



What is a breed?

What is a breed? Is there really such a thing as a purebred?

Let's begin by defining what a breed is. The late Hilton Briggs, the quintessential authority on breeds and author of the book, "Modern Breeds of Livestock," defined a breed as: "a group of animals that, as a result of breeding and selection, have certain distinguishable characteristics."

Briggs goes on to define a purebred animal as "an individual both of whose parents are duly registered in a Registry Association."

It's interesting to note that Briggs says nothing about "breed purity" or "percentage of blood" in either definition. If one delves back into livestock history, it can be concluded that very few populations of so-called "purebred" cattle existed. Rather, nearly all breeds were developed by combining various strains of cattle within a region into a generally agreed-upon type.

British breeds

The Shorthorn breed was created by selecting the best of the native, short-horned cattle in northeast England and infusing them with a small amount of Galloway blood. The Hereford breed was developed by infusing the native cattle of Herfordshire in southwest England with Flemish cattle imported from the low countries in Europe.

Shorthorn blood is reported to have been introduced into the Angus breed at an early stage of its existence. And the Red Poll breed originated in the English countries of Norfolk and Suffolk where some Galloway and Devon breeding eventually found its way into the breed.

As near as can be determined, two British breeds appear to have remained free of outside blood – Galloway and West (Scotch) Highland.

- Galloway originated in southwest Scotland's Galloway province. When the Romans first populated England, cattle

roamed the region's forests. These indigenous cattle became the progenitors of the Galloway. Today, Galloway are recognized as the oldest breed of beef cattle in the British Isles.

- The West (Scotch) Highland originated in the rough, mountainous region of western Scotland. It's known these cattle were bred for centuries in the West Highland region. Consequently, it is nearly as old as the Galloway breed.

Continental breeds

Meanwhile, the first Charolais cattle in the U.S. didn't come directly from its mother country of France, but via

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Mexico in the 1930s. These cattle were then crossed with other breeds in the U.S. The same is true of the first Charolais to be imported from France through Canada in 1966.

The Charolais breed as it exists today in the U.S. is largely the result of a grading-up process. Charolais bulls of French descent were used on British cows, primarily Angus, Hereford and Shorthorn.

In the late 1960s and early '70s, a wave of bulls from other Continental breeds were brought into Canada and used in the grading-up process on British breeds of cows. The new breeds included Simmental, Limousin, Maine-Anjou, Salers, Chianina, Piedmontese,

Belgian Blue, Romagnola, Marchigiana, Tarentaise and Normande.

After 4-5 generations of upgrading, these new breed associations registered the animals as purebreds. Obviously, there would still be a small amount of genetic material remaining from the base British cows.

Some final notes

A final note regarding the purity of the Continental breeds is in order. By the end of World War II, Europe was in total chaos, and cattle ran loose in many regions. As a result, a significant amount of interbreeding occurred.

It's also important to note that during a period of type change in the late 1960s and early '70s from overly small, fat cattle to growthier, leaner types, there was some unethical infusion of Holstein and Brown Swiss blood into the Angus breed, as well as Simmental blood into the Hereford breed. In some instances, such cattle were detected via blood-typing and removed from the herd book. In other instances, they weren't.

During the 1970s, the American Shorthorn Association established an appendix program in which it opened its herd book to Milking Shorthorn, Irish Shorthorn, Australian Illawara Shorthorn and Maine-Anjou blood. This served to enhance the performance and carcass composition of the breed.

Finally, we come full circle and return to the initial question, "Is there really such a thing as a purebred? The likely answer is, It all depends upon how you define "purebred." ■

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