

The Self Red - beautiful but neglected

by Mette Lybek Jensen (1993)

The Self Red is one of the oldest breeds, but is far from the most popular. Unlike many of the other Selfs it has never had a big devoted crowd of fanciers trying to breed it to perfection. Therefore Reds can very seldom compete with the other Selfs, not even for the award of best AOC.

As a big admirer of Reds, I don't really understand why they don't appeal to more fanciers, but there may be one or more reasons. First of all Reds have a very big reputation of being wild. Nothing could be more wrong. Cavies only get tame from handling, and as the Reds are often kept as the 'second breed' in the stud, it is very likely that they are handled less than they ought to be. My Reds are good eaters, very curious and confident, sometimes almost naive little creatures, very lively, but never wild. Many of them have great personalities.

The second reason may be that Reds never win the major awards. Winning is very important for many fanciers, and they get discouraged when they see the other Self breeds winning all the awards. And the fewer breeders there are the, less genetic progress is made during breeding.

Finally, because breeders are few and far between, it may be difficult to find stock available. Many new fanciers who come to shows to decide which breed to keep don't choose Reds, because there are none at the show, so they don't even consider the opportunity. Even at Bradford Championship Show 1993 only 10 Reds were entered, and many of these never showed up. On the same occasion over 100 Self Blacks were shown.

For me the Self Red was love at first sight, and I soon found myself with a foundation stock of sows from Margaretha von Wedel in Sweden from a strain originating from Phil Francis from Worthing (nice all round, without excelling on any particular point), a pair from Mrs Vermeulen in Holland (excelling head, eyes and ears) and two boars from Roger Bebbington, the most successful breeder in England at the time (excelling colour). Then, I thought, nothing could be easier than to mix these three strains, select the best by combining the good points and then start winning. What I forgot to consider was that, apart from introducing all the good points from all the strains, the bad points went in as well, and the bad points were the most dominant. Moreover one of the boars from Roger Bebbington showed up to be rather infertile as he only sired litters under very special circumstances. First of all the sow should be very small and very light in colour, and an absolute demand was that she was a virgin. Then, he could only mate successfully in the autumn. But at last he managed to sire a decent boar, who fortunately was less selective in his choice of partner, and who is behind every single pig I've got today.

The first generations were generally very plain with high set ears, small eyes, dark golden colour and long and narrow head. Problems like pink eyes, ear hems and coat faults were frequently seen. Occasionally, though, there was the odd flyer, in which everything seemed to come out the right way.

Despite all the difficulties, I've managed to breed two Danish Champions. My most successful sow is Lybeks Bloody Mary, who is Danish and Swedish Champion with 8 certificates awarded by 6 different judges of 5 different nationalities (3 certificates awarded by at least 2 different judges gives a Championship), winning 2 BIS and several BIS placings including a 4th BIS at the Scandinavian Championship Show in 1991. Now, after about 7 generations the offspring seem to be more

uniform and definitely better than the foundation stock, but there is still a long way to go.

The Standard

The Standard aims for a deep mahogany colour with ears to match and with dark ruby eyes. That means for me a very dark red colour with a tinge of blue to make it look even deeper. This colour must be carried right down to the skin. There is some disagreement about the colour of the ears, as many judges don't like the dark, almost black, ears that many Reds have nowadays, but my opinion is that if the cavy has the right deep red colour with a bluish tinge, the colour to match must be very dark brown. Normally the undercolour is somewhat lighter, so grooming must be carried out very carefully to avoid uneven colour on the sides.

Another important feature is type, and here is the real challenge of the Self Red. Unfortunately, it is very common that pigs with correct colour have a very poor type, small and narrow in head and body. On the contrary the lighter pigs have a better type with good size, broad head, good muzzle and shoulders. But it should be possible by careful selection and breeding to combine good type and colour, at least in a small percentage of the offspring.

Coats vary a lot. Adult boars often get a long and coarse coat, which is the reason why I only infrequently show adult boars.

But unlike some of the other Selves, the coat doesn't really become greasy. Sows can also have a very long coat, but quite a few have a very soft and naturally shiny short coat, and these sows are my favourites for breeding and showing. A light grooming, a bath and carefully rubbing with a nylon stocking, and they will shine beautifully. Coat faults like quiffs, skirts and side whiskers must be watched, as they crop up now and then.

Eyes must be large and bold. Many Reds have small and almond shaped eyes. I never breed from such ones. Ears can be seen in all different shapes and settings, but large and drooping ears are preferred. Ear hems may crop up, but must be avoided in breeding. Condition can easily be fed for, as the Reds are good eaters. Good show sows keep their firm body after breeding, although some tend to get pear-shaped.

Breeding

Reds are good breeders. They are generally very fertile, and frequently get litters of four to six. They are not very susceptible to pregnancy toxaemia. After having 200 litters, I've lost only a handful of sows due to toxaemia. The sows are long-lasting and can have many litters. And they are very good and caring mothers. The birth of the babies is quick and only seldom gives complications.

To avoid over showing of my best sows, I show them once or twice as u/5 or young 5-8 then I breed 1-3 litters from them, and afterwards they are fed into show condition and are shown until they seem to get old and tired, but never more than once a month (this is possible because there are not as many shows in Denmark as in Britain). This may be one of the reasons why I have so few problems when breeding. Sows are put to the boar in 6-8 months of age. A Boar can be left with a sow to mate her as soon as he gets old enough, or he can run together with an older boar until he is about 4 months. I usually rest the sows 1-2 months after removing the litter. A good breeding sow is used until she's 2 years approximately, but I'm sure she could go on producing litters for another year, if I allowed her to.

Normally I use a dark, plain headed boar to a paler sow with a pretty head, but occasionally I do it the other way around, as I get a few boars with a broad and

masculine head, but far too pale. At least one of the parents must excel in eyes and ears.

When the babies are born, I look at them as soon as possible to see if there are any ear hems. I also look for a broad head and a good muzzle. The colour is chocolate on the new born babies, but an early colour assessment can be done by looking at the top and undercolour. Babies with a top colour notably darker than the under are promising, whilst babies with darkest undercolour will be far too light as adults.

When the babies grow older, the colour will change several times from dark to pale and back to dark. My experience is that babies having big colour differences between the darkest and the palest stages, and which can seem almost bicoloured at times, will get a poorer colour - top as well as under - as adults compared to cavies with a more gradual and less pronounced colour change. But no rule exists without exceptions, and quite often a very promising baby turns out too pale. Unfortunately, the opposite situation i.e. an unpromising colour turns out better than predicted, is most unlikely to happen. Colour is not fully developed until 1 to 2 years of age.

Showing

Because of the colour changes, only few Reds can be shown before 4 months but as the colour keeps on improving, the best showing age is 1 to 2 years or even longer. So a sow of good quality can easily be bred from a couple of times before she's fed into show condition. The average life span on my Reds is longer than average, and they keep fit for a long time, so they are showable for quite a long period.

Handling Reds is just as necessary as in other breeds to make them feel comfortable on the judging table. A cavy lying flat on the table from fear, or rushing around trying to escape, doesn't present itself to its best.

Grooming must be carried out with care. Grooming must start several weeks before the show, to achieve the best result. Starting too late means that you must choose between leaving the coat too long or accepting a certain degree of flakiness on the flanks, where the paler undercolour will shine through, and bald patches can soon occur when giving them a quick 'day-before-the-show-grooming', where many hairs must be removed in a short time. This method is also far more painful for the cavy.

Colour and coat improve remarkably by giving the cavy a bath a few days before the show. Afterwards the coat can be rubbed with a nylon stocking just to give it that extra shine that makes the reds so attractive, as well as to make the coat lie evenly all over the body, so no flakiness is evident.

When looking at one of my Red cavies, sitting on the judging table, presenting itself to its best in good condition, with shining coat and an even and deep red colour, it is for me one of the most beautiful sights, and I feel sure that my love of Reds will last forever.

My hope is that this article will create some more interest in this forgotten and neglected but beautiful breed, so more British fanciers will give it a try. Of course these are all my own experiences, and my strain may vary slightly from the English, so if someone has something to add or different views on part of my article, I'm very interested to know. But one thing is for sure: improvement of the breed doesn't come overnight, but needs a lot of work, just like has been done in the more successful colours during the last decades. So come on folks, before it's too late.

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