Goat markets continue to be strong. There are many projections showing the goat market may hit up to $6 dollars a pound around Easter this year. For those that haven’t been paying attention, that is extremely exciting! For months I have written about the high cost of production. Many species are struggling with razor thin margins due to the high cost of production but the goat industry continues to see strong profits due to high meat prices. As the demand for goat meat rises, so will the demand for higher quality meat as well. This demand can make it easy for producers to get stuck in a pattern of single trait selection. This is not a new concept and many before me have written extensively about it. However, in this current market space it becomes even more paramount that producers are mindful of their selection processes.

Single trait selection is not a new problem. In my travels, I often speak with producers not only about nutrition but also about their creative selection process. I find myself intrigued by what traits each farm values most highly. If a producer lives in a high rainfall area, it can be easy to focus almost entirely on worm resistance. When a producer has a limited number of goats, it is easy to focus on prolific nature. When I speak with boer producers, the most valuable trait is often muscling. With kiko breeders; worm resistance and mothering. With spanish breeders; survivability and worm resistance. Each breeder selects against the traits they cannot tolerate in their stock. Although selecting against traits is a solid approach, intentional selection must consider both the positive and the negative equally.

In our household, goat is the main meat we eat. Not only do we enjoy goat meat, but it also gives us opportunity to reflect on our breeding progress. This does not mean we are immune to making or realizing mistakes. Two years ago we purchased a doe from some very popular bloodlines. We had originally hoped to pair this doe with one of our bucks to create a new bloodline to use in our linebreeding program. Unfortunately, after trying for over a year, we were never successful in getting her bred. Looking at the doe, there was nothing obvious that should have prevented her from getting pregnant. We tried many protocols yet she still would not conceive. When we made locker dates for a few goats a couple months back, we finally pulled the plug and added her to the meat roster. She was ultimately harvested with a home grown wether. Both had 102 pound hanging carcasses. Prior to harvesting them, if you studied them phenotypically they looked like they could have been siblings. It wasn’t until we saw her carcass on the rail that we were finally able to identify why she would not conceive. Unfortunately, the reasons the purchased doe could not conceive were all internal. If you look at the pictures you can see that her internal capacity was almost nonexistent. She carried a tremendous amount of muscle and phenotypically looked ideal. Unfortunately, this is a perfect example of where single trait selection can become a tremendous problem.

With market prices on the rise it can be very easy for a producer to focus on increasing the amount of meat on each goat. The boer goat industry has gotten singularly focused on muscling over all else. When marketed, boer goats often bring the highest prices of any breed due to meat quality and yield. Their hide and coloration lead buyers to pay more knowing that cutability and meat quality are often better with the breed. With the selection process focused on meat first, issues have arisen in the breed in the forms of hardiness, worm resistance, and maternal traits. This is by no means to imply that the boer goat breed is a superior or inferior breed. Rather, it is an opportunity for breeders of any breed or purpose to see the dangers of single trait selection. Boer Goats offer the highest rate of gain per head per day. Spanish goats are extraordinarily resilient, and have the capacity to birth kids much larger in relationship to adult size than most other breeds. The Kiko provide size, mass, and durability and can be a solid option for commercial breeders looking to improve their stock without compromising carcass size. None of these breeds by themselves are perfect.

As producers how often do you see the end product your livestock produce? This is a question every producer should start asking themselves as they work to improve their goats to hit the top of the market every time. Each breed has strengths and weaknesses. Each breed has a tendency to select for a handful of traits too heavily and simultaneously ignore valuable, marketable traits. The sweet spot for the industry is when breeders progressively work to extend the benefits of a breed to create an animal that is not only marketable but also requires lower inputs and offers improved productivity. The goat that we purchased is simply one example showing why breeders need to not only judge their animals with the hide on but also judge them on the rail. If we only select phenotypically or genotypically, we will often miss opportunities for true improvement. Are you maximizing your marketable product?

-Gregory Meiss