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JUDGING BOER GOATS IN THE SHOW RING

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by

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The South African Boer goat is generally recognized as the meat goat of the world. Boer goat shows are held in all corners of the world with the best goats in each country put on display. I have been judging Boer goats around the world for almost twenty years. A few months ago I was asked to document the procedures, techniques and steps that I use to judge Boer goats in the show ring. I was asked to comment on the considerations that are involved in my selection of top placing goats. This information is presented in this article and I hope that it is helpful to the reader.

Most importantly I judge Boer goats and not people. I am so intent on studying the individual goats that I do not have the time or interest in knowing who is holding the collar. If you bring the best goat into the ring it will win the class or the show regardless of who is holding the lead or collar. Honesty and integrity are the most important traits that a Boer goat judge can possess in my opinion.

My preparations for judging a show begin with arriving at the show site a day in advance. I spend the day before the show resting in the hotel room, reviewing breed standards and evaluating hundreds of photos (both good and bad) of Boer goats that I have collected in my travels around the world. This day of rest allows me to slow down from the quick pace of my everyday life and take time to focus on the task at hand. I remind myself that judging livestock is primarily about taking into account skeletal dimension, structural correctness, muscularity and eye appeal with the addition of the breed standards for the particular breed being judged. After a day of leisurely study I go to bed early after eating a pasta dinner. I

awake at 6 a.m. on the morning of the show and have a hearty breakfast while I am studying the breed standards and photos of ideal goats for the last time before the show. I arrive at the show site 30 minutes before the show begins. I meet the show officials, check the show ring and decide on the direction of travel for the goats in the ring, check to see that all of the paperwork for the show is in order and get ready for the show to begin.

I am careful not to spend time with any exhibitor before the show and am careful greeting people that I know as I try to remove any hint of impropriety. I realize that when judging a show I am "in a fish bowl" and everyone is watching every move I make and everyone I acknowledge. Some people are just looking for something to complain about or find fault that can be used to explain why their goat did not win.

I meet my ring steward or stewards and we discuss the traffic pattern for the goats to follow when entering the ring and the procedures for running the show. The traffic flow should normally be in a clockwise direction. Sometimes I will ask the steward to assist me in lifting the rear legs of the goats to check the teats, udder and testicles.

When the show is ready to begin I like to gather all of the exhibitors into the ring for a short meeting where I present an anatomy demonstration and discussion which sets the tone for the show. I consider every show that I judge as a celebration of the wonderful South African Boer Goat. The goats cannot help who owns them or holds the collar and we should all appreciate an excellent Boer goat regardless. I give a short anatomy lesson for several reasons. Everyone says they know goat anatomy but many really don't. By reviewing anatomy from the head to tail of the goat the exhibitors can also become familiar with the terminology that I will use in the show ring. What some call the twist I might call the stitch. What I call the thigh some might call the britch and so on. This anatomy lesson also gives me the opportunity to discuss proper structure, proportions and angles in the goat. I cover not only the parts of the body but I also discuss the underlying skeletal structure. I always try to use a live goat in the demonstration that is close to the ideal standard.

When the opening ceremonies and the anatomy demonstration are concluded the first class is called to the ring. The ring steward lines up the class of goats at the entrance to the show ring. I check each goat before it enters the ring for a correct bite (the lower teeth must

meet or touch the upper pad with no space or separation up until they are 36 months old according to the South African standard and after that age the goat can have up to a 6mm separation between the lower teeth and the upper pad which is called an underbite). Both an underbite (monkey mouth) and an overbite (parrot mouth) are disqualifications. Once I have checked the mouth of the goat I examine the teat structure for females and the testicles for males. The females can have no more than two functional teats per side that are totally separated from each other with a possible single non-functional teat (teat without an opening or orifice) located high, middle or low on the body of the functional teat. I check the testicles on the male to make sure that they are soft and pliable and do not have more than an inch split between them. The testicles should also be equal sized with no twist in the testicles. Some people think that the shape of the testicles on the buck has a direct bearing on the shape of the udders of the doe kids he produces. Finally I check the amount of dark or sandy pigmentation under the tail of the goat determining that at least 75% of the tail is pigmented. Ideally 100% under the tail should be pigmented. A lack of pigment can also be detected by noting the pigment on the nose and around the mouth. Also a lack pigment can be indicated in the color of the hooves which are not totally dark but rather have light striations in the hoof. Pigmentation under the skin of the goat provides protection against skin cancer. Since the Boer goat was originally a desert animal with a hot direct sun, having enough pigmentation under the skin was a requisite for survival in the veldt in South Africa.

If the mouth is not correct, the teats or testicles do not meet the standard or the goat lacks adequate pigmentation the exhibitor is informed of this and the goat is not allowed into the ring. Disqualifying a goat before it gets into the ring saves possible problems and embarrassment on the part of the exhibitor. No one wants to have to be asked to leave the ring during the show because their goat has a cull fault or disqualification property.

When the goat has passed the inspection described above it is allowed into the show ring. I let the exhibitor lead the goat around the ring until it stops behind the previous goat. I like to watch the goat walking into the ring from a front view as I note the width between the eyes (a measure of overall width of the body across the shoulders and across the loin area), the length of the face from horn set to muzzle (a measure of the length of the

goat from hook bone to pin bone), the width of the chest floor and length of the cannon bone (a predictor of growth potential), and I note the circumference of the forearm which is an indicator and predictor of mass and muscle of the goat.

I then view the goat from the side noting the length and strength of the front and back pasterns looking for a straight line between the back of the dew claw and the back of the hoof to be ideal. A weak pastern will have space between where the dew claw projects a line to the ground and where the back of the hoof projects a line to the ground. A broken pastern will occur when the dew claw touches the ground as the goat walks. Also when viewing the goat from the side I note the levelness and length of the topline and levelness or lack thereof of the underline. Females should be deeper in the rear to have more capacity to hold kids (this is called the wedge) and males should be more massive in the front end as they have to fight with other males for the females. Finally from the side view I note the amount of skin and length of skin in the flank. The more skin and the deeper the skin is in the flank the more capacity there will be for muscle development in the stifle joint area and the entire rear end. If you let your eye follow the flank skin to where it intersects with the front of the back leg and extend this line with your eye to the rear of the back leg you will note that the meat in the buttock will stop where this line extends through on the rear of the back leg.

Also viewing from the side as the goat walks I take notice of the length of stride looking for the back hoof to track in the space left by the front hoof and I notice how smooth and fluid the goat moves as it walks.

I then look at the goat from a rear view noting the width between the back legs, the straightness of the rear hocks as the goat tracks noting any hockiness (cow hocked) or bandy leggedness or posted leg. (Posty legs are where the angle at the hock is greater than 160 degrees and is sometimes indicated by the loin seeming to be elevated or the topline going uphill from the shoulders to the tail.) Still viewing the goat from the rear I note the width of the goat from the stifle joint to stifle joint, hook bone to hook bone and pin bone to pin bone. I also note the amount of muscle from the anus to the start of the udder or testicle (called the twist or stitch) and how far the meat extends down the buttock toward the hock. The deeper the stitch and the closer to the hock that the meat in the

buttock extends the more meat is being carried on the carcass.

When the goat completes its walk around the ring I return to check the next goat at the gate. Once all of the goats have entered the ring I will parade the goats around in a circle around the ring two times continuing to note all of the properties that I discussed earlier in the preliminary evaluation. Of course I am standing in the middle of the ring with the goats going around me. When the goats have completed circling I line them up in a straight line down one side of the ring. I position the goats in a head to tail position leaving about three feet between the animals. The goats are lined up in a way that the majority of spectators can view the goats in profile. I stand in the middle of the ring so that the entire goat is in view with the exhibitors standing behind their goats. The spectators get a clear view of each goat. In this profile position I study each goat noting the balance or lack thereof possessed by each goat by letting my eyes track from nose to tail. If my eyes stop before I reach the tail of the goat I know that the goat does not have balance. Balance is when all of the parts fit and everything is in proper proportion. I now take note of the physical bearing of the animal. Is it proud of itself and seems to say, "I am beautiful and give you the privilege of looking at me." This trait is called "look of the eagle" in South Africa or "aristocratic bearing" in Australia. Not all goats have this trait only the best ones.

I study the angles and proportions of each animal. I mentally divide the goat into thirds first looking at the front end assembly or front third of the body. I note that the length of the neck which should ideally be half of the topline length. (The topline length extends from the first cervicle vertebrae to the pin bone.) I note the point of the shoulder where the scapula connects with the humerus which should be approximately 137 degrees. I note that the angle of the neck coming out of the topline is about 40 degrees and the angle at the rear hock is about 160 degrees. I note that the scapula or shoulder blades lay flat against the back bone. I note the spring of rib around the middle of the body. I also note how far the brisket extends past the front legs of the animal and the levelness of the underline. If the goat is elevated in the chest floor the underline will not be level. Many goats with a tubular body shape will have an elevated chest floor and lack a level underline. Often when a goat is elevated in the chest floor they will also have little or no flank skin and have

what the South Africans call "cut up the thigh". I note that the legs are directly underneath the body and are straight to the ground. I also take note of any protrusion or misfit at the point of the elbow which is called subluxation.

Now I look at the middle third of the goat noting the levelness of topline, the lack of devils grip or tightness behind the front shoulders which would pinch the heart girth. A pinched heart girth would keep the goat from being a robust animal with a lot of growth potential. A pinched heart girth would restrict the chest and lung capacity and affect the goat's breathing. This trait will also limit the longevity of the animal and hinder its sustainability in the pasture.

I remind myself that judging goats is about recognizing and rewarding function over form and production over "pretty". Many shows are beauty contests and do not reward the functionality of the goat as much as they should. The goat should exhibit evidence of characteristics that contribute to its survivability and sustainability in a pasture setting.

Moving my eye to the posterior third of the animal I look at the length of loin and note the levelness of the rump or hip from hook bone to pin bone. I also note the length of the rump. A rump that slopes too much in a female will cause birthing problems for her kids and a steep rump on a male is the "kiss of death" for his doe kids at they will probably have steep rumps as well. I note the amount of muscling in the rear end and how far the meat extends down the back leg toward the hock. In a female I note how the udder ties into the body and how far the udder extends in front of the back leg. I note the position of teats (forward or straight down) and how far the teats extend down toward the rear hock. I note the depth of the body in relation to the length of the body. Boer goats should be "boldly three dimensional", that is, long, deep and wide.

In studying the rear third of the goat I take note of where the femur bone connects into the pelvis (called the thurl). In a correctly structured goat the ratio of hook bone to thurl to pin bone will be 2 to 1, that is, the distance from hook bone to thurl will be two parts while the distance from thurl to pin bone will be one part. If the thurl ratio is closer to 1 to 1 it will effect the rear hocks and cause the hocks to tie in together called "cow hocked". In addition when the goat walks and takes a left or right turn it will almost fall down because this thurl

connection is off and the skeleton cannot support the body properly.

After reviewing each goat from a profiled side position I walk to the front of the line of goats. I study each goat from the front end noting width of the chest floor, elevation of the chest floor and straightness of the front legs. I note whether the toes point straight forward and whether the feet point forward or toe out or toe in. Feet that toe out or in may be a structural problem or simply a hoof trimming problem. The feet should be straight with a vertical line extending from between the toes up the leg through the knee cap to the point of the shoulder. By putting at least three feet distance between the goats I can look down the line of goats and compare the width of the chest floors of the various animals. Sometimes I will have the exhibitors have their goats face me and I can review and compare the front end, chest floors and width and front legs in this manner. I also sometimes have the exhibitors turn their goats with the rear end facing me so I can compare the width in the rear, depth of twist, udders, testicles, etc. from this perspective. I return the goats to a profile position when beginning to do the final placings for the class.

When I complete the walk down the line of goats I look back up the line studying the rear ends of the animals noting the width between the back legs and straightness of hocks of each goat as I look back up the line. I note the amount of muscle extending down the back leg of each goat and I look at the width of the rump and loin. I take note of each female's udder and note the shape and the strength of the medial suspensory ligament that supports the udder as well as how far down the leg the teats are positioned on the udder. The teats should not extend down past the hock for good functionality. The teats should also not be too big and bulbous which would cause nursing problems for a new born kid.

I now walk back up the line of goats putting my left hand on each goat's back starting at the withers or shoulders. I move my hand down the goat's back noting if there is tightness or a tie in behind the shoulders called devils grip. As I continue down the back I note where the loin begins behind the thirteenth rib and I note the length of the loin as it extends to the hook bone. I note the length of loin, the width of the loin and the depth of the loin as my hand keeps moving down the back. I note the width of the rump and then I feel the meat on the buttock as it goes down the back leg. Finally I put my hand around

the forearm and note the amount of muscling in this area. The forearm is a muscle surrounded by skin and does not get fat. If the goat seems to be over conditioned or too fat I grab the skin behind the front leg to see if it fills my hand with the pong of fat. If it fills my hand the goat is carrying too much fat.

When traveling up the line of goats I note each goat's hair coat. The desirable hair coat is one that has short, slick hair and is lustrous and glossy. The South Africans call this a quality hair coat. The texture and quality of the hair coat is an indication of the robustness, health and vigor of the animal. A scruffy hair coat indicates possible mineral deficiencies in the goat's diet and a possible parasite or worm load.

As I move back up the line of goats I feel each goat in the same area. If you touch one goat in the class you have to touch all of the goats in the class in the same place so people will not be able to say "I did not get a fair chance as the judge did not touch my goat." I always remember that I am in a "fish bowl" and everyone is watching every move that I make.

Now that I have evaluated each goat I begin to pull the goats into another line for placing. I begin with the goat which will be in last place motioning for the exhibitor to bring their goat forward. The goats that are better according to the breed standard and those that have correct structure and more meat are put at the top of the line. As I near placing of the top three or four goats I may want to let these goats loose in the ring separately and possibly together if the ring will allow this. It takes some help from the ring steward to do this. When the goats are running loose you can see if the goat lifts its tail and levels out the rump and how fluid and smooth each goat travels and their length of stride. It also gives you the opportunity to see the goats traveling together side by side. Once the goats have all been moved into a front line I study the line up one more time possibly moving a goat up or down the line a position or two. When the line up has been set I get the microphone and give my reasons for placings.

I work very hard to improve my reasons from show to show. I give comparative rather than descriptive reasons. You can see that the goat is a beautiful animal and don't have to be told that it is. I take care not to use "I love this animal" or I really "like this animal". I try to keep my comments relating to the breed standards, structure and correctness. I use the terms "longer, thicker, deeper,

wider, more correct, more desirable, etc." when I give reasons. I try to give three comparative reasons for each animal. I am really judging two goats at a time as the characteristics that are better in one animal may point out the weaknesses in the animal immediately behind it. I try to keep all comments positive taking care not embarrass exhibitors with harsh critical comments. I try to treat all exhibitors and their goats with respect. Everyone brings the best that they have to a show and they don't deserve negative comments. In the exhibitors meeting at the beginning of the show I tell the exhibitors to listen closely to the reasons given about the animal in front of them. You can tell an exhibitor that his animal has back legs that are cow hocked by saying that the animal in front of his goat has a more correct set to the back leg. You can tell an exhibitor that his animal lacks femininity by saying that the animal in front has more femininity in the head and neck.

A set of reasons might sound like: "number 1 is placing over number 2 due to greater femininity in the head and neck, being longer and more level in the topline and having a better set to the back leg; number 2 is placing over number 3 due to greater width in the chest floor, more depth in the body and a longer and more level rump; number 3 is placing over number 4 due to a more quality hair coat, greater spring of rib and more correct angulation in the rear hock", etc. I always try to say something positive about every goat in the line including the goat in last place even if it is only a comment about the shape of the ear or color of the face. You can say something positive about every animal. By using positive comments and comparative reasons everyone can feel good about their animals and at the same time be made aware of their animal's weaknesses.

I have had excellent response from using this type of reasons and conduct in the ring. A judge needs to remember that when they are at a show and in the ring they are representing not only themselves but also the association that sanctioned the show. A judge should be professional at all times and neatly dressed out of respect for himself and the Boer breed. You never know who is watching you. Each class is reviewed and placed using the techniques and procedures described above. At the end of each age group the championship drive is conducted. I used the same procedures and techniques to evaluate the goats competing for champion and reserve champion.

At the end of the show I always remember to thank everyone for attending the show and participating in the show. I remember to thank each member of the show committee, the announcer and the ring steward by name. I always bring small gifts with me to give to the principals that make the show run smoothly. The gift may be something like a swiss army knife or a keychain or piece of goat related jewelry. The people who run a show are volunteers and spend many hours preparing for the show and making it run smoothly. They need to be recognized accordingly.

One final thing - I never go back into the pens after a show to discuss goats with the exhibitor. Going into the pens can only lead to problems and possible hurt feelings. When I see a problem with a goat in the show ring I will many times hold the collar of the goat and let the exhibitor stand where I was standing as the judge. I will then ask "Do you see the problem with the xxx?" I want the exhibitor to see what I see. In many cases I will suggest things to improve the problem that I see such as better hoof trimming for example. I recommend that exhibitors show their goats in a mirror at home to see what the judge is seeing in the show ring. And lastly I never make a plane reservation to fly out on the day of the show. This would put stress on me to rush or complete the show and I need to take all the time necessary to evaluate the goats and not be in a hurry.

I have truly been blessed by the South African Boer Goat. It has taken me around the world many times (nine at last count) and allowed me to meet many wonderful people worldwide with a passion for their Boer goats. I hope the information presented in this article is helpful to you in the future.

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