

Breeding for polled position

Dairy farmer: Kerry McGarvie and Lawrence Finney

Region: Western Victoria

Topic: Breeding for polled cattle

Kerry McGarvie has one regret when it comes to breeding polled Jerseys – that she didn’t go harder at the start.

With 212 polled animals in a herd of 345 females, it’s hard to imagine Kerry ever doubted the concept. But in the early days, after she discovered polled dairy cows online, she still had lingering suspicions.

“I was apprehensive about trying polled bulls so just used a few straws of three bulls in our herd of 350 Jerseys at that time. Eight polled calves were born in 2011; not many, given we were rearing 100-plus a year back then. When I saw that the calves were not only normal, but actually pretty good, I ordered straws of two more polled sires.”

“We could have had so many more polls today, as some of those original polled daughters are still in the herd today.”

Kerry and husband Lawrence Finney diversified their farm near Camperdown in Western Victoria and now milk 220-240 registered Jerseys under the prefix Taughboyne and are developing a meat and dairy goat herd with 400 does.

Their polled breeding has come a long way since Kerry stumbled across a chance comment, about 12 years ago, on the Jersey Australia online forum about a polled bull.

Breeding polled animals was attractive as the practice of disbudding, while necessary, never sat well with Kerry.

“When I discovered there were polled dairy cattle, disbudding went from something I hated, to just another problem that could be solved,” she said.

Kerry used the Jersey Australia forum to garner information from polled breeders across the globe. Later, a group was created where participants only discussed polled bulls and Kerry revelled in the “positive vibe”.

It was here she learnt that the polled gene is dominant; this changed the course of her breeding.

For the past 10 years, Kerry and Lawrence have focused on breeding polled Jerseys. They have bred 416 polled females and numerous herd sires, and bought five polled cows.

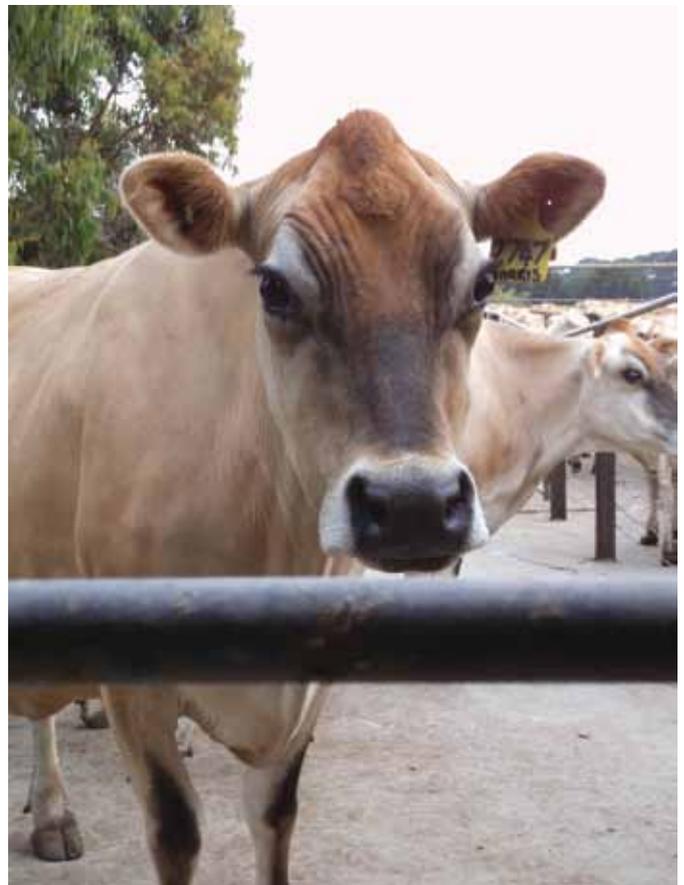
These are a combination of both true polled (homozygous

or PP) animals – those whose offspring will be polled regardless of the mating – and poll carrier (heterozygous (Pp) animals – where the animal doesn’t have horns but its offspring could depending on the mating.

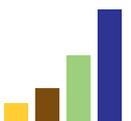
Two years ago, 82% of their heifers were born polled, their best year to date. “It was a reflection of using polled sires over polled cows,” Kerry said.

Their breeding philosophy has been simple. Everything gets mated to a polled sire. Even mop-up bulls and those used to mate heifers were polled. This has helped build numbers.

“I choose polled bulls the same way I’ve always chosen bulls, nothing changed there,” Kerry said. “I choose them on trait strengths, so that I have a bull to fix a problem when needed.



Kerry McGarvie and Lawrence Finney have bred 416 polled females over the past 10 years.



“It’s been especially easy to find good cell count polled bulls and I have, at times, had a whole bull team better than the breed average for cell count. I haven’t focused on fertility, we never felt like that was a problem.”

Initially, Kerry looked to the US for polled bulls. Admitting some of her research bordered on pedigree “obsession”, she scoured the US Jersey Green Book Online and meticulously went through 300-plus bulls searching for specific traits that she wanted with the polled genes.

But as the polled bull market increased in Australia and there were more bull options, Kerry used a balance of Australian and US sires.

Included in their breeding tool kit is the DataGene *Good Bulls Guide* to rank potential sires.

Kerry has used horned bulls recently, without compromising the polled breeding program.

These bulls were selected because of their high scores for other traits and then Kerry joined them to true polled (homozygous PP) cows, which ensured a polled calf.

Kerry and Lawrence closely monitor their genetic progress. They are part of the Ginfo project where farmers contribute herd recording, classification and genomic testing results to the national reference herd.

“We haven’t noted any negative effects from breeding for polled; in fact the most recent DataGene Genetic Progress reports show our herd ranked slightly above breed average,” Kerry said.

“Initially we suspected a reduction in bull choices would result in worse type or production, but it has not been the case at all. In fact, some of the sires have made a big improvement in our herd, especially with type.”

Last season, Kerry and Lawrence recorded their highest-ever milk volume from a 2-year-old polled heifer at 25 litres/day. Kerry credited some of the type enhancements, such as improved stature and strength, for this result.

The Taughboyne herd calves in Autumn and averages 460 kg of milk solids/cow/year. The farm is a dryland operation with the herd fed 2-4 kg of concentrate/cow/day.

The polled genetics have also proven their worth when it comes to classification. Kerry and Lawrence’s highest classified polled cow, at 91 points, is equal to their highest horned cows. The couple also recently bred their first polled three-generation pedigree where all the dams were scored 90 points or more.

Breeding for polled has reduced costs through less disbudding. But Kerry and Lawrence have also had an increase demand for their polled bulls. They now have repeat buyers, some taking up to 14 polled sires a year.

Taughboyne’s polled breeding has attracted interest from herd improvement companies seeking young bulls to test for use for artificial insemination. They seldom had this sort of attention before the introduction of polled genetics, according to Kerry.

Other highlights have included a progeny test daughter being photographed by an AI company and an On-Farm Challenge class win which went on to be crowned champion of the local Jersey club.

“All this happened in the last few years, while at the same time our financial position has improved,” Kerry said. “There just has not been a downside for us.”

In recent years breeding for polled has increased in popularity. Kerry says there’s more choice than ever, thanks to genomics.

This acceptance of polled breeding and encouragement from the dairy community has been heartening for Kerry.

“Some of the most enjoyable experiences I’ve had have been other farmers telling me about their polled successes,” she said. “I still remember how great it felt when those first polled calves were born, how I did that little happy dance in the springer paddock.”

Polled genes in Australian dairy cattle

- True polled: PP – homozygous dominant
- Poll carrier: Pp – heterozygous
- Horned: pp – homozygous recessive

[More info: DataGene fact sheet 20: Breeding polled cattle.](#)

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