

Rob Derksen:

‘Australian Jersey Breeders have Embraced the Best Genetics in the World’

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– Rob Derksen

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Author Bert Wesseldijk.

Rob Derksen started his career in cattle breeding in 1973, at Victorian Artificial Breeders (VAB), where he first came into contact with the Jersey breed. Derksen has been employed by Genetics Australia (GA) since it was established in 1994. The Australian AI company maintains close contact with Jersey Australia and since 2023 is part of the URUS group. Jersey International spoke with the very experienced breeding man about the Jersey program at GA and the qualities of the Australian Jersey population.

– BERT WESSELDIJK

To get an impression: how large is the Jersey population in Australia?

Derksen: ‘There are about 200,000 Jersey cows in Australia, and a few thousand more that have Jersey blood in the pedigree. Approximately 100,000 Jerseys are on official milk production recording.’

How extensive is the Jersey program at GA? How many sires are launched annually?

‘In the time before genomic testing, at VAB we sampled about 60 Jersey sires annually. Of course, the arrival of genomics has turned the entire system

upside down. In the past, just 1,200-1,500 doses of a “young sire” were used. Nowadays, bulls that receive their first daughters in production are often surpassed by the quality of the available younger sires, so we no longer “sample” a certain number of sires. If I need to put a number on it, I would say that we annually launch about eight new sires in our program. In total, GA currently has 35 Jersey sires available, both progeny proven and young DNA-tested sires.’

What are the most significant traits used by GA for selecting Jersey bulls?

‘Our national breeding goal is the BPI (Balanced Performance Index). It is an economic index based on 51% production, 32% health and fertility, 11% conformation, and 6% milking speed, temperament, and farmer satisfaction. As such, BPI forms the foundation, but there are also other aspects that are taken into account. We give preference to sires with A2A2 and BB, and also pay attention to genetic defects and bloodlines.’

Does GA have its own female breeding program, or are all sires bred by Australian breeders?

‘No, we do not have our own breeding program but work closely with Australian breeders for generating our sires. For Holsteins, however, we have a connection with the Peak breeding program, and perhaps Jerseys will be added in the future.’

Does GA primarily acquire its genetics domestically, or also from abroad?

‘The reason why Australia is such a rich source of Jersey genetics lies in the readiness of Australian breeders to use the best sires from all over the world. In the past, Jersey bulls from New Zealand, the US, Denmark, and to a lesser extent Canada appeared in the pedigrees of sires. Sires need to especially score well for the Australian indexes. Some sires can breed nice cows, but if they are not high ranking in Australia, they will not be widely used. In recent years we have used more and more Australian sires for our breeding program, since it is becoming increasingly difficult to find suitable bulls from other Jersey programs. An exception to this is the American sire Valentino, who was marketed by GA.’

What are the most important qualities of Australian Jerseys? What sets them apart from other Jersey populations?

'I do not want to become controversial here, but will provide a brief summary of the differences between Australian Jerseys and other sources. We are of the opinion that Australian Jerseys are generally more balanced in terms of production and conformation. And we do not use any JX sires (sires with non-Jersey bulls in the pedigree, BW), as they are not accepted very well here. All of our sires are fully registered in the Australian Jersey herdbook. We continue to use the best sires that score well here. We see that Australian Jerseys have a bit more milk and perform better for BPI and conformation than many Danish sires. That they have more dairyness and strength in the front end than the bulls currently available in the US (and we do not use JX sires). And that generally they provide better conformation than the available New Zealand sires. For that reason we also see increasing demand for Australian Jerseys in countries like New Zealand and the US.'

What makes the Australian Jersey population so strong?

'Compared to other Jersey populations, Australian breeders have always embraced the best genetics worldwide to develop truly profitable cows and bulls that can compete internationally.

In general, Danish and North American breeding organizations have used one another's genetics, New Zealand has, generally speaking, only used its own genetics, while in Australia, you come across bloodlines from all of these populations, together with locally developed genetics. I think that no other country can claim to have done the same.'

Has the Australian Jersey cow changed much over the years?

'Yes, since I first came into contact with the breed, today's Jerseys have higher milk production without having lost the breed advantage of high components. In addition, udder quality and udder texture has improved, they have better rump width and angle, and in general they are a bit taller so that they can compete with other breeds.'

Are a lot of Australian Jersey genetics being marketed to other countries?

'That is growing. I have already mentioned the US and New Zealand, but the growth potential is the greatest in Asian and African countries. During the past three years, we have exported Jersey semen to Pakistan, and during the past two years, also DNA-tested Jersey two-year-olds. In the coming year we hope to begin exporting Jersey semen to India (1.4 billion people – Pakistan, 230 million). These countries have a growing need to improve the productivity

of their dairy herd. While buffalo milk is common and popular due to the extra creamy taste, Jersey milk is ideal to meet this need and to provide larger volumes of milk than the indigenous breeds. For more than fifteen years, South Africa has been the country with the largest semen import of Australian Jerseys, used for Jersey x Jersey and for crossbreeding programs, especially with Holstein. The rest of Africa also offers tremendous growth opportunity for Jersey.'

What is your perspective on the future of Australian Jerseys?

'As more and more producers see the advantages of the Jersey breed, the demand for the breed will increase. Since we have a strong source of Jerseys in Australia, we should be able to profit from this future growth. The Australian dairy industry is not growing and faces a number of challenges. As such, we need to adapt and focus on the growing export possibilities for Australian genetics. Jersey will be an important part of this growth. I believe that Australian Jersey breeders are keen and that they will keep an eye on what is happening all over the world. In addition, the cow families here are world class. In 2025, the World Jersey Conference will take place in Australia. It will be tremendous for many international visitors to see firsthand what the Australian Jersey has to offer. I am certain that they will not leave disappointed.'

LIVING PROOF

A nice example of an Australian bull dam with an international pedigree, who provided sons and grandsons for the GA breeding program – and who is described by Rob Derksen as one of the best Jersey cows that he has ever seen – is Loxleigh Iris 4 EX-94.

She was bred by the Akers family in Northern Victoria and is a daughter of the Australian sire Badger: a son of a bull that was sampled together with LIC in New Zealand named Taranak. On the maternal side shines another Australian sire, Estimate, while the next dam is a daughter of Mollybrook Beretta Fabulous (Astound), who was imported from the US by VAB as an embryo.



Loxleigh Iris 4 EX-94, photographed at nine years of age.