



BY DR. FRANK PINKERTON

Setting useful 'milestone' weight categories for growing meat goats

In the October issue of *Goat Rancher*, I identified major factors affecting the weaning weights of kids (dam's age and size at parturition, birth weight of kid, sex of kid, number of kids/litter, nutritional status of gestating doe). Shortly thereafter, I received an interesting and useful follow-up inquiry from Nevada concerning the average daily gain (ADG) of goats as they grow to puberty and beyond, to wit: What are the correct 'milestone' weight categories for meat goats for use in evaluating growth performance of individuals and, by inference, assessing general levels of herd management.

The inquirer was Ms. Jean Harrison of Reno, Nev., who is creator and operator of EasyKeeper Herd Manager LLC, a web-based program for evaluating on-farm performance of kids, dams and bucks and for storing/using herd management data (reproductive data, pedigrees, health status, etc.). While working with university specialists, she was asked to generate milestone weight categories for meat goats for use in evaluating growth performance. Thus her inquiry to me and to Brian Payne, long-term Canadian importer/producer of Savanna goats whose herd has been enrolled for some years in the Kentucky State University Goat Herd Improvement Program (GHIP) conducted by Dr. Ken Andries.

Brian and I replied thusly: The most useful weight categories are defined by time intervals. Accordingly, we suggested the following ages for weighing goats for generating useful test weights at: a) birth, b) weaning at 90 days (+ or - 20 days; adjusted by calculation to 90 days), 6 and/or 9 months, and yearling (12-15 months). The adjusted 90-day weight (traditionally used for lamb evaluation) is assumed to reflect mostly the milk yield of the does as the primary source of nutrients for kid growth. Too, herd managers typically wean buck kids by/before 4 months of age to avoid unwanted pregnancy of herd does.

Weighing at 6 months of age (+ or - 20 days) is practical because many such kids go to slaughter or replacement markets at about this time as pastures/browse decline. Contrarily, South Africa and New Zealand owners prefer a 9-month evaluation date because it is thought that most goats are ready to breed at this age (if well grown) and also owners are able to make better informed keep/sell/cull decisions at this age. Yearling weights of both sexes can be taken from 13-15 months of age. Such data is useful for evaluating replacement animals *per se* and for assessing general herd management (genetic quality as well as nutritional and health status).

As always, we urge producers to enroll their herds in a performance testing program for the primary reason that it permits one to make more accurate keep-or-cull decisions, which will lead, perforce, to improved genetic quality of one's herd and, one may reasonably expect, increased profitability.

But, there is a *second* benefit of extensive on-farm performance testing, and that is the generation of multi-farm data that can be used to evaluate and identify superior sires using EBV (estimated breeding value) and/or EPD (estimated progeny difference). Data linkages or a sire's performance between a cooperating breeder and multiple commercial farms significantly improves the reliability of EBV/EPD data.

Widespread usage of such genetically valuable sires and their offspring would do much to improve herd gross income and operator net profit. Caveat: although the use of such sires, via artificial insemination, could increase the *rate* of genetic improvement among herds, AI of meat goats has not been widely practiced in the goat industry to date for several reasons (cost, availability of desired semen, experience of producer/inseminator). But, even without AI, progressive sheep breeders have banded together to form cooperative breeding groups that share superior, performance-tested sires between herds. Goat breeders could also benefit by such cooperative approaches in proving, and using, young sires.

Cloud-based data means easy access

As some of you know, there are a number of commercially available computer programs available for improving the convenience, accuracy and usefulness of performance and reproductive data as well as for tracking pedigree information to enable better mating decisions. Brian and I have some knowledge of the EasyKeeper system mentioned above and are impressed with both its current status

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and its potential for enhancing its scale and scope and thus its industry-wide utility. Since I am not knowledgeable of the technology involved, I asked Jean to describe, in lay terms, the EasyKeeper system for record keeping and its usage to producers, large and small. She replied as follows:

EasyKeeper Herd Manager is a cloud-based application specifically designed to meet the record-keeping and performance analysis needs of meat and dairy goat producers. EasyKeeper runs in the user's Internet browser. This offers access to the herd's records and reports wherever and whenever the producer can go online, and from any device, including a desktop or laptop computer, a smartphone or tablet.

Because the portability and availability means a producer can add events as they occur — in the barn, out in the field, at the show ring or sale, it is much easier for the producer to stay on top of his general records collection. As a result, this provides the foundation for the reporting required to improve performance and yield. Traditional pen and paper methods, and even spreadsheets, fall short in this task in many ways, especially for the producer who is interested in performance improvement simply because these methods don't readily offer up answers; it takes time, often lots of it, to compile the information and perform the analysis to get to the point where an informed business decision can be made.

In comparison, EasyKeepers's herd management interface provides forms that record 'every day' data, from which the system automatically calculates performance metrics. For example, when entering two or more weight events, the performance metric of average daily gain is generated. In future editions, this data will be used to perform further benchmarking and herd-level performance assessments.

Other essential record-keeping and reporting features of the service include breedings and breeding outcome for dams and sires, pedigrees and progeny, health and maintenance events and automated follow-up reminders, body condition scoring, management groups, purchase and sales, lease and boarding, milk and meat production, and income and expense tracking.

Moving from animal record-keeping and data analytics to herd management are EasyKeeper's up-to-the-minute tasklist, which displays reminders for upcoming events such as vaccination, administration reminders, and notification of animal status updates, and herd management checklists (such as kidding and dry-off schedules). These

tools are generated from the animal records as they are entered, reducing the time spent in task and resource planning and remove any guesswork as to when an activity should be completed.

See www.easykeeper.net/plan for a full list of current and future features and services as new ones are added often.

Miss. co-op working with ASU

Glad tidings: The Mississippi Meat Goat Producer's Cooperative (MMGPC) is expanding its meat goat program and is working closely with Alcorn State University (ASU), Small Farm and Agribusiness Center, Alcorn State, Miss.


MMGPC ranchers, Michael Cook and Dr. Terri Cook (President, MMGPC), MMGPC members Charles and Mary Prater and Benjamin and Belinda Usher recently purchased a small group of Spanish doelings and two young bucks from Broken Horn Ranch, Mason, Texas, owned by Grady and

Donna Fort. These young does were his top keepers from the 2014 on-farm performance-testing program, but the on-going drought necessitated their sale. (Grady's management policy is to not overstock and damage the land or forage base).

Grady's Spanish doelings in this group were all twins and born in mid-March, weaned at 90 days and reared on Wilmann Lovegrass pasture with no grain supplement. At 6 months of age they weighed: 65, 82, 74, 77, 84, 78, 78, 79, 66 and 79 — an average of 76 lbs. during the Alcorn visit.

Grady's herd has been on test since 2007 and his selection process has increased his annual average weaning weights by nearly 22% — a good return for the effort involved, as demonstrated by easy sales and rising prices of quality bucks. Insofar as I know, his is the only tested Spanish herd in Texas, or elsewhere, with years of on-going performance testing.

The herd will be kidding in January




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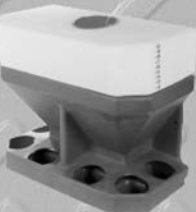


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Width-14" Drinker height 3"



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2015 and tested doelings and bucklets will be available for delivery in June. His top end young bucks will be put through an on-ranch buck test, post-weaning, lasting 90 days, and will be available for delivery after Labor Day.

Grady may be reached at WGF2@HCTC.NET or 325.347.9546. (*Caveat, full disclosure: I get a modest broker's fee.*)

These goats will be used by MMGPC and ASU to demonstrate the use of crossbreeding of two unrelated breeds to maximize hybrid vigor. The second breed has not been chosen, but I am urging the use of fullblood or high percentage Savanna bucks because we have several years of successful experience with this particular cross (see my July '14 *Goat Rancher* column reporting improvements in market weights and price/lb totaling about 30% for Pape's F-1 Savanna/Spanish kids over his full Spanish kids). Also, the F-1 doelings grow up to be especially good dams when back-crossed to another Savanna, or to one's buck of choice.

The heterosis (hybrid vigor) demonstrated in crossbreeding programs is simply a paying proposition. It would take several generations of careful selection to generate that much improvement in a single-breed herd. Contrarily, readers should understand that crossing poor quality individuals, regardless of breeds used, will not demonstrate acceptable heterosis ... two pore ass goats will just produce (a few) more pore ass goats; don't go there.

Milo is comparable to corn

From Kansas, an inquiry about the use of sorghum grain (milo), to wit: is it safe and doable?

Yes, this feedstuff is safe to feed goats, and its usage is similar to corn grain. Milo typically contains about 10% CP and about

74% TDN, as compared to corn at 8% CP and 79% TDN. I have heard anecdotal information that it may contribute to urinary calculi in goats, but I have no documented proof. If it were cheaper than corn, or other feed grains, I would not hesitate to use it. It would need to be ground because some portion of its small, hard seeds can escape chewing/cracking and not be digested fully by goats. FYI, steaming milo will increase its digestibility (even more so than for steam-flaked corn). Steamed milo is widely used in cattle feedlots in milo growing areas. Milo will grow reasonably well on fields that are too dry for decent corn yields (parts of KS, OK, TX, CO).

In a related call, I urged a producer from South Dakota to take advantage of locally available by-product feedstuffs such as wheat cleanings (15% CP, 68% TDN), corn screenings (8% CP, 80% TD) and cull peas (22% CP, 75% TDN). They are usually much cheaper than typical feed grains and goats readily eat them, singly or in mixtures.

Years ago, I visited an Angora farm near Fargo, N.D. The goats wintered on wheat cleanings and wheat straw plus mineral mix ... ice on their beards ... and cut about 80% more mohair than their counterparts in Texas. The program was catching on but then the USDA abandoned the Mohair subsidy program and killed this promising enterprise deader'n Elvis.

Medical update

Medical progress report: I continue to improve post-surgery, blood pressure readings stabilizing at desirable levels and mandated exercises are not so onerous as before. Finally got the bill for the one-day surgical procedure ... it was pretty bad by the hour — it totaled \$105,850 for the 3.5 hour procedure. Thank you, taxpayers, one and all for your Medicare-powered rescue.

(Dr. Frank Pinkerton, PhD, is a retired extension goat specialist living in Martindale, Texas. He can be contacted at 512-357-2534 or by e-mail at fpinkerton@austin.rr.com. His book, A Compilation of the Wit and Wisdom of the Goat Man, is available for purchase at www.goatrancher.com.)

NAILE market goat and ABGA shows planned Nov. 18-20

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) 9th Annual Junior Wether Goat Show will take place Nov. 18-19. It's open to exhibitors not more than 21-years-of-age and at least 6-years-old by day of the show. Premiums are \$2,500 plus jackpot added monies and are paid to entries in each class. Additional premium money has been added this year for Grand Champion Wether (\$500) and Reserve Champion Wether (\$250). Entry fee is \$25 per head.

The 4th Annual Junior Wether Goat Showmanship Contest takes place on the evening of Nov. 18. There is no entry fee and winners receive NAILE ribbons and belt buckles.

The 15th Annual NAILE Boer Goat show takes place on Thursday, Nov. 20. The American Boer Goat Association is sponsoring and sanctioning the show, and \$8,000 in premium money is offered. Registered Boer goats from all recognized associations are eligible.

The 41st Annual NAILE is produced by the Commonwealth of Kentucky at the Kentucky Exposition Center in Louisville, Ky., under the direction of the Kentucky State Fair Board. During the Expo's run Nov. 4-21, the facility's entire 1,200,000 square feet of climate-controlled exhibit space is used. More than 200,000 visitors and exhibitors attend the event annually. ■

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