

Dr Izak Hattingh: Drakensberger farmer

How did it come to be that a veterinarian started farming with Drakensberger cattle in the Eastern Free State? "Easy", says Dr Izak Hattingh, veterinarian in Villiers: "Apart from this region being Drakensberger territory, especially further east towards the Drakensberg mountains, my father used to farm with Drakensbergers because it is such a hardy and cold-tolerant breed that can survive well on the veld.

"Being a veterinarian with little time to spend with my cattle, the Drakensberger perfectly suits my lifestyle. I need to farm with an animal that can look after itself and a cow that can rear a calf on her own."



Izak Hattingh and his sons, Drikus and Izak, both future Drakensberger breeders.

Izak farms with commercial Drakensbergers in a typical Eastern Free State mixed farming operation, consisting of crops, cattle and sheep. The cattle are kept on the veld in summer and on crop residues in winter. The farm is situated between Villiers and Oranjeville, between the Wilge and Vaal Rivers.

Outstanding traits

"I use a variety of the best Drakensberger bulls I can afford, on our best cows. Our main selection criteria are good values for growth, with the aim to breed replacement heifers. The rest of the cows go to other bulls, mainly European beef breeds. These calves are sold on the spot and are highly sought after at feedlots, as their heterosis leads to satisfactory performance in the feedlot."

His breeding season runs from 15 November to end January, when cows are kept on the veld along with the bulls.

"I put my heifers with the bulls from the age of 15 months, for 63 days from 1 May onwards. They calve in February and March. Their calves are weaned by the end of August so they can be put with the bull again in November and then join the rest of the cows."

Over the past ten years the conception rate across the entire herd has been more than 85%, with the heifers at around 90%.

"My heifers undergo strict selection. Any heifer that fails to fall pregnant the first time is culled. First-calvers that do not become pregnant in the November breeding season, are also culled on the spot. This is the best method to select for fertility. Thereafter each cow gets one chance in her lifetime. If she does not fall pregnant inside of the normal mating season, she is sent off to the bull along with the heifers during May. After that they don't get another chance."

Pure mother line

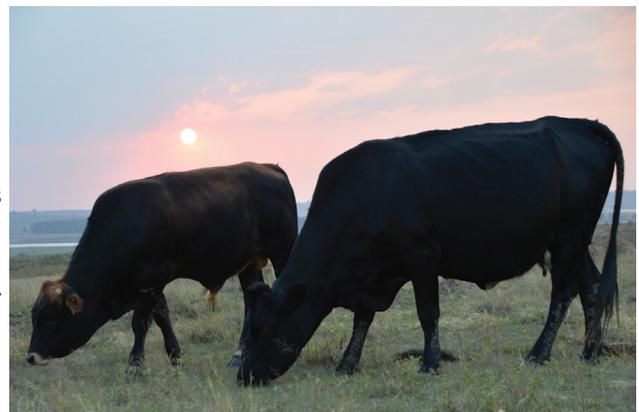
All of Izak's cows are pure-bred Drakensbergers. He firmly believes that the breed's mother line cannot be beaten in his area due to its exceptional traits. He uses a variety of bulls on the pure-bred cow herd. This is why he has a very strong opinion of the Drakensberger as a mother line in a terminal cross-breeding programme.

"If you can combine the advantage of an exceptional easy-to-manage mother line with the heterosis offered by a cross-breeding programme, your situation is ideal. We benefit from a weaning weight of



These calves are from Drakensberger heifers and an Angus bull. They were born in February and March, respectively.

10–15kg on the cross-bred calves. I believe the value of heterosis is not as well utilised as it should be in our country.



A Drakensberger cow with a Chianina-cross calf.

"Apart from high weights, feedlots are prepared to pay a premium for the cross-bred calves. This means that I enjoy double the benefit – improved weaning weights and a premium per kilogram. My pure-bred Drakensberger cow herd exhibits exceptional traits such as fertility, calving ease, hardiness and a sufficient supply of milk, making the breed an easy animal to farm with. With a cross-breeding programme on these cows, I also benefit from heterosis."

For more information, phone Izak Hattingh on 082 322 0452.