

Still going strong with Simmentalers!

Simmentaler breeder **Mike Krafft** might be 74, but he has no intention of slowing down – and he has a lot to teach younger breeders, such as the value of good veld and selecting for fertility.

Good pasture is a must for experienced Simmentaler breeder Mike Krafft (74) of the farm Ibenstein at Dordabis, in the Khomas Region of central Namibia, 80km east of Windhoek. And he says farmers should produce in accordance with their land's carrying capacity and provide for lean years.

When it comes to production, he believes in selecting for fertility. "The lean, ugly cow that calves means more to you than a beautiful cow. Without a calf, she's no longer pretty," says Mike. "If a cow, or especially a heifer, doesn't conceive, she must be culled without further ado."

Mike has also done away with the winter mating season. This the worst

time of the year, and calves arriving in winter are weaned at a bad time. The mating season at Ibenstein is now in autumn, from February to mid-April.

"In autumn, the veld doesn't have enough food for the animals. Supplement feed and licks help restrict losses," he says. "If you can maintain your animals' weight at this time of the year, half your battle is won."

PASTURE AND NUTRITION

Mike says it's remarkable how the growth of pastures varies from year to year. "In 2008's cool, rainy weather, *vermeerbos* made an appearance. Now the bush is *stinkbos* again," he notes.

On Ibenstein, 2 000ha has been deforested in the past four to five years.

BELOW: Mike Krafft with some of his prize show animals. He did exceptionally well at the Windhoek show this year. The Interbreed Junior Champion Bull, Interbreed Calf Champion Bull and the Simmentaler Super Cow all came from his showstring. To the right are some of Mike's animals that are being finished off for auctions. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SIMMENTALER AND SIMBRA CATTLE BREEDERS' SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

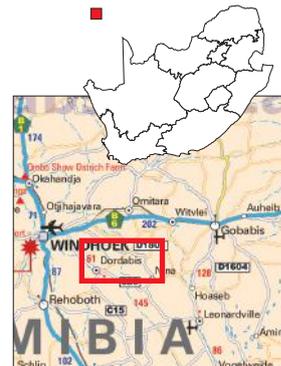
This is part of the annual planning and budget.

"We use manual labour and herbicide," says Mike. "Any spiny African mesquite (*Prosopis africana*) is chopped off."

Mike believes that forestation, in conjunction with the grass population, restricts production. In turn production is determined by your calf percentage – the higher that percentage, the better your revenue.

Mike says his grandfather detected deficiencies in the veld in the 1920s, when tests showed a phosphate deficiency. Grass is the most important source of nutrition, but phosphates, protein/lick, minerals and trace elements are also needed, he adds.

Animals must not be allowed to deteriorate in dry periods. When the



rainy season comes, they must be capable of eating enough protein for growth. Consequently, Mike maintains a comprehensive feeding programme.

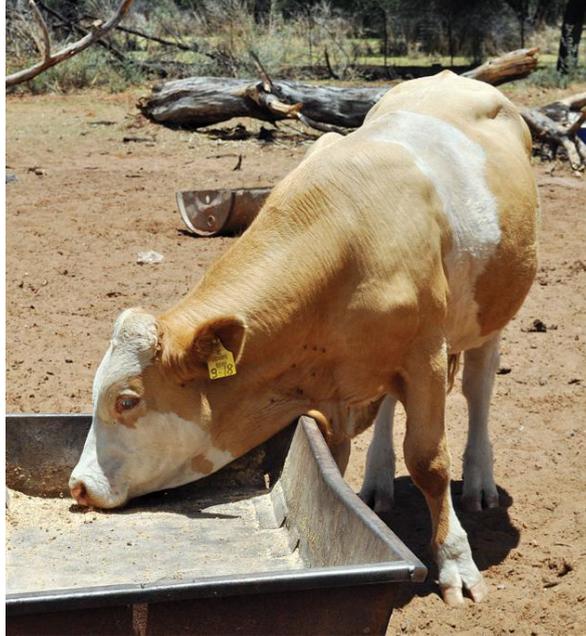
"When I suspect there's something amiss, Dawid Krause of Voormeester is only a phone call away for advice and assistance," he says. For cows and growing

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calves Mike uses Voormeester's Promol 18, which he mixes with *kameeldoring* pods and maize meal for an energy lick. In dry times *droëveld* concentrate is used as a maintenance lick. The indispensable phosphate is administered throughout the year in the form of Futterfos, but in larger quantities during the green season.

To keep his bulls at a good growth level, Mike gives them Beefpro 14 – at 0,5% of the animals'



LEFT:
A Simmentaler calf laps up the last remains of Voermeester animal feed.

BELOW:
Trophies and Karakul wool weaving art adorn the hunters' lodge.

body weight, with a little less in summer.

"One doesn't want to feed up bulls," he explains. "You want the muscles and skeleton to develop to their full potential." It's also wrong "to dump your bulls in fodder three months before an auction. They have to maintain a constant growth rate."

BUYING BULLS

You have to decide whether you want to produce weaners or oxen, and choose your bulls accordingly, says Mike.

Where you farm – in sandveld or in rocky terrain – also plays a role. In the past, nobody wanted to farm in the sandy parts of the area, but today these are sought after thanks to supplements and licks, he explains.

Mike says estimated breeding values are useful when buying bulls, but they're not the alpha and omega, as they aren't accurate enough.

"One also has to look at a functionally efficient animal," he says. For example, it means nothing if the figures say the animal is "right", but its legs are bandy.

Mike adds that it's preferable if a bull's birth weight index, which correlates with its growth figure, is above average.

If the figures are too low, you may later have to cope with smaller-framed cattle. When you then want to breed larger cattle again, calving problems will surface.

PERFORMANCE TESTING

"The Breedplan performance testing system gives you a good overview of your production," says Mike. "You just have to weigh and use the figures. I already decide at weaning which bulls I'm going to use for breeding and which for ox production.

"Not all the selected breeding bulls are, of course, passed by the selector during his visit or the vet's fertility tests."

Mike uses artificial insemination with imported semen on a small scale to establish new bloodlines. During the 1960s he imported many bulls, but had little success. He then started to buy bulls in South Africa, and things went a little better.

However, he says, he got the best results from adapted animals he bought locally from fellow Namibian breeders.

• For more information contact the Simmentaler and Simbra Cattle Breeders' Society of Southern Africa on 051 446 0580 / 446 0582 or email info@simmentaler.org.

Diversifying with game

Mike introduced game into his farming concern some time ago. In 1977 he registered as a professional hunter – one of only seven in the country at that time.

He says game animals graze on the best, tastiest velds. "We thought we could manage cattle, sheep and game on the same farm, but no ways. It doesn't work like that.

Veld management isn't possible with game. They jump over or crawl underneath fences."

He enclosed 6 500ha with game-proof fencing and game numbers increased sharply.

Mike explains how easy it is to make a mistake with game numbers. At one stage they believed they had 300 gemsbok – until an official game count found 800.

Previously Karakul sheep pulled them through the dry years, but these days it's the game and tourism industry.

Mike's son, René, who received an agricultural diploma from Pretoria Technikon, now manages the game enterprise and the commercial side of the cattle section.

Every year, between seven and 12 groups of hunters come to visit Ibenstein – some 25 hunters in total.



Farming history

The Ibenstein stud dates back to 1924, when Mike's grandfather August Stauch imported Simmentalers from Germany.

The first Simmentalers entered Namibia in 1893, but a rinderpest epidemic wiped out virtually all of the country's cattle. The next Simmentaler imports were in 1902/03. Another rinderpest epidemic followed, but did less damage, thanks to a new vaccine.

In 1937 Mike's father, Nicolai, and his uncle, Hans, sold the Simmentalers. Then came the

Second World War, and Karakul sheep were in demand.

Mike's father started farming with Sussex cattle together with Karakuls.

Mike took over the farming enterprise after Nicolai's death in 1958. He had another year to go before he would have completed his degree in agricultural engineering at the University of Pretoria, but there was no other option. He had to come and help his mother.

In 1975, Mike decided to sell the Karakuls because the predator problem

was occupying 80% of his time. There was also a recession in pelt prices. He also cut down the numbers of Sussex cattle and brought back his mother's beloved Simmentalers.

Mike tells us Dordabis was a major shopping centre in those days, when roads had not yet been properly developed. "Farmers came to collect their mail and load fodder, stock medicine and groceries on their ox wagons," he says. These expedition often involved a three-day outspan and "social sessions" at the hotel.