

BREEDING FOR COLOR

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Should seedstock breeders consider color as a factor when making breeding decisions within the Fleckvieh breed? There are two answers to this question.

The first answer is that color should not be a factor when making breeding decisions if the sole goal is the production of red meat to be sold by the pound over the scales. Breeding for one trait, such as color or birth weight, more often than not results in sacrificing other traits to gain the single goal. So, breeding for color, depending on the herd, can be counterproductive to the bottom line of selling weight.

The second answer is more important for the seedstock producer. The seedstock producer, in addition to producing cattle with the appropriate maternal and performance traits, must produce animals that are cosmetically pleasing to prospective purchasers. Otherwise, sales will tumble.

History is worth recounting on this point. The Simmental cattle originally imported into North America originated from several European countries. These imports had a myriad of color patterns. This is explained in an article at the beginning of the American Simmental Association website entitled "Description of a Simmental." The author(s) then writes that polled genetics were introduced into the breed. This statement sidesteps and avoids stating the obvious; the polled genetics came from the Angus breed, predominately the Black Angus breed. Additionally, many breeders inseminated their Angus cows with semen from imported fullblood bulls at the beginning of the Continental Revolution in the early 1970's.

The discounting of straight Simmental genetics started in the middle 80's as a result of traits that the commercial man didn't appreciate. Accordingly, Simmental breeders needed to disguise Simmental genetics by making them black. Breeding to Angus got rid of the many color patterns displayed by Simmental cattle, enabling Simmental breeders to disguise their cattle as Angus, all the while registering them in the Simmental herd book and calling them purebred cattle. The change in the color prevented the order buyers and feed lot operators from identifying Simmental genetics which they discounted when making such purchases.

However, the infusion of Angus genetics into the Simmental population resulted in the loss of a breed identity and heterosis because the greatest percentage of the commercial cow herds in North America were and continue to be Angus based.

Some Simmental breeders resisted the introduction of Angus genetics into their herds, believing that the benefits of maintaining breed identity and purity outweighed the benefits of raising cross-bred cattle. These breeders, however, recognized that spotted cattle were discounted when they were weighed over the scales so their customers didn't want spotted calves. These breeders began to focus their breeding programs on the use of bulls that had a solid colored red body and pigmentation around the eyes. Some reasoned

that the continued use of a red colored bull would result in color predictability over time. Most of the solid colored red animals came from Austria and Germany which, along with their moderate frames, heavy muscling and great fertility, resulted in the focus on what has become to be known today in North America as the Fleckvieh Breed. While animals with white spots and stripes on the body may be every bit as good, and often even better in individual instances, a solid red animal that maintains the desirable maternal and performance characteristics is the most marketable and desirable animal today.

Some of these same breeders then noticed that there were some bloodlines that produced offspring that, in addition to having a solid colored red body, had a solid or almost solid colored head. The Neff line is the most well known example. These breeders began to focus on these bloodlines and, as a result, have now produced a number of totally or almost totally red animals. There is enough genetic base of solid colored animals at the present time so that they can be crossed without a close line breeding and without any fear of losing the other desirable characteristics.

The goal in producing these solid colored animals is much the same goal that breeders had when they introduced Angus genetics into their Simmental herds. They want solid colored cattle that will produce solid colored cattle. However, instead of producing cross bred Angus look alikes, these North American Fleckvieh breeders produced animals that had only fullblood Fleckvieh genetics. In addition to producing solid color commercial calves when used by the commercial breeder on his herds, these animals will provide greater hybrid-vigor than the cross-bred Angus based Simmental will. These solid colored bulls will produce a uniform set of commercial offspring, without any spots or stripes, so that the commercial cow man can sell a uniform group of high performance cattle to the order buyer or feedlot operator.

The next step in the breeding process will be to identify color non-diluters so that when the solid colored Fleckvieh bull is bred to the Angus cow, there won't be the occasional grey calf and no rat tails.

Unfortunately, the World Simmental/Fleckvieh Federation, as well as some countries that are members of the European Union, do not accept solid colored fullblood Simmental or Fleckvieh animals as Simmental or Fleckvieh because of an out-dated definition. Australia may include the solid red Fleckvieh cattle in their "red" category which is made up of Red Angus based genetics. These limitations were likely due to the recognition that when Angus genetics were introduced into the Simmental herds, particularly in North America, the results were cross bred animals, not Simmental or Fleckvieh animals. This anomaly should be corrected by these entities because the solid colored animals were developed by the use of fullblood Simmental and Fleckvieh genetics without the introduction of genetics from other breeds. These entities should encourage these breeders to continue in with their breeding goals because there aren't many places left in the world where the true genetics of this breed are better preserved and utilized than in North America.

In writing this article, there is no intention to disparage the Angus based genetics that make up the largest percentage of the registrations in the ASA herdbook as well as approximately half of the registrations in the herdbook of the Canadian Simmental Association. The breeders so engaged can and should be proud of their product. However, many of these breeders are beginning to recognize the advantages of using a solid colored Fleckvieh bull on their Angus crossed Simmental herds to add greater performance and maternal traits to their herds, increase the heterosis that their sale bulls will provide, and maintain a solid color pattern in the resulting offspring.

The breeders that persisted and continued to use fullblood Fleckvieh genetics, and not engage in a cross-breeding program, can be proud that they have demonstrated that a good breeding program can be maintained by utilizing within breed genetics rather than engaging in a cross cross-breeding program to gain a solid colored animal.