

Breeding Self cavies - some top fanciers tell their secrets

By Bryan Mayoh

I always enjoy reading articles on the breeding of livestock, when they have been written by someone who knows what they are talking about and who is willing to give personal insights and experiences. There is always a little frustration, though, in that in any one article you only get one set of experiences; whilst one writer will concentrate on different aspects of the subject from another, so that it is difficult to get a rounded coverage of the subject, in which you can compare different viewpoints.

When we were discussing this Year Book, we decided that we would attempt to provide a solution to these difficulties by defining a fixed set of questions on most aspects of breeding Self cavies and then asking a number of leading Self breeders for their answers, thereby getting them to reveal at least some of their secrets.

The questions we asked covered four topics:

- Choosing the Stud Boar
- Choosing the Breeding Sow
- Selecting the Boar/Sow Mating
- Raising the Litter

The 'panel' we assembled to answer these questions consisted of Joan Radeaglia (JR), Graham Phillips (GP), Margaret Pearce (MP), Noreen & Peter Handley (NPH) and myself (BM). GP and BM answers generally relate to Self Blacks, NPH to Self Blacks and Self Goldens, MP to Self Whites and Self Creams, and JR to Self Beige. The answers are reported 'straight', with editing only for clarity. Conclusions are left to the reader.

1 Choosing the Stud Boar

Specific questions asked on this subject were:

- 'How do you select stud boars? What faults will you allow and what won't you permit?'
- 'At what age do you first use stud boars?'
- 'How many stud boars do you keep? How many sows do you pair them to?'

GP:

- ❖ The boar should be as close to the standard as possible, the best you can get. He should have a broad head and a bold eye and not too many red hairs. A greasy coat will be tolerated, as will slightly short ears - 'you won't get floppy lugs on a broad pig.'
- ❖ Boars are sometimes used at 3 months, to a maiden sow, if they are very good, but more usually their first mating is at 5 months.
- ❖ The quality of the boars is 'the main thing' about the stud. About 15 stud boars are typically in use, each being paired with only one or two sows at a time. GP prefers to have lots of choices of boars to use: 'You can get a horse which wins the Derby and breeds nothing', so dependence on a small number of boars is avoided.

JR:

- ❖ The boar should not have bad colour, in beige he should be medium or a little light but not too dark. He should have good size and good ears, some lack of boldness in eyes will be tolerated. The boar's job is colour, size and ears, type can be bred from the sow.
- ❖ Boars are first used at 8 months.
- ❖ Typically 6 to 9 stud boars are used for a breed. Each is used with a maximum of 3 sows at a time, 1 if they are show boars.

MP:

- ❖ The boar should be glamorous, to allow the use of big, plainer sows in mating plans. Full muzzle, bold eyes are essential, and there should be good body width with not too long a body. Ear setting must be good, but a smaller size of ear will be allowed, ear size being got from the sow chosen for the mating.
- ❖ Boars are normally first used at 7/8 months, although a very good one might be left with his mother and left to mate when old enough.
- ❖ Circa 10 White boars and 6 Creams (including Buffs and Whites bred from Creams) will be used. Three, and sometimes more, sows are put with one boar.

NPH:

- ❖ The boar should be close to the standard, balanced & strong. In Blacks he should not have too many red hairs. The faults which will be allowed depend upon the sows he is to be mated to - each mating should, between the boar and sow, have all the qualities you are after.
- ❖ An outstandingly bred boar might be left in with his mother to mate her when old enough. Otherwise boars are first used at 4 months, with a single sow.
- ❖ Lots of stud boars are kept, typically 25 Black boars to 40 breeding sows, and 15 Golden boars to 25 sows. One boar is paired with two, occasionally three, sows.

BM:

- ❖ The boar should be as close to the standard as possible. Boars which are well-bred, from a good boar and a good sow, are favoured - less well-bred ones have to be very good to be kept. The boar should not have any really obvious faults; and most importantly, all the points looked for should be somewhere in the mix of boars used in the stud.
- ❖ Boars are normally first used at 6/8 months, to give them a good chance to grow up, and their work rate is gradually stepped up (although I don't suppose they'd call it work).
- ❖ Up to 6 boars are normally used, with a good choice of youngsters coming on to replace them. The best are used most often, and to the best sows. Typically one boar is mated to 2 or 3 sows at a time.

2 Choosing the Breeding Sow

- Here the questions asked were:

- 'How do you select the sows used for breeding? What faults will you permit and what not?'
- 'At what ages are sows first mated?'
- 'Are show sows used for breeding?'
- 'What rest are sows allowed between litters?'

GP:

- ❖ The sow must have type, good shape of head & good muzzle, but red hairs are not a problem.
- ❖ Sows are first mated at around 6m, the oldest being 9m.
- ❖ The best sows are given one litter and then built up for show condition, though some fail to flesh up enough.
- ❖ Typically 6 weeks is allowed after littering before re-mating. The important thing is that the sow has to have recovered some flesh and be fit.

JR:

- ❖ The sow is the source of type in the mating. Sows with one cocked ear are disliked. Sows with side whiskers are not used. Dark sows will be used, to a boar of good colour.
- ❖ Big sows might be used at 5m; typically 6m would be the normal age for first mating. 12m is the maximum age.
- ❖ Show sows are sometimes given one litter and sometimes not bred from.
- ❖ After a small litter 1/2m rest would be allowed, 2/3m after a large litter. Too long a rest can cause the sow to get too fat.

MP:

- ❖ The sow must have good bone structure and width of body, a bold eye and good coat. Plain-headed sows can be forgiven if you have glamorous boars to put them to.
- ❖ 6m minimum and 9m maximum are the ages for first mating.
- ❖ Show sows are usually bred from as intermediates, only being held back if too brilliant to risk.
- ❖ Dependant upon the sow's condition 6/8 wks rest is normally allowed after littering before re-mating. Post-partum meetings are sometimes used (by accident!).

NPH:

- ❖ The sow should have a good head, eye & ears. Red hairs are allowed.
- ❖ The normal age for first mating is 4 months for non-show pigs: 'nature decides if they're old enough.'
- ❖ Show sows are usually bred from (9 out of 10 cases) as intermediates.
- ❖ Dependant upon the sow's condition post-partum mating could be used, if there is a need for another litter soon. Normally 'not too long a rest', 1/2m is allowed.

BM:

- ❖ The ideal breeding sow is a top-class show pig. Failing that, preference is given to well-bred sows (top-class parents or parents who have bred top-class stock) that are good all round without being outstanding. Red-haired sows are used if very well-bred and if good type.
- ❖ Dependent on size, time of year (trying to avoid winter for first litters or for outstanding sows) or the need to breed for a specific show, 5/8m is the normal age for first mating.
- ❖ All sows are given one or two litters before being prepared for adult showing. About half make up.
- ❖ Ideally 1/2m rest is allowed between litters; sometimes post-partum is used to breed for a specific show or to produce a litter before winter. After adult showing sows are usually incapable of getting in pig - perhaps 1 in 3 manage it.

3 Selecting the Boar/Sow Mating

Questions asked on this subject were:

- 'How do you decide which sow to put to which boar - pedigree, appearance, best to best, randomly?'
- 'Do you use outcross stock (from other breeders) in your mating?'
- 'What use do you make of inbreeding - father/daughter, mother/son etc?'

GP:

- ❖ Avoid duplicating faults. If one parent is weak on ears the other should have good ears. If one has red hairs the other should have good colour.
- ❖ Outcrossing has been tried on odd occasions, using sows, never boars. Today's cavies would now carry a 'pinhead drop' of their blood. Occasionally, pigs descended from the strain, via other fanciers' breeding efforts, are reintroduced.
- ❖ Father-daughter, Grandfather-granddaughter mating is sometimes used. The mating of a boar to a sow by the same sire is common, but not full brother-sister mating. The large number of boars kept would tend to avoid over-close inbreeding.

JR:

- ❖ In each combination of boar and sow one should have the right colour. Pigs with the same fault would only be paired if the fault is a rare one.
- ❖ Two outcrosses (of Beige) have been used in 15 years. In each case the pigs were the best available and the cross worked first time!
- ❖ Inbreeding can be used until there is evidence of weakness in the stock. Father-daughter, Brother-sister tends to be avoided. More distant inbreeding is used, but an attempt is made to keep two separate lines within the stud, which can be intermingled if problems occur in one of them.

MP:

- ❖ The boar and sow between them should have all the features needed for perfection. A fault on one should be balanced by the other's being good in that feature.
- ❖ No outcross has been tried for 10 years. A major programme was tried then, after several years of breeding from one strain, but the results were disappointing.
- ❖ The best boars are used repeatedly, so that potentially the same boar could be father, grandfather and great-grandfather of a litter if he's good enough and lives long enough!

NPH:

- ❖ The 'best to the best' is the ideal mating plan. Pedigrees are also considered, the expectation being that qualities shown 2 or 3 generations back could come out in the litter. The ideal pig for the future is, 'a good one bred from a good one.'
- ❖ Self Goldenes are from one strain, the odd dark boar of known breeding having been introduced to keep the colour correct. Blacks are from three different sources, each of a common origin, and are occasionally intermixed. The outcrossing is thus controlled: 'don't go for an outcross to an unknown source.'

BM:

- ❖ The mating of outstanding sows to outstanding boars has produced the best results - 'the best to the best'. Generally, then, the best sows are given to boars of outstanding appearance or who have proved good sires. Pigs with the same fault would normally not be paired, except (as a whim) if their parents showed no sign of the common fault.
- ❖ Outcrosses have never been used for Self Blacks. Occasionally, new blood is brought in from the original source or from fanciers to whom stock has been sold, when the pedigrees of the pigs are known and they are of very good quality.
- ❖ Early on, father-daughter mating was used successfully. Nowadays, common ancestors would appear in the second generation of the pedigrees of the boar and sow being paired. However, given a boar that was virtually faultless, close inbreeding would be used again - but such pigs are rare!

4 Raising the litter

Here the questions were:

- 'Do you leave sows to litter alone or with others?'
- 'What litter sizes do you typically get? Do you reduce the litter by culling?'
- 'At what age is stock weaned?'
- 'What do you look for in assessing young stock?'

GP:

- ❖ Sows are generally left to litter alone. Occasionally two are left together, but 'they can set each other off', i.e. one littering can stimulate the other to litter too early.
- ❖ Litters of 1 to 5 are usual. Culling is generally not carried out.
- ❖ Boars are weaned at 6 weeks. Sows are left with their mother until she is to be re-mated.
- ❖ Youngsters are assessed as soon as they are dry. You are looking for a 'miniature adult', with broad head & ears which are easily teased down. You can get surprises, though, in any stock sold before the age of 5 months.

JR:

- ❖ Sows are usually left to litter alone.
- ❖ Typical litter size is 3 or 4, unhealthy young being culled.
- ❖ Boars are weaned at 3½ - 4 weeks, or there is the risk of them being ready to mate. Sows are left with their mother until she is re-mated.
- ❖ When pigs are born they are assessed on width of head & size of ears, colour is not assessed. Surprises later are usually bad ones (initially 'good' pigs showing faults) rather than the reverse!

MP:

- ❖ Sows are left to litter in family pens of 3 or 4.
- ❖ Self Whites produce 2 to 4 per litter. Creams often have litters of 4 to 6, but with more still births/early deaths. No culling is carried out to reduce litter size, but pigs are not hand-reared either, so there is a natural selection for strength.
- ❖ Boars are weaned at 6 weeks. Sows are left with their mother until she is re-mated.
- ❖ Pigs are assessed when they are born and afterwards during feeding or cleaning, 'as and when one appeals.' A square head, solid body, good muzzle and bold eyes are sought, with no hems on ears.

NPH:

- ❖ Sows are left to litter alone if possible, 'then you know who's bred what.'
- ❖ Average litter size is four. Pigs with obvious faults are culled (poor type, runts, patches of coloured hairs, hemmed ears') but all are kept if they are O.K.
- ❖ Boars are weaned at 4 weeks. Sows can be left with their mothers, although good young ones may be put on their own.
- ❖ Youngsters are assessed at 1-2 days old. All need to be kept for 7-8 weeks unless there are obvious faults. Pigs then pass through a rangy stage and 'it is 5 months before you really know.'

BM:

- ❖ Sows are never left to litter alone (after a spell of toxæmia several years ago when unaccompanied sows seemed particularly prone). They

might be kept with other sows (if not due at the same time), young sows, a sterile boar or an active boar (if post-partum mating is planned).

- ❖ Litters are 4-5 normally, 6 is common and 1 or 2 rare. Boars with excess red hairs are culled, and litters are reduced if the sow is failing to cope, either by culling weaker pigs (esp. boars) or by fostering the less promising ones.
- ❖ Weaning is typically 4-5 weeks, when the sow is re-mated. Sometimes sows are left with their mother if she is to be fed back to show condition.
- ❖ An assessment is made (out of curiosity) when they are born, on width of head & size of ears, but only in rare cases has this been significant. The most significant assessments are at weaning, on frontal and ears, and then every 2 weeks. Pigs 'come and go' in quality as they mature, but usually you can tell by 3 months if they are stars or not. Particularly unpromising pigs not wanted by other fanciers are given to P. Gammie for whom they go on to win BIS at Northampton.