

ACBA: Husbandry

## SELECTING AND CULLING FOR BREED VIGOR IN THE CAVY

By David Hardesty

All cavy breeders, from novice pet owner to veteran exhibitors, have fond memories of their first cavies. I remember my first cavies. The brother of the next door neighbor was moving into an apartment, where they couldn't have pets, and they had to find a home for about 20 Peruvians. He gave them to me because he had seen I was good with animals. They were all the offspring of one senior boar and he was the father of four generations represented in this herd.

I knew absolutely nothing about cavies. But I thought they were wonderful. All that soft, long hair, and they were vocal too! I entered them in the local Montgomery County fair that summer, in Dayton, Ohio. I had always wanted to enter livestock at the fair. I envied these 4H youth and their steers. But a steer was utterly out of the question as I lived within the Dayton city limits. But these small animals could qualify me for making an entry at the fair.

I had no idea what I was doing. I filled out the entry blank and hand delivered it, with the entry fee, before the deadline. I brought them to the rabbit & poultry barn, which was under the grand stands for the race track, and set each up with feed and water. Then came the day of the judging. Boy was I excited. I knew I was going to win something because I had the only guinea pigs entered. The judge, Phil Macy, assisted by his wife, as writer, were somewhat overwhelmed initially because, knowing nothing about breeds, varieties and classes, they had to sort out my entire entry into a classes before they could even be judged. Then, of course, all my cavies had been kept in family units so everyone had barbered everyone else. Imagine Phil Macy's delight when he finished judging my little motley crew. But I was delighted with all the blue ribbons I got. Then I met Frank Richards, a Polish breeder. "You ought to come up to the Springfield Rabbit & Cavy Fancier's show next January", says he. "Besides, you had no competition!"

I went to that show and took a Peruvian Broken Color Senior boar to enter. I knew now how to properly enter him. I immediately was introduced to the concept of the word competition, as there were 12 in his class. But my boar, which I kept in a 20L aquarium, in my dormitory room at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, managed to place 5th. This in spite of not being wrapped. Thank God my boar wasn't a chewer. I just made a point of brushing his coat

everyday with a soft baby brush to keep out the tangles. Bathed him frequently. Kept his cage really clean too. Besides I had roomies to be concerned about their complaints about any smell. I had a chance to see the other breeds and representative varieties. Back then there were only the three breeds. I fell in love with Red Americans. I had to have these. Boy was I hooked bad.

Many entries and many cavies have passed across a judging table since then. I have just returned from the Noblesville, Indiana ACBA National Specialty show. I sold a lot of animals, but I came with my own list of cavies I was looking for. Found some I needed, some that were unexpected. I found that Blue Roan Satin American boar which will fit nicely into my breeding program. I also bought a Strawberry roan American boar and a Tri-roan American boar. I also bought an American Black Senior boar from Peg Smith out of Anchorage, Alaska, which she delivered to me. He ended up finishing 2nd in a very large class of black senior boars. He is a huge, very typey boar. His undercolor leaves something to be desired though. These boars will be pressed into service as soon as I can set up tubs for them. Until then I'll have to keep them alone and isolated. I came back with a net loss compared to the number I brought, which I guess is good. I still had fits playing musical cages so that I could isolate the newbies.

After 30 years doing this cavy thang, I'm still picking up pigs in the varieties I already have. I have learned that the truly successful breeder constantly evaluates what they have and is trying to bring in stock which will compensate for these weaknesses. I am noticing that my Black American sows, although very, very typey, are very slow to get senior weight. That's the primary reason I wanted Peg's Black boar. He's a big, bruiser of a boar. God willing I can get his size, into the offspring he produces, without taking a step backward in type or color. This is what being a breeder is all about.

But being a breeder is more than making offspring, which have good shape, color, or breed coat characteristics. Altogether too often we allow ourselves to be tunnel visioned on a very narrow set of physical traits which equate to wins on the judges table. We think of that cavy as a Peruvian, a Teddy, and a Texel. Breed first, and foremost. But before it

is an American Shorthair, it is *cavia porcellus*. We need to select offspring for the next generation's breeders based on a much longer list of criteria than just shape, color, coat texture, and percentage of "showable" babies.

Are we doing the breed any good when we consciously select sows, which throw two large babies in the litter? That may be an optimal number for the number of milk taps which mom carries, but how many generations before that number drops to one huge baby which is too big for the sow to whelp naturally? How many breeders keep performance statistics on their breeder sows tracking average litter size, percentage of live birth, and body weight? How many does she raise out of the live births? I keep sows out of mothers, which consistently throw four or more babies, which are all born alive, and which the mother raises without degenerating to skin and bones before they are weaned. Good mothers produce good mothers. If you don't watch out, what you can end up with are sows which need C-sections to have babies. How does a population support itself when the mothers cannot whelp naturally? Just ask the English Bulldog breeders!

Are you tracking the average litter sizes a boar produces when bred to several different sows? We are quick to condemn the mother if the litter size is consistently small. What's to say the boar couldn't have a low sperm count. Big, heavy boars can sterilize themselves, with time, as they put on weight. A symptom of this is gradually smaller, and smaller litters out of a breeder boar. Breeder boars need good space for exercise to reduce the odds of this happening. Try the sow to a different boar. If she throws a normal size litter bred to a younger boar, then the boar is the problem. If the mother still throw's small litters, consider selling her to another breeder with unrelated bloodlines.

Are you culling ruthlessly? If you are line breeding, any setback as an offspring matures means that this will be passed onto and concentrated in his progeny. I have had problems with my Black American boars developing cervical lymphadenitis. It was like a childhood disease in the young boars. Some would develop it and then get over it. Some would never get over it without medication. Three years ago I started culling those which got it and didn't spontaneously get over it, without any medications. In other words I was keeping animals which were able to resist the organism. I was still selecting for type, shape, and color. Slowly but surely each successive generation has shown fewer and fewer incidences of lumps. This was because I was concentrating the ability to resist the organism in each successive generation. Now I cull any animals, which develops them, because the vast majority isn't. I also taken to culling animals, which develop pneumonia. It has to be a truly exceptional animal for me to treat it. But I will not breed back to that animal. You will be concentrating the susceptibility to pneumonia into successive generations. Breed for vigorous, healthy animals, which grow to a good size with no health setbacks.

If a breeder can build a bloodline, which produces consistent color or coat, then there is no reason why we cannot build a bloodline, which is vigorous and disease free. If we can breed animals, which consistently have good shape and head, we can breed animals which throw good size litters and who raise all they birth. Learn to recognize the signs of exceptional breeders. Learn what it means to cull ruthlessly. Culling ruthlessly now pays handsome dividends generations down the line. The choice is often not an easy one. But you are the only one, as breeder, who is in a position to make it. Make those choices now, or let natural selection weed out their sickly progeny.

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