LONG TIME FOCUS ON POLLED GENETIC PAYS OFF

Jakob Lykke Voergaard
Senior VikingRed Breeding Manager

The results of a breeding selection that prioritized polled genetics are evident when seeing VR Fuzzy P, bred in the farm of Bent Skovgård in Stege, Denmark. Bent has worked, for many years, choosing polledness genetics for his dairy herd, and today, he is one among few in the world with the highest amount of polled VR animals with high NTM.

If you are stating a meaning about polledness and VikingRed it is nearly impossible to get around without mention the breeder of VR Fuzzy P, Bent Skovgård from Denmark.

The car is bumping down the private road to the farm Skovgård, that is owned by Karin and Bent Skovgård. They have had a dairy farm for many years now and although Bent is 70, he has no intention to stop farming.

In 2011 he builds a new barn with three milking robots and went up to 200 cows. He not only built another stable, but he also filled up with another breed in it. “I started to inseminate all the cows with VikingRed”, Bent says while telling most of the cows are VikingRed and he has also some crossbreeding cows.

Important part of the future

While the topic has been more and more popular in many countries, Bent has been working with polled genetics from long time ago. "I had no doubt that one day it will be a demand from consumers´ side or from politicians that we no longer dehorn our animals”, he says.

In the beginning, Bent though it was fun to get polled animals and used a bit more of the semen after polled bulls, always watching their overall performance in the Nordic Total Merit (NTM) index.

Today, they have more than 65 polled VR animals with many different pedigrees.

"I use a polled bull on a horned cow and vise-versa a horned bull on a polled cow. On this way I keep the diversity in my polled genetic. If we use to many polled bulls on the polled females, we will lose the diversity" Bent explains.

A very important part of the breeding work on the farm are the small notebooks with information about the polled animals. "For many years, I have registered the polled animals when we dehorn and if we are not sure if the heifer is polled, we push her for the next round of dehorning" says Bent.

The story of a polled heifer

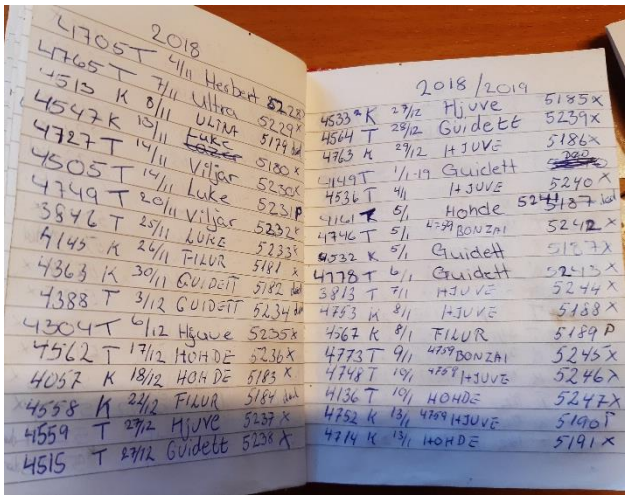
One of Bent´s females, VR Lazer heifer got a good genomic test for some years ago. The ancestors to the polled gen were four generation back in the pedigree so the heifer was not in close family to the other polled animals.

This VR Lazer daughter was flushed three time as a heifer and the bulls VR Vigil P and VR Azer comes from her. Also, some other polled females that have got flush contracts with VikingGenetics.

In her first lactation, the VR Lazer daughter still had a high NTM and she was flushed one more time with VR Fanof P to try to make a homozygotic bull which is an animal that both has the polled gen from the dam and sire and all its offspring will be polled.

Bent was not so lucky to get a PP bull but the results were also fantastic, he got two top bulls: VR Fuzzy P +38 and VR Facit P +33. Besides, he got a homozygotic polled heifer with +35 in NTM.

Right now, Bent have flush contracts on six polled females and many of them have had more than one contract. "I hope the good results keep on. In the beginning of the summer, we made three flush and got 41 embryos in total. Even having 200 cows, 41 embryos are a lot" Bent laughs.



Notebook with information about polled animals


VR Fuzzy

WHY IS POLLED GENETICS IMPORTANT?

Increasing interest in animal welfare has placed many livestock production practices under enhanced scrutiny. One such practice is dehorning, or disbudding, which is common in both beef and dairy cattle production systems in many countries.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), dehorning cattle conveys a variety of potential benefits, including reduced risk of injury for handlers and other cattle, fewer aggressive behaviours, and reduced feeding trough space. As evidence of these benefits, many dairy cattle producers recently indicated routinely dehorning cattle. To obtain cattle without horns can also come naturally, by selecting polled bulls.

Polled genetics versus dehorning calves

Pollened genetics bulls are gaining field because they can breed animals that reduce or eliminate the labour costs for dehorning. Besides, farmer is conscious about the need to accomplish with animal welfare and concerns from consumers.

Incorporating polled genetics into a breeding program is an alternative to dehorning. By using polled genetics, the dairy and beef farmers potentially eliminate the welfare concerns and expenses associated with dehorning.

Polled animals have always existed in cattle populations, but intense selection for production attributes in the dairy industry has suppressed polledness in the population. However, in recent years it has been shown by different studies, that the genetic alteration responsible for polledness, contrary to previous speculation, does not appear to affect production performance.

Polledness in short

- A horn is a kind of bone growth from the cranium and it can have many different designs. They can be small or big, curved or straight and bend in different directions.
- The variation is breed specific which indicated it is genetic controlled.
- If the horn is missing it is called polled.
- In some cattle breeds the polled gen have been a part of the breeding program for many years, so many of the animals in the breed are polled. In other breeds the polled gen is not observed.