

Maintaining and adding value to a buffalo herd

Lindsay Hunt

‘If you are not moving forward proactively in the buffalo industry, you are actually sliding backwards.’

The African buffalo has, for centuries captured the imagination of African explorers and adventurers. David Livingstone, Cornwallis Harris, and FC Selous arguably inspired many of the safaris of the early 20th century.

Thus, it seems somewhat appropriate to plagiarise a title so blatantly because it is debatably men like Robert Ruark, Ernest Hemmingway and James Mellon, the adventure writers of the post-war period, who reignited the imagination of generations of hunters who came in search of the world’s most coveted dangerous game trophy – the African buffalo.

The African buffalo has retained its allure due to its magnificent unforgiving personality. They retain the right to play judge, jury and executioner all in less than ten seconds.

I have in previous articles attempted to explain the consistent value of buffalo, how the industry is underpinned by an unwavering hunting demand, and how to establish the most economically sensible buffalo herd. I would now like to focus on maintaining and adding value to a herd.

Be paranoid about disease

I have repeatedly stated that the most critical factor affecting the value of a

herd is its disease credentials. Any disease outbreak within a herd will decimate the value of the entire herd almost immediately. A disease in a single animal can have a catastrophic effect on the entire herd almost instantly. I am repeatedly shocked at how casual buffalo farmers are about disease and disease transfer. It is the single most important aspect to understand before ever entering the industry.

Although I have covered this before it is of such paramount importance that I urge all buffalo farmers to be excessively cautious and understand the diseases and the tests used to monitor those diseases

The facts are simple. Buffalo are hosts to two African diseases, namely foot and mouth and corridor disease, both of which are readily determined by a blood test. Both these are endemic diseases and have little or no effect on the buffalo themselves but are dangerous to non-resistant ungulates, especially domestic stock. These diseases have short incubation periods and the tests are extremely effective – the likelihood of a false negative is extremely remote.

Buffalo are also, unfortunately, susceptible to both bovine tuberculosis (BTB) and Brucella (CA or contagious abortion), which are European diseases. They act as both carriers and hosts, and are affected by the diseases. The problem with these diseases is that they are not as easily detected and can often be present undetected in a herd for some time, even with regular blood tests. These diseases can remain hidden for many months, as the incubation and infection period is extensive. Animals can test clean and be allowed to move

and then months later turn out to be positive.

The safest way to control disease is at source, but the easiest way to monitor disease is through testing. Controlling disease at source is a subjective exercise – performed by the breeder. Hence the importance of trusting the source is critical.

Enforcing disease control at source is impossible, so the department of agriculture imposes strict quarantine, testing and movement restrictions on all buffalo.

I would urge all buffalo farmers to understand the diseases and speak to the vets who perform the tests to be certain that you are fully aware of the risks. Moreover, I would encourage any breeder to make use of the most experienced wildlife vet available, someone who has ample experience and understanding specifically of BTB and CA.

Pursuing future value

My previous article (*G&H* October 2012) covered the issue of establishing an economically competitive buffalo herd. I increasingly find that too many farmers are not **maintaining and improving value**. In the simplest terms: If you are not moving forward proactively in the buffalo industry, you are actually sliding backwards.

Regardless of which approach one chooses the future management principles are universal.

All markets are a reflection of supply, demand and perception. I would go so far as to say that any market that is a reproductive asset faces two very different sets of demand and supply curves. I will refer to this as selling *horizontally* as opposed to selling *vertically*. Selling horizontally is selling to

someone in direct competition – another breeder. Selling vertically is selling to an end user – a hunter.

I would argue that selling horizontally can only be sustained when either the unique assets of the animals for sale are not readily available or when the demand for the end product is overwhelming.

In the buffalo context, 48-inch bulls and 33-inch cows are sold horizontally, while 36-inch, hard-boss bulls are sold vertically. There are very few breeders that have 48-inch bulls and 33-inch cows, hence the demand for

those animals face a relatively inelastic demand curve. However, 36-inch bulls are a staple of the hunting industry and unless there is a large increase in demand or a change in the rand/dollar exchange rate, that demand curve is much more elastic.

However, the most important factor is that there is a constant demand for buffalo simply because it is arguably the most coveted hunting trophy in the world.

Adding value

The simplest way to add value to a

buffalo herd is to ensure that each progressive generation allows for an improvement in the overall herd. At Hunt Africa each year our herd improves as we mix combinations that continually punch above their weight. We are now at the stage where we are producing buffalo calves where we can trace back lineage – three generations.

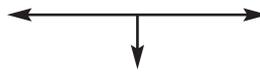
Tracing generations is all about supplying information – animals that routinely punch above their weight, that are crossed onto other over performers increase the likelihood of produc-

PURE HUNT AFRICA HERD

Asis



Othello



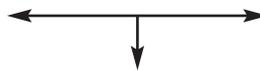
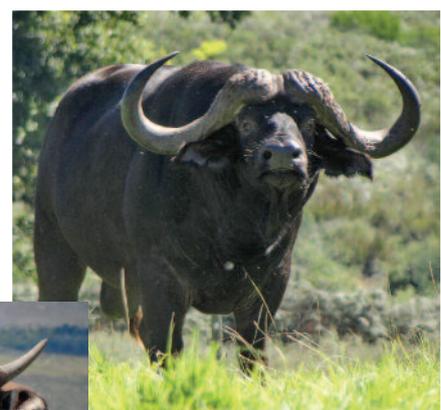
Davina



Davina



Romulus



Sparticus (here with his mother Davina)

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ing exceptional animals.

I would like to stress that at Hunt Africa we are not horn obsessed. It is very important to produce animals with exceptional horns to stay at the cutting edge, but not at the expense of other attributes. Hence we focus on body size and temperament. We obsess about hyper masculine bulls and feminine cows. The majestic allure that embodies the spirit of the African buffalo must never be reduced to breeding 'rats with horns'.

Creating value

The simplest way to create a high-value herd is to buy the very best animals. However, this is not the most cost-effective way to achieve a superior herd. The 'boxing clever' way to achieve a superior herd is to buy as many above-average female animals pregnant on the widest array of superior bulls as possible. The greatest sire diversity creates the greatest overall value. So, having 12 females that are

pregnant on three different bulls over 45 inches is an exceptional way to start.

This depth of genetics allows the future sire to then be covering the widest array of genetics – but most importantly, one would expect to generate one's own future sires from the founder herd. Thus when it comes to splitting the herd with two herd bulls one is able to create multiple generation family trees, without any threat of line breeding.

The issue of at what stage to use a bull, and how to assess and estimate performance, will have to be covered in a future article.

Following are two family trees – the one is a known performer while the other is a wild card. The pure Hunt Africa family tree that produced Sparticus consists of known over performers, through all generations. Hence, Sparticus should be the best bull Hunt Africa has ever bred.

The Hunt Africa X Leonidas family tree has only a single generation of

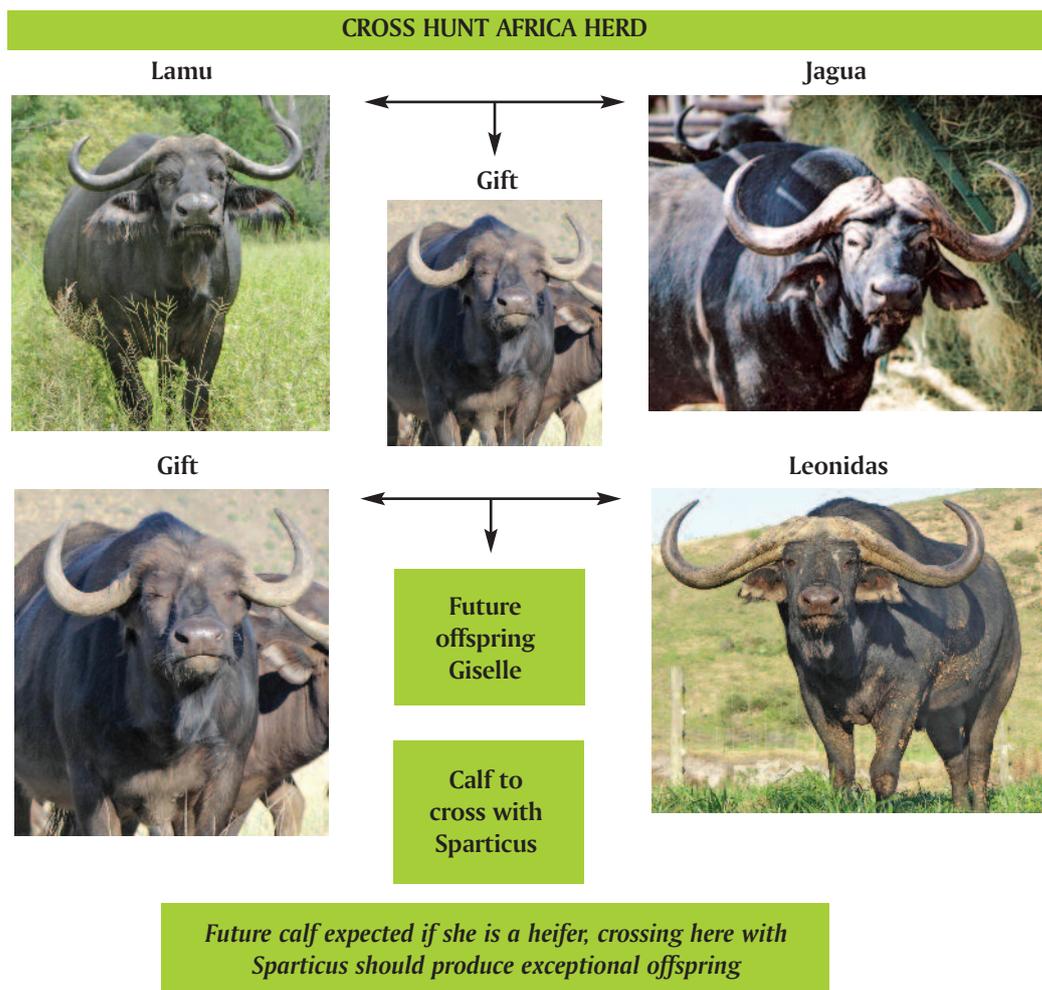
over performers – Gift and Jagua. Gift is now pregnant on Leonidas* and there is only one certifiable calf born to Leonidas who is currently three months old, so it will take some time to see if he is an over performer as we expect him to be.

If Leonidas proves to be as remarkable as we expect then a future cross of Sparticus on Giselle (as yet unborn, and assumed female) would then produce the best-ever Hunt Africa calf, as it would combine these two exceptional family trees.

Maintaining regular records and observing performance of animals over time and then making use of over performers, is the single most effective way to add value to one's herd. It requires definite dedication and commitment but the difference of a herd's value over time will reflect as a multiple not a fraction.



*Leonidas is owned by Alan and Denise van Coller, of Alden Buffalo



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