

## Conversations With Rick Pisaturo, December 2016

Many younger Shorthorn Breeders may not be familiar with Rick Pisaturo, legendary Australian Shorthorn breeder and founder of the Mandalong Stud, but he has had a tremendous impact on Shorthorns in the USA and Canada. Having read his first book “Stud Beef Cattle Breeding & Common Sense” I was intrigued by his approach to breeding quality beef cattle and more specifically Shorthorns. Also because I have semen from some of his Shorthorn bulls from the 1970’s I wanted to get his insight on how I might best use the semen for breeding our Shorthorns, so when my wife and I decided to take a “Shorthorn trip” to Australia, Rick was at the top of my list of Shorthorn breeders to visit. I approached contacting him with some trepidation as I realized he was 94 and had been out of Shorthorns since the late 1970’s. Fortunately things just “clicked” with Rick and us—he could not have been more gracious and generous. We anticipated meeting with him for 2-3 hours and ended up staying 2 days as his guest at his Sydney apartment and Mandalong Park which is approximately an hour North of Sydney.

To gain a perspective on what propelled Rick to the top of the Shorthorn world it is important to note the difficult path he had to maneuver to achieve that success. As a child in Italy he was always fascinated by the large Chianina cattle he saw. As World War II pushed him into Mussolini’s army, he was sent to Libya, captured, and transported to Australia as a prisoner of war. Providentially he was able to be sent, as a POW, to a farm owned by Mr. Reay Mackay Badgery who in essence became both his mentor and benefactor. As Rick in his second book, “Australia, My Love” states “whatever I know and have I owe to Mr. R M Badgery”. The strong work ethic, intertwined with the curious intellect possessed by Rick, caused Mr. Badgery to take him under his wing. It also happened that Mr. Badgery raised Shorthorn cattle. (As a side note I would strongly recommend Rick’s second book “Australia, My Love” because it takes one through the struggles he endured dealing with war, its aftermath, and the toughness it took as immigrant to triumph over the difficulties of being a former POW in Australia.)

After Rick became successful in real estate and house construction in the Sydney area he wanted to embark on a new venture which was to be a successful cattle breeder. Following consultation with Mr. Badgery he decided to breed Shorthorns purchasing his first Shorthorn cows from Lone Pine, Meriwong, and several other studs in 1961. Given his enchantment with large Chianina in Italy, he became convinced that larger Shorthorns would be his path to success because he saw the problems with the “pumpkins” being raised by Shorthorn breeders in the 60’s. Small size “belt buckle cattle” were all the rage in cattle breeds worldwide during the 50’s and 60’s. Rick recognized this as both a huge mistake and a great opportunity. Through his selection insight he was able to breed up his Shorthorns to a size that garnered curiosity, criticism, and eventually jealousy from Australian Shorthorn breeders. He started winning shows and soon became the dominant Shorthorn breeder in Australia. As more breeders from

all over the world became captivated by his Show Ring success and his type of Shorthorns, his sales exploded. This culminated in his sale of Mandalong Super Flag to Dr. G. Carter of Alberta, Canada for a record price. Super Flag was shown at the National Western Stock Show in 1974 and was named the Supreme Champion bull. A real game changer in the Shorthorn breed both because of his size and the fact he was bred by an Australian Shorthorn breeder. Rick continued to have immense success in Shorthorns but eventually the jealousy and sniping by other Australian Shorthorn breeders took a toll on him and he dispersed his Shorthorns in 1976 much to the disappointment of many Shorthorn breeders worldwide. A great loss.

He had already become involved with the Charolais and ultimately he included Chianina in his breeding programs. With changing times and a thirst for new challenges Rick developed and promoted 3 composite breeds—Mandalong Specials, Square Meaters, and Tropicana. All of these became quite successful in Australia, with many Mandalong Specials also exported. Further information on these breeds can be found in his books.

Philosophically Rick has often been an outsider in cattle breeding circles because he does not follow trends. He has always bred cattle that filled a utilitarian purpose. Many of his tenets for breeding cattle do not fit current trends. I will go through a few of them that I discussed with him.

Cow size has dominated cattle breeding circles the last several years with most breeders moving to smaller cows despite the small size disasters of the 50's and 60's. Rick believes cows must have good frame size, partly because of the versatility of a cow with size, but also his desire to produce a larger weaned calf. Personally I have heard all of the current arguments supporting small cow size but most ignore serious downsize drawbacks. Rick believes that you need to use a bull two frame scores bigger than your cows to just maintain your chosen cow frame score. Any less will put you in a downward spiral that potentially could cause massive difficulties. He has no problem with cows in the 6-7 frame size.

Recently there has been a push for less milk production in cows in the name of efficiency. The belief is more milk production translates into more feed costs for the cow, ignoring its affect on the calf. Rick strongly believes good milk production in the cow is the path to a healthy calf and a growthy calf. Many who push decreased milk production neglect the intangibles of cow-calf dynamics and calf well-being.

Calf size and calving ease EPD's have become all the rage in the cattle industry. Rick's focus was always on the shape of the bull and ultimately the shape of the calf. Narrow front ends on calves facilitate delivery of the calf without necessarily compromising size. Rick believes constant focus on smaller birth weights can produce many other secondary problems that only come home to roost when you are left with just a bunch of small cows.

Show Ring judges recently have been selecting for weak pasterns (soft) and straight legged (posty leg) Shorthorns as the new “style”. Rick would have none of this because of the lack of functionality in both the cows and bulls. A bull breeding on hills or walking miles for feed will quickly break down, stop breeding and be a poor doer. It’s one reason many Show Shorthorns being sold for commercial herds today simply do not work. Fault lies with both the judges and breeders for trying to foster this type of Shorthorn on the buying public.

In his personal life and in cattle breeding nutrition has been a major focus in his life. He readily admits that he made mistakes which resulted in some of his Shorthorns never reaching their true potential. He conducted many experiments to develop what he believes to be a sound rational approach to feeding cattle. Bringing them along slow in the feeding process allows for both proper bone and muscle growth. His formulas for feeding are detailed in his first book and provide the interested breeder with a look at what worked for him.

There are many other subjects I discussed with Rick that are too numerous to mention. Hopefully this gives the reader a look into a man who has been truly successful in life from escaping as a POW in Australia, to becoming a wealthy home builder and real estate investor, to breeding some of the best Shorthorns in the world. Suffice it to say he would disagree with the direction many Shorthorn breeders are taking in “today’s breeding programs”. Today at 94 Rick continues to lead a vigorous life. His current passions are China and Thoroughbred horses. He travels to China approximately every 2 months going primarily to Shanghai or Beijing. His second book, “Australia, My Love”, has been translated into Chinese and is quite popular in China with Rick doing many book signing promotions there. He is currently revamping Mandalong Park with new horse fencing throughout and remodeling his barns for his Thoroughbreds. I think it is only a matter of time before he has success in the Australian Thoroughbred industry. Rick is certainly a man who constantly looks forward—seeking new challenges and levels of success even at age 94. It was a great privilege/honor for Sue and I to spend so much time with him. For us it was an experience of a lifetime.