



# SA Simmentaler embryo export pioneer

Exporting of Simmentaler embryos to Canada was South African Simmentaler breeder Abraham Kruger's gateway to international success, writes **Izak Hofmeyr**.

In 1965, Abraham Kruger of the farm Rietfonteinpoort in the Colesberg district bought Simmentalers from Namibia for the first time. He systematically built up his Troverberg Simmentaler Stud over the next 36 years with an unquenchable desire to consistently improve the breed.

Then, 11 years ago, he met a Canadian who radically changed his cattle farming approach.

"I met Canadian engineer Ron Nolan at the then Pretoria Show. He was a world-renowned Simmentaler breeder and owner of the well-known Bar 5 Ranch in Canada. He was impressed by one of my champion heifers on show, Toverberg Reinette. After a long discussion, we saw an

opportunity to obtain the best Simmentaler genetics in South Africa, export it as embryos to Canada and market the progeny worldwide.

"This culminated in an agreement, drafted and signed on the back of a show catalogue, which we honour to this day."

## THE AGREEMENT

According to the agreement, Abraham would buy carefully selected cows in South Africa on behalf of Ron and keep them on Rietfonteinpoort. He and his team would then inseminate them with selected South African Simmentaler semen, flush them for embryos and export the cryo-preserved embryos to Canada. The embryos would be

**ABOVE:** Some of the cows and their calves at Rietfonteinpoort.

**TOP RIGHT:** Bar 5 SA Mr Optimal 447L, exported from Toverberg to Canada as an embryo.

**RIGHT ABOVE:** Abraham Kruger and Ron Nolan. COURTESY OF THE SIMMENTALER CATTLE BREEDERS SOCIETY



implanted into recipient cows on the Bar 5 Ranch where the calves would then be reared and sold at a prestige auction to top buyers from the US, Brazil and Mexico. The income from the sale of the calves would be split equally.

The success of the project is illustrated by the bull Bar 5 SA Mr Optimal 447L, exported from Toverberg to Canada as an embryo and eventually sold to Agro Zurita in Brazil. Son of the sire Kykso Hano and dam Salerika Zinka 5th, he subsequently made history when Agro Zurita sold a half share at a world record price of C\$500 000 (R4 million). Semex is currently marketing 19 bulls from Toverberg as embryos in 26 countries.

## A CHANGE IN FOCUS

Abraham recalls that when he started breeding Simmentalers, Germany was the main source of genetics – a position this country kept for around 30

years. After the outbreak of mad cow disease in the eighties, Germany changed its focus from the dual purpose Simmentaler to the dairy Simmentaler. "Due to this change of focus, South Africa became globally known as the country with the best dual purpose Simmentaler cattle in the world. That is why Ron Nolan came to the Pretoria Show – he wanted genetics. It was unfortunately impossible to export semen from South Africa. The only way to export genetics is through embryos, and that is how we managed to supply the world with South African genetics for 11 years."

**COMING TO AN END**  
"Bar 5's breeding policy is

## The Merino stud

Abraham is originally from Venterstad, but the family farm was expropriated for the planned Gariiep dam in 1962. The family had traditionally farmed with sheep and Abraham has continued the tradition for the past 55 years.

“I identify the best genetics in the country to incorporate into my own stud. The ram, Dawid, currently has the greatest influence on my herd.

“Six years ago, I realised that I needed more crimp definition

and a higher lanolin level in my fleece. Piet Venter, BKB’s agent in Colesberg, who obviously travels a lot, advised me to visit Stephan Naudé from Hanover, an established breeder.

“We inspected 80 rams, but one really caught my eye. I only saw his head, but I asked Stephan to catch him for me. It was Dawid. I bought a half share in him at auction. He went straight to Ramsem where his semen was collected.

We sold the semen fairly cheap. To date, I have earned R80 000, a good indication of his popularity.”

Abraham stresses that one of the biggest traps a stud breeder can fall into is to buy feed instead of genetic potential. Supplementary feeding for better performance has definite drawbacks, he says.

“I believe in animals adapted to their environment. We farm in an extensive area, where sheep must be

able to survive and produce on pasture. For me, it is a matter of principle that I do not supplement feed. Discounting twins, the lambing percentage is between 97% and 98% without any feeding. I do, however, assist twins on greed feed. Dawid sires sheep with better quality wool that can survive under extensive conditions.”

His ideal Merino? “In the first place, it is adaptable and not dependent on the co-op

for survival. Secondly, I strive for a balance between meat and wool with a fleece diameter of around 20 microns. If the wool is too fine, meat characteristics suffer. At this stage of my life, I have a fairly good idea of what works on my farm.”

He stresses that selection pressure is the most important factor in breeding naturally adapted sheep or cattle, with one more important condition: The farmer has to have an eye for it.



based on unrelated lines. It was only interested in South African animals completely unrelated to its own genetics to the fifth generation on pedigree. After 11 years, we have obtained all the best genetics available in South Africa and Namibia. I can no longer provide anything new.”

Bar 5 now breeds mainly with progeny from South Africa, but the genetic base is so firmly established in its own studs that it no longer needs to import embryos from South Africa.

### EMBRYO TECHNOLOGY

“Embryo technology has considerably accelerated the saturation process. Where a cow would only give one calf a year, it enabled us to average

six embryos per cow per flush. Every donor cow was flushed around once every two months, giving 36 embryos per year.

“I practically drowned Bar 5 in embryos. Remember, the man who buys these animals pays a lot of money for them, so he also uses embryo technology to get as much progeny from his investment as possible.

“The advantage of embryo technology is that we could export the best genetics without adversely affecting our own stud. We still have the best dual purpose Simmentaler genetics in the world.”

Although embryo export has come to an end, Abraham still has cattle in Canada in accordance with the original agreement. It has also become clear

**ABOVE:**  
The ram, Dawid, had the greatest influence on Abraham’s Merino flock.

**RIGHT:**  
What Toverberg stands for: outstanding world-class genetics.



that his genetic material is second to none. One example is Toverberg Erika, one of his cows. Her embryos were the first to be exported. Of the 19 bulls from which Semex sells semen across the world, three are her calves with different bulls.

Embryos that were unsuitable for

cryopreservation were transferred to recipient cows on Rietfonteinpoort. The same principles of the agreement applied in South Africa: the calves were sold locally and the profit was shared.

• Contact the Simmentaler Cattle Breeders Society on 051 446 0580 or email [info@simmentaler.org](mailto:info@simmentaler.org)