The Brahman Influence in South Florida

published in

The Peace River Farmer and Rancher

March - 2000

By Findlay Pate

UF/IFAS, Range Cattle REC

With exception to fencing, the production practice that most impacted Florida beef production was the Brahman bull. Originating in India, Brahmans (Bos indicus) were introduced into Florida, via of Texas, in the early 1900's. The Brahman breed was a natural for south Florida because these cattle were adapted to our hot, humid climate, were relatively immune to ticks and most other Florida insects, and had an inherent ability to forage on native range. Most important, it was quickly recognized that breeding Florida native cows with Brahman bulls greatly increased the size and weight of weaned calves and replacement females. The Florida native cow weighed about 600 pounds soaking wet and weaned a calf that averaged around 200 pounds.

During the 1930's several Florida cattlemen conducted breeding demonstrations which illustrated the advantage of crossbreeding Brahmans on native cows and English breeds (Hereford, Angus and Shorthorn). The Penny Ranch near Jacksonville and Crescent Valley Ranch (Mr. P. E. Williams) near Kissimmee, were the principals involved. The first controlled crossbreeding research with Brahman cattle in Florida was initiated at the Range Cattle REC by Dr. Gordon Kirk in 1942. These commercial ventures and university research dramatically revealed the benefits of crossbreeding native and straightbred English cows with Brahman bulls.

The greatest benefit from crossbreeding with Brahman was obtained in the female produced from the first cross of straightbred Brahmans and straightbreds of a Bos taurus breed (Angus, Hereford, Charolaise, etc.). She is termed the F-1 (first cross) cow. Like hybrid corn, the first cross is where maximum hybrid vigor (heterosis) occurs. The F-1 Brahman cow is an excellent mother, produces an abundance of milk, grows to a desirable mature weight (ranging from 900 to 1100 pounds), and remains productive longer than cows without brahman influence. Because of these attributes the F-1 Brahman crossbred cow produces a thrifty calf at weaning that often weighs 100 pounds heavier than other calves; and she continues producing calves until 12 to 15 years of age.

Beef cattlemen readily recognize the superiority of the F-1 Brahman cow. At times F-1 Brahman bred heifers from Brahman x Angus and Brahman x Hereford crosses have sold to commercial cattlemen for $800 to $1000 per head. When bred to a Bos taurus bull (Hereford, Angus, Charolaise, etc.) F-1 cows produce uniform calves (only 1/4 Brahman) that are not discounted when marketed. By weaning heavy, uniform calves until they
reach 12 to 15 years of age, these F-1 heifers are well worth the investment with current feeder calf prices.

It would be great if all our cows could be F-1 Brahman crosses. The problem is that F-1 cows can only be produced by crossing animals from two different straightbred breeds. A rancher must maintain a straightbred female herd to cross with straightbred Brahman bulls or a straightbred Brahman female herd to cross with bulls of a Bos taurus breed. This is difficult because straightbred replacement heifers must also be produced to go back into the straightbred herd, in addition to producing F-1 females. Another problem is that half of the F-1 calves produced are males. When sold as feeders these high-Brahman steers are discounted heavily on today's calf market. For most cattlemen, especially those with small herd sizes, it is best to purchase F-1 Brahman crossbred heifers, even at premium prices.

In south Florida we must have a degree of Brahman breeding in our commercial cow herds to maintain good calf production. Besides producing F-1 cows there are other breeding management alternatives to maintain the Brahman influence in our commercial cow herds. We will discuss a couple of crossbreeding alternatives in next month's article.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate