

Meatmasters and recording.

When going through all the hardships of developing and registering the Meatmaster breed and society I must admit that **“the dream of a Breed Society and breeders, like no other: truly committed to doing all we had agreed upon and to use everything at our disposal to breed a truly economical sheep based solely on its ability to make money and keep it in your pocket”** was my motivation.

The tremendous popularity the breed gained in such a short period of time, mainly due to sheep breeders out there believing in the traits and recordings we had laid out to adhere to, led to a lot of new members joining our Society, not having shared the vision from the start. I made total peace with the fact that because of all the different points of view about breeding principles and for the sake of unity it was agreed to not make recording a prerequisite for Meatmaster Stud Breeding and to leave it up to each individual member to decide how he intends doing his stud breeding and selection.

The aim of this article is by no means to force the issue of recording but to very objectively and honestly give the advantages and disadvantages of recording, to the Society the Meatmaster breed and also individual breeders. This will help each breeder to make an informed decision and years from now no one will be able to say - but why were we not informed adequately?

Firstly concerning the Meatmaster Breed

The breed was registered as a **developing breed** by the Registrar for animal improvement. The Registrar will only register us as a **developed breed**, once by means of recording we have enough animals at a F4 level (animals that have been bred pure for 4 generations). F4 Meatmasters have **92% pure Meatmaster genes** able to be carried over to the next generation. This is why the breed can only then be considered a truly new breed.

A **F4 Meatmaster ram** mated to a Dorper ewe, thus gives you a **50% Meatmaster and 50% Dorper** cross

Should a **F1 Meatmaster ram (50% Dorper and 50% Damara)** be mated to a Dorper ewe you have a **75% Dorper and 25% Damara cross**. This is no good for upgrading and you are **getting nowhere until you start using the crosses on each other to stabilize the Meatmaster genes**. This is why breeders can now with great success use **F4 Meatmaster Rams** to upgrade any breed to Meatmasters and have very little variation in type in the process.

A further point to consider is that only Meatmaster breeders recording their sheep are helping to get the breed registered as a developed breed. Yet this will **greatly benefit all Meatmaster breeders**.

Secondly concerning the Meatmaster Society

As mentioned earlier all members are equal and all have a vote. The Society however has to abide by the laws of the country and these state that only recorded Meatmasters may be exported by the Society. I don't see us ever being able to change this law but whether government is in position to

enforce this law at their custom departments at border posts is another matter I cannot comment on. I just feel it is only fair that breeders are made aware of this.

Thirdly concerning the breeders themselves

Recording is nothing other than the gathering of information regarding fertility, growth, milk, and phenotype. The more information you have the more accurate your selection to make more money.

The advantages of gathering this information:

Let's look at just two of these traits: Fertility and Milk.

For fertility, I can select for all the twins born without recording but with recording I can also select for the mothers, half-sisters, brothers and fathers that have twins more regularly, thus increasing my accuracy for a trait with low heritability but the potential to greatly influence profit.

Milk is an interesting one, as without recording I don't know who the ram's daughters are and I have to measure their milk production through their lamb growth to wean to accurately measure and select for milk. A ram that's daughters perform only 5% below average compared to a ram that's daughters perform 5% above average gives you a 10% difference. The weaker ram slaughter lambs will for example then sell for R900, compared to the better rams R1000. On a 100 lambs born per year from a rams' daughters **the difference is R10 000**. I find this difference in my figures after every weaning, thus it is not exaggerated. This is for only one trait, include traits of growth and fertility and you are astounded at the difference in profit. **Comparing two rams once for all their traits, I found that the one ram over three years brought in R40 000 more than the other ram.**

Phenotype, what the ram or ewe looks like is also of utmost importance. Thus by also recording this I don't just know what this one sheep I am looking at looks like but also what all her sisters brothers, father, mother looks like. All this information enables me to make a much more accurate selection. I always listen to arguments about **"must it be performance testing or selection on type"**. **It is never the one or the other, both are of equal importance.**

The negatives and disadvantages of recording:

- It takes a lot more work and dedication than just viewing an animal for selection.
- A study has to be made on how to do recording accurately to get the correct information out. **Rubbish inaccurate data in will give you rubbish inaccurate data out with no value at all.**
- It does call for much better management and control of your sheep.
- Breeders are tempted to take part only because they feel they may lose out and don't record accurately and then try to use some figures to promote a certain sheep.
- Remember recording is done for you to improve your entire herd, not just to compare your sheep to the next farmer's sheep.
- To be successful a thorough scientific evaluation must be made of all animals and of all their traits to select for the best balanced animals. This study takes a lot of time and if not totally committed you will not do it properly, thus not reaping the benefits.

Recording is hard work and needs much long term dedication and results should never be used by breeders or registering authorities to create sensation for promotional purposes. I now fully understand how naive I was to think all breeders would be prepared to make the sacrifice. **For those that do put in the effort it does most definitely work.**

Consider the following:

Maize farmers don't look at maize seed and say, "oh this is a nice looking one, and so is this one and then plant them. They study the scientific production potential of the seed and trust it to give them the results. By so doing they have taken yields of 5 ton a ha 40 years ago under irrigation and now produce on 20 ton a ha. The milk farmers, pig farmers and chicken farmers all trust their production data and have made huge improvements. Sheep farmers, except for a few think it's good enough just to look at a sheep and pick the best one on looks, not taking into consideration the difference environment, management and feeding has played and wonder why they don't make any more money than years ago. The sheep are given names and are selected according to preference like pet dogs, cats or your favourite parrot.

I often hear the statement being made that "**I don't have the labour or the time for record keeping as I run 2000 ewes or more.**" I don't think it is necessary for any breeder with that amount of ewes or more to at the most record only 300 of the best to reap the full benefits for all 2000 ewes. **Remember the rams bred out of the 300 recorded ewes are used on all 2000 + ewes thus all the economic traits selected for are also carried over to the entire herd.** You can then also sell better rams & ewes out of your commercial herd because of the genetic improvement coming from your 300 recorded ewes. **Even as few as a 100 recorded ewes can make a huge impact.**

To sum up, all our breeders have the right to enjoy breeding and selecting their Meatmasters in whatever way they wish, they however basically have 3 choices.

- You can select solely on Phenotype (what your Meatmasters look like) and breed nicer looking sheep.
- You can select on phenotype and record with SA Studbook and breed nicer looking sheep and select for fertility.
- You can select on phenotype, record with SA studbook and do performance recording and breed nicer looking sheep, select for fertility for more milk, more multiple births, and faster growing lambs.

May we all enjoy our Society and our Meatmasters as each breeder selects his sheep as he believes is best and may each breeder reap the success for the effort he puts in. May jealousy or what one believes is correct never divide or dampen the spirit of our breeders as we all strive to improve our wonderful breed to the benefit of all in every breeder's unique way.

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