazing strategies were first introduced in Australia, and more specifically, the dairy industry in Tasmania in the late 1970's. The Tasmanian Department of Agriculture held 3 day training courses to introduce the system to dairy farmers in that state. As a beef producer at the time, I became interested when I noticed the milk tankers making

more calls at my neighbour's dairy at a time they would usually be making less about 12 months after our neighbor had started with what we called block grazing in those days.

This was in the early 1980's and I thought that if that system works for dairy cows, it should work with a beef herd. Within 18 months of starting with that system, we had increased our herd size by 25%. Whilst some of that increase may have been due to our own management inefficiencies being improved, that would not account for all of that increase. We also cut an extra 100 tonne of silage (enough to maintain around 35 cows in full production for 100 days) off the same area that we had cut on average in previous years and that was with no increase in any other input, i.e. fertilizer etc. We maintained or slightly increased that gain for the following 8 - 10 years that we remained in the industry.

With this background, I am often bemused by the comments that I hear from cattle producers down-playing any possible advantages of controlled grazing. Regardless of whether you are in favour of it or not, it kind of reminds me of some of the arguments we used to hear when daylight saving was first introduced. We were told that the curtains would fade faster, the chooks would stop laying, the cows wouldn't give as much milk and so on.

Some of the arguments against controlled grazing have a similar base and I would like to discuss them as follows:-

- a) I have heard producers comment that you can't breed using any of these systems because moving cows every day (or every 2 - 3 days in some cases) becomes so disruptive that they stop cycling. My own experience was the opposite. Because the cows were in a smaller area, the bull(s) did not need to travel any great distance to serve a cow and we increased our overall calving percentage and the number of cows that got in calf in their first cycle. It also allowed us to select the best bull(s) to go to the herd first. I also used to rest the bull(s) once or twice a week overnight by putting them into the next days paddock the night before the cows.
- b) Another argument is the cost of fencing and water access and I appreciate that on large properties this will be significant.

The obvious thing is to plan to meet your own particular situation. One way is to have central water points with grazing paddocks radiating out and getting wider as they get further from the water point. Another way is to have laneways from several paddocks going to central water points. This will be governed to a large extent by the size and shape of the property. There are also valves available now that can be put in main water lines and then have feeder lines off to a trough that can be easily moved with the herd. Once cattle get used to watering from smaller troughs, they have no trouble getting adequate water. I'm talking small troughs as small as 200 litres that can be pulled around off a quad bike or loaded easily onto a ute when empty. I have seen this working on a property in New South Wales several years ago where a herd of 600 steers were being shifted daily and their water trough shifted with them. There are plenty of options available today to reduce the cost of watering cattle.

- c) In further reference to fencing, I would suggest that if you are refencing then employ laneways in your plan. Sure, they do take up some grazing area, but the cattle will still get some grazing from them as they move around the grazing system. However, the major advantage comes at mustering. Laneways can save many hours, even days, when mustering both in time and man power. The other thing to consider is how you can incorporate your existing fences into your new system.
- d) Whilst cattle are creatures of habit, they can also be trained, as in the case of something like a new grazing program, to adapt to your way of managing them. There may be some danger with young calves that they are more susceptible to predators until they learn the routine of herd movement. They can stray under electric fences and be separated from their mothers. I have seen new mothers herd their calves away from fences. There is also a danger that cows will plant their calves for the first few days and not have

them with them when they are moved. The way too overcome this during that calving period is to leave the gates open so that the cows can go back for their calves. In our own situation we had a maternity paddock where the cows went at the start of calving and then went back into the rotation after calving. In some cases, it did take 3 – 4 days before the cows retrieved their calves from the hide, but that was no great issue. After that time the calves were usually always with the cows when we moved them. We also found that if we walk or drive around the paddock if a cow hasn't got her calf with her, she will break from the herd and usually retrieve the calf when you get close to the hide.

- e) I have also heard producers criticizing the cost of attending courses providing information on setting up these different grazing programs. I guess that gets back to one's own motivation to learn. The courses I have seen on grazing management are very well organized and contain information to support the grazing system itself. Whilst you can research a lot of relevant information on websites today and probably make decisions on how you would like to change your system from that, a course will have everything you need to know laid out and easy to access. Remember, the time you spend researching things yourself is valuable and needs to be accounted for in your business. The other factor is that in my experience most agricultural based courses are cheaper to attend than their counterparts in other industries. I have attended similar seminars or workshops in the health and welfare sector where the cost for a day can easily be \$4 - 500.
- f) The thing that many producers still don't understand or appreciate is that pastures, where ever they are, need to be treated like a crop to get anywhere near the reward from them that they have the potential to give. I believe the key to the success of any grazing system is in understanding how pasture plants grow. I discussed this topic previously so won't dwell on it again here.

Suffice to say that set stocking or long-term grazing on the same area results in stock overgrazing the more palatable plants and leaving the others, usually weeds or less productive species, to grow and ultimately choke out the more nutritious plants. This happens because those plants don't get the chance to produce enough leaf area to photosynthesize and thereby produce the energy and food to keep their root system growing enough for the plant to remain productive and competitive. With most pasture species in the growing season, their leave area will grow fast enough in three days to produce enough leaf area to re-graze so to give them an optimum opportunity to recover from the initial grazing, it is important to move the stock off them at the latest at that stage. Certainly, the grazing time for each paddock will change with seasonal conditions. The other indicator of pasture growth and thus moving intervals will be a measure of the dry matter available at the start of grazing a paddock and again of how much is left at the end of the grazing period.

- g) If you are used to set stocking, then there are certainly some challenges to get used to moving your cattle much more frequently and even, at times, on a daily basis. You may question whether that is time well spent. I questioned this point myself when we started using controlled grazing and so I worked out that what we saved in early detection of animal health problems saved us quite a lot in vet. costs. In fact, I worked out that in the second year (1983-84) of using the grazing program it was worth \$40 an hour to us in vet. bills for the time spent shifting the herd. It became less than that in later years.
- h) This was because the rotation system broke the breeding cycle of most of the parasites that caused problems for us previously. This is another factor that many don't consider when evaluating whether to or not to change to a controlled grazing system.
- i) There has also been the argument that these

grazing systems don't make any difference at the onset of a drought. Again, this can be influenced by management practices as much as anything. However, when the program is adhered to and especially if you practice feed budgeting, then it is more likely than not that when your set stocking neighbours run out of feed, you will still have some feed left to carry your herd on for some time. If the drought persists and you end having to sell some of your stock, it is likely that the market will have hit rock bottom some time earlier when all the set stockers had to sell their stock and would then be on the rise, albeit possibly only slightly, when you have to sell.

I hope this has given those of you who are considering making changes to your grazing system some food for thought. I have tried to keep this summary balanced as I don't have any axe to grind as to whether you change or not. Those of you who are already using a controlled grazing program may have some comments from your own experiences that you could share with us. The fact that we live in very diverse and different situations in terms of climate, stocking rates etc. has been in the front of my mind as I write this so much of what I have discussed is generalized so I hope you will bear this in mind.

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## **MORE FINER FACTS**

1. A sign of zinc deficiency in your herd can be indicated by a newborn calf that has difficulty walking and tends to "knuckle over".
2. The most important component of milk butter fat is the milk oil or ghie as it is known in some countries.
3. Genetics and Nutrition are of equal importance.
4. Professor Bonsma claims that the larger the prepuse opening, the less fertile the bull will be.
5. Whilst we have spoken of how a bull's teats should be forward of the scrotum and not on it. They should be well formed, small (up to 2 cm. maximum) replicas of a cow's teats. Large nipples = lower fertility and flat bear skin rather than a nipple =

- poorly formed teats on the bull's daughters.
6. A cow with straight well-formed front feet (toes) is highly likely to have had good uterine nutrition.
  7. The leg below the hock should be narrow at the back and there should not be surplus fibre and fat deposited at the back of the leg.
  8. When a cow is pregnant, the pancreatic swirl (under her belly) gets much bigger and comes up the side of her gut.
  9. The width of an animal's shoulders is determined in its first 10mths. Wide shoulders = good heart girth and low maintenance plus more meat. Again, this highlights the importance of adequate quantities of butterfat during that period.
  10. A fine whippy tail = better meat quality. Most very fertile cattle also have a long whippy tail.
  11. Feathers on the outside of the escutcheon are good – they will hold their milk supply during pregnancy.
  12. The feed that the cow is consuming at the time she becomes pregnant will be the feed that her calf does best on during its life.
  13. The month prior to calving is also a nutritionally significant period for the cow. It is not so much the quantity but quality of feed that she receives i.e. fresh grass.
  14. A triangle from the shoulders, along the back and down to the hocks should equal a triangle from the shoulders to the knees to the hocks.
  15. The prepuce should not be below a line from the knees to the hocks in a bull.
  16. The cheapest and most sustainable way to get nutrition right is to get the soil right first and then see what is missing in the animal's diet and add that as a supplement.
  17. The main nutritional needs, generally speaking are copper, selenium and iodine. If you think your herd is lacking nutritionally, start by trying these three minerals. Vitamins A,D,and E are also a good common health booster.
  18. Getting locked into a supplementary nutritional program that could at least be partly solved by increasing soil microbiological activity is just putting money into chemical company's pockets that could be staying in your own.
  19. The muscle at the back of the scrotum, when prominent should be between the testes and not on one side or the other. This affects the suspensory ligament in cows.
  20. Fine, close wrinkles on a cow's neck indicate milk quality.
  21. There should be even fat distribution between the meat fibres. Inconsistent and low nutrition will mean that fat is not evenly distributed, but in blobs around the muscle.
  22. Poor and inconsistent nutrition also leads to poor intra muscular fat deposition.
  23. A large thymus whorl, situated on the front of the brisket in both horses and cattle is a sign of overall animal health and the ability to fight/control the production of white blood cells.
  24. The cow's udder should be free of hair from at least a quarter of the way up the udder for good butterfat. It should also have fine hair in the escutcheon, especially directly around the centre of the udder.
  25. There should not be a seam or deep "V" shape on the scrotum at the rear between the testes.
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Thank you for your continued interest in our newsletters, our website and our book. Please feel free to order one of our books and become familiar with the CLMS system and the directions we are taking in the overall scheme of animal and food production for human consumption

**PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONTACT US ABOUT ANY ITEMS IN THIS NEWSLETTER, ON OUR WEBSITE OR IN OUR BOOK. WE WELCOME PRODUCER INPUT AND INTEREST AND WANT TO INVOLVE YOU IN WHAT WE ARE DOING.**

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