

THE VALUE OF REGISTERED CATTLE

By Pat White

Here is the article I wrote for the Bagpipe for those of you who are not members of AHCA. I would love some reaction from those of you who do not have registered Highlands or do not plan on having registered cattle.

I often get frustrated when I am browsing Facebook pages about Highland Cattle. I love the photos posted, I love the educational aspect of the columns, (although one must be very careful: I have seen some rather incredible mistaken beliefs posted as gospel) but I don't understand so many individuals with such an apparent passion for Highland cattle, and yet they either do not register their cattle, or they do not buy registered cattle in the first place. I am such a strong proponent of pedigreed cattle with on-going registration of offspring, and I struggle to understand why others do not share this particular passion of mine.

So the question remains, why should anybody buy registered Highland Cattle? Registration papers signify a great deal about the actual animal you own or are thinking of purchasing. Those papers trace the ancestry back through 3 generations, and if you look up that registration information on line, with a simple click of your mouse you can explore each ancestor on the pedigree back another 3 generations, with each and every click.

In addition to name and color you can explore "relatives"; the offspring produced by a grandsire or grand dam on and on ad infinitum or at least as far back as our herd book details. You also can see if any of the immediate ancestry are considered Impact or Elite Impact animals, if any were produced by Artificial insemination or embryo transfer. If the pedigree provides a Canadian or Scottish Import, the data base of these affiliated associations will provide further information on ancestry in a similar fashion. Studying pedigree can allow you to make breeding decisions: for example trying to duplicate a particular animal that you like by pulling the same ancestors out of similar pedigrees.

This is a common theme that is used by breeders in their own herds: when we recognize a superior animal out of one cow sired by a particular bull, we may try to reproduce some facsimile of that superior creature by repeating the breeding, or getting as close to that breeding as we can. Sometimes it works magically; every full sibling is a carbon copy of each other. Sometimes it fails just as dramatically; a single superior animal in a sea of mediocrity.

That is the fun and the joy and the frustration of breeding livestock: to see what you can accomplish and hopefully learn from your mistakes, (and there will be many.) In your own herd, you will remember which pairing creates what results. Purchasers of registered animals will have that same ability but without the benefit of your memory; to search through pedigrees and try to produce that superior animal based on careful analysis and evaluation of those registration histories. For registration papers are just that, a written history of your cattle.

Performance of family groups can be evaluated using those same papers. Longevity and production can be tracked through the on-line herdbook, and breeders should be willing to share any collected performance information whether in a hand written notebook or through the American Highland Cattle Associations on-line performance registry. Important, heritable traits such as longevity; udder

conformation, age at first calving, calf weaning weights and yearling weights are all points that can be compiled on line through our national association website.

Registered Highlands allow you to maintain detailed pedigree information on your cattle with ease, allow you to participate in breed shows and association events, and permit your cattle to appeal to a broader segment of the cattle owning public, not just those raising beef or raising feeders, but to those families looking for a project for their child, or looking for a supplement to their income, or looking for a hobby that can develop into a passion.

So when it actual comes to making that initial purchase of seedstock, many times I hear on the other end of the phone that the buyer doesn't need or isn't interested in show quality cattle. I truly beg to differ. The only kind of cattle any buyer of registered stock should aspire to purchase, is show quality cattle. I am not recommending that new breeders go out and buy "show cattle"; anyone who knows me personally would think I had turned over a totally unexpected leaf if I actually said I believed that.

I have always been a proponent of naturally fed cattle in the show ring. I am not a proponent of show rations and have long paraded our cattle into countless show rings fed no differently than our entire herd (sometimes to excellent results, many times not). I am saying however that any animal you purchase, if in adequate rig and presentable state of cleanliness, should be capable of walking into a show ring with any number of show hardened, fed-up veterans, and do you proud. That does not mean you win the Championship; that most likely will go to the animals that best appeal to the judge's eye; those cattle superbly fitted and fed to perfection.

Nor does it mean that you should ever plan on showing your cattle or even halter-breaking your cattle. It means that any animal you elect to keep as a member of your breeding herd should have everything it takes to acquit itself in the show ring admirably. It can walk well, it has good feet and legs, it has a level topline, has a good udder with decent teat size (assuming of course, a female old enough to display its most obvious feminine attributes) and hopefully on top of that, has a gorgeous head and sweeping majestic horns to round out the rest of the animal.

For all intents and purposes, it may well be better than the Champions. If you are purchasing cattle, buy the best cattle you can find. Cattle with correct conformation have the proper angle to their feet and legs that minimizes the wear and tear on their skeletal structure so that they can live to a ripe old age while looking ½ of their actual years. Cows with properly formed, tight udders and teats the perfect size to fit a newborn calf's mouth will continue to produce calf after calf, year after year, without any human intervention. (Barring, of course, unforeseen situations.)

As conscientious breeders of registered cattle, we have an obligation to cull our herds of inferior specimens that should not be in our breed. These cattle should be in a beef program and eaten, clear and simple. Recover as much value as you can from these animals, because registered or not, all cattle are ultimately beef. Highland cattle should carry themselves on reasonably correct musculoskeletal systems, with good udders and easily accessed teats to be able to raise a calf that is fat and healthy, be sound breeders and repeat that trouble-free calf rearing business year after year after year. If they cannot do that, get rid of them. Don't sell them to some sucker down the road; what goes around comes around and your reputation will suffer. The best part is that older non-productive Highland cows make the best burger you have ever eaten.

Breeding registered Highland cattle is highly rewarding both from a personal, emotional level and from a financial standpoint. But buying the best registered cattle you can find will not guarantee you receive more money for their offspring, so if you want those registration papers to pay off, you need to study them, you need to develop a feel for what good cattle are and what traits work best for you. You need to develop the best purebred herd that you possibly can and then you need to market those genetics in any fashion that you can possibly fathom. That doesn't mean that every animal you breed has to win on the show circuit. It means that you breed reliable cattle that do what you expect, what your buyers expect and desire; you build a reputation for honesty, integrity and good cattle all at the same time. You back up your words with deeds and make sure you take care of your buyers. Help them learn, help them market, help them become as enamored with registered Highland cattle as you are.

One of the first, and as I see it, one of most important actions you can take to impress upon a new buyer the importance of registration is to transfer those papers into the new buyers' name. Do that immediately, do it yourself and pay the transfer fees. Next, purchase that new buyer a membership in your National Association*. This does not need to cut into your profit; charge enough for your cattle to cover these costs. It is not rocket science, but it goes a long way to cementing a relationship between you and that new buyer, and a relationship between that new buyer and your Association. Make registration of Highland cattle your priority and instill that precedent into every purchaser of your cattle.

It takes a long time to build a respected reputation that new breeders will turn to as a first purchase option and established breeders will look to for herd improvement. But do those registration papers actually add to the value of your cattle? The answer to that is an unequivocal yes. Anyone with cattle can market those animals as beef. Registered cattle can produce beef just as effectively as grade or commercial cattle. But grade or commercial cattle do not come with a detailed family history of performance ability. Registered cattle can always be sold as beef, or as grade/ commercial animals without papers. But the opposite is not true. AHCA does not permit the grading up of Highland type cattle. Unregistered, grade cattle can never become registered. No matter how gorgeous, no matter the breed character, no matter the conformation, no matter the disposition, no matter how pure they may appear, grade Highlands may not ever become registered cattle.

It is for this reason that whenever I view a gorgeous example of the breed, only to discover that the animal is not registered, I feel such a profound sense of disappointment. I find failure to maintain the registration on these animals to be both a travesty and a tragedy.

The definition of "breeder" is paramount, and Wikipedia summed it up this way "a breeder is a person who practices the vocation of mating carefully selected specimens of the same breed to reproduce specific, consistently replicable qualities and characteristics. This might be as a farmer or a hobbyist, and can be practiced on a large or small scale, for food, fun, or profit. " This is where breeders differ from the many keepers and sellers of Highland cattle. We should all look at breeding Highland cattle as a business, whether large or small, and we should all profit from the sale of our cattle, whether many or few. But paramount to any Highland operation is the "careful selection of breeding stock" and subsequent registration of those animals with the American Highland Cattle Association (or other Highland breed registry). If the animals are not registered, and those papers are not transferred to a new owner, that animal is effectively lost to the breed gene pool; it is no more than a grade or commercial beef animal. Its lineage is lost, its link to the past is lost and in most cases, cannot be re-

established. Such Highland owners then become little more than animal collectors, rather than conservators of a unique and rare breed.

Be a breeder of Highland cattle.