

## Hurwitz Farming's record-breaking success with Boran cattle

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***Hurwitz Farming has become synonymous with Boran cattle in South Africa. But it hasn't always been plain sailing. Simeon Hurwitz spoke to Janine Ryan about the increasing popularity of this breed.***



BH 18 749 Cyclone, son of the well-known Picasso, achieved the record-breaking price (across all cattle species) of R8 million in August this year. He was sold to Collen Tafireyi of the Sinyo Boran Stud in Zimbabwe at the annual Hurwitz Production Auction.

Recently, the Boran has become a topic of hot debate on social media in agricultural circles thanks to the sale of the bull BH 18 749 Cyclone, which was sold to Zimbabwean farmer Collen Tafireyi of the Sinyo Boran Stud for a record-breaking price of R8 million at the [Hurwitz Farming 10th Production Auction](#) in August this year.

At the time of the sale, Tafireyi told *Farmer's Weekly*: "We are excited to have acquired this top bull. Cyclone is going to play a major role in our future plans in terms of breeding quality. Our plan is to breed the best Borans in Zimbabwe. We want to put Zimbabwe on the map."

Tafireyi's insistence that Cyclone is the right bull for this purpose is indeed high praise for the men behind his breeding: Simeon and Jarren Hurwitz. And, while the Boran may

now be growing in popularity, there was a time when it was hugely unpopular, and farmers were selling their animals for below slaughter prices to simply get rid of them.

“We were always true to the breed, even at a time when everyone told us we were wasting money by reinvesting in the Boran,” says Simeon.

With the sale of top-quality animals like Cyclone, it seems that the Hurwitz brothers are well on their way to having their names cemented in the Boran’s history in South Africa and maybe even further afield, but it hasn’t been an easy journey.

### **The beginning**

The Sandton-based brothers took over their grandfather’s farm located in Bethal, Mpumalanga, in 2009. Dr Barney Hurwitz was a pioneer of the Boran breed in South Africa.

**Brothers Jarren (left) and Simeon Hurwitz have turned their grandfather Dr Barney Hurwitz’s (middle) Boran herd into a record-breaking stud.**

In 1995, eight years before the establishment of the Boran Cattle Breeders’ Society of South Africa, he began importing Boran embryos from Zambia, while other breeders were importing the breed from Kenya.

Barney’s foray into the Boran is particularly interesting and speaks to the unique qualities of the breed.

Simeon and Jarren's grandmother's sister Reeve married into a farming family. Her children then also married into farming families. One of Reeve's daughters, Marcelle, married a farmer in Mpumalanga.

As many farmers do at some point, Marcelle and her husband fell on hard times, and to stop the bank from liquidating the farm, Barney signed surety to keep the farm in the family.

Then, in the early 1990s, Marcelle's son Evan, who grew up to become a veterinarian, along with his friend Shaun Morris, a well-known feedlot veterinarian in South Africa, began researching cattle outside of South Africa that were best suited for the country's conditions.

This led them to the Boran, and acted as the foundation on which Hurwitz Farming was eventually built.

When Simeon and Jarren took over the farm, there was only a herd of between 10 and 15 head of Boran cattle, none of which were registered. As professional accountants, the brothers also had little experience in farming.

"We were novices at the time, and decided to run other cattle breeds simultaneously to hedge our bets. We figured that those that could survive in this environment would thrive, while the others would fall away. At one point, we were running five different breeds, namely the Brahman, Simmentaler, Santa Gertrudis, Simbra, and the Boran. This was a huge mistake," says Simeon.

With the differences between the breeds becoming more and more apparent as time passed, and each breed requiring different management, Simeon and Jarren decided it was time to begin systematically eliminating breeds from the farm. Ironically, the first breed on the proverbial chopping block was the Boran.

"We wanted to keep the other breeds running because they were popular with feedlots," says Simeon.

But thanks to some nostalgia and a visionary approach to cattle farming, Simeon and Jarren eventually decided to eliminate the other breeds and reinvest in the Boran.

"We soon realised that we weren't going to reinvent the wheel by investing in the other breeds we had on the farm; they were already too well established, with well-established politics in place. And so, despite the many naysayers, we decided to concentrate on the Boran," says Simeon.

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At the time, the brothers' decision made economic sense, with Borans selling between R50 000 and R70 000 on auction, while other breeds were selling well below this. In

2011, for example, Simeon bought the cow Julia B 03 17 and her calf at the National Boran Sale for R200 000, a massive price at the time.

But the good times didn't last, and the Boran soon after became a very unpopular breed, with auction prices plummeting.

"It was an embarrassment to farm Borans [at that time]. At public auctions, for example, in-calf heifers were selling for R7 000 to R8 000, which was well below slaughter value. It was a case of farmers merely trying to get rid of their Borans to farm something else," says Simeon.

Despite the lack of demand, however, Simeon and Jarren continued flushing their Borans and building the stud.

"Ultimately, the genetics were still the genetics, which means the value of the product remained," says Simeon.

### **The rise and rise of Hurwitz Farming**

Going against the grain and ignoring the naysayers was difficult, particularly for two novice farmers. But Simeon and Jarren's vision for their farming enterprise has been paying off.

"It just makes economic sense to farm Borans. They are highly tick-resistant and easy to maintain. The dams have spectacular mothering abilities and look after their calves," says Simeon.

He adds that the Boran's herding instinct is unmatched; it is very difficult to separate one animal from the herd without the rest following. In South Africa, where stock theft is a growing problem, this natural instinct is very important.

"A friend of ours farms near the Lesotho border and began investing in the Boran for this particular purpose. When he was farming another breed, he was suffering significant losses because of stock theft. Now that he only farms Boran cattle, he still experiences some losses, but they are no longer as significant," says Simeon.

"We also see this herding instinct in the first-generation Boran-crossbred animals, thanks to the dominance of this particular gene in the Boran."

Simeon explains that the Boran is very intelligent, and that it doesn't jump fences and walk easily in hand.

"Where dams and calves are camped together, we've seen them create a type of 'nursery': a few cows will stay behind with all the calves, while the mothers go out to graze. They'll later return to feed their calves."

He says they have a calm temperament and are generally easy to handle.

“If they know you are not a threat, they remain relaxed and will allow you to move among them. Some become so tame you can develop a pet-type relationship with them.”

Simeon also says they are highly fertile and give birth to small calves.

“Of course, the cow’s nutritional management is important during pregnancy. But if this is managed well, the Boran will easily deliver a small calf that grows quickly.”

Calves are weaned at about nine months, and the cattle are camped according to their stage of life.

Simeon and Jarren employ an embryo flushing programme on their stud animals but also allow for natural mating. The commercial herd, made up of Boran-type cows, are used as recipient cows. Simeon adds that the Boran is a low-maintenance breed that is very adaptable and tough.

“The Boran breed has been good to us from a nostalgia and business perspective. The breed has opened doors for us in terms of the people we have met that I could never have imagined,” says Simeon.

### **A dual partnership**

But the Hurwitz brothers’ relationship with the Boran has not only been a one-way street.

“We have given back to the breed in terms of genetics and marketing.”

This is particularly evident in the phenomenal animals that Simeon and Jarren have produced over the years, with Cyclone a recent example of the exceptional genetics available in the Hurwitz Boran stud.

But Cyclone is not the only Hurwitz Boran making the headlines; at the Hurwitz Farming Summer Sale in October, the in-calf cow BH 18 545 Jasmine with her bull calf BH 24 273 Jozini were [sold for a record-breaking \(across all cattle species\) R2,5 million](#). She was also bought by Tafireyi.

The sale of Cyclone and Jasmine, says Simeon, is not only good for Hurwitz Farming, but also good for the reputation of the South African Boran in general. And while some South African farmers have expressed concern about the country’s best genetics leaving our borders, Simeon has another, more positive, take.

“The Boran cattle are in huge demand in Zimbabwe, and that is why there is so much interest from Boran breeders in that country. However, while Cyclone is no longer in South Africa, his genetics are still here in the form of his progeny. The best Boran genetics are thus still within South Africa.

“We must remember that farmers put animals on sale to be sold. Where that animal ends up is determined by the open market. But that does not mean that we’re losing all our Boran genetics.”

He adds that even if an animal stays within South Africa’s borders, not all farmers will benefit from his or her genetics, as access to the animal will still be limited to those that can afford it.

“A bull like Cyclone can take someone’s herd from a one out of 10 to a seven out of 10 in a matter of nine months, and the sale of a bull like this is tremendous marketing for the breed in South Africa, the breeder, the buyer and the seller. It’s therefore, overall, a positive development for the breed in South Africa.”

He explains that as the protocols in Zimbabwe are different to those in South Africa in terms of where animals, semen, or embryos can be shipped, South Africa’s Boran genetics are also reaching a wider base worldwide, bringing more attention to the country’s exceptional Boran genetics.

Simeon and Jarren’s different spin on marketing has also been a boon to the Boran breed.

Indeed, one could argue that the breed’s growing popularity comes down to not only genetics, but also farmers’ awareness of the aesthetic beauty and qualities that the Boran possesses.

In this way, Simeon and Jarren have been instrumental in making a name for the breed. The brothers’ started off with having professional photographs taken of their animals, which paid special attention to the micro details of the animals.

“We then introduced videos for marketing the animals in 2020, which had never been done before in the industry.

“We also put a different spin on auctions with the construction of The Bull Ring: a smarter setup versus pitching a temporary tent and having people sit on dusty seats.”

The construction of The Bull Ring was met with a lot of negativity, and Simeon and Jarren were warned that they were building a ‘white elephant’. But, like their belief in the Boran, the Hurwitz brothers were certain that The Bull Ring was a good investment.

Now, the annual Hurwitz Farming auctions are held at The Bull Ring, while other farmers also host their auctions there. The Bull Ring hosts around 12 auctions a year.

### **Other business interests**

There are around 5 000 head of cattle on the farm, with the vast majority being Boran. But Simeon and Jarren also run Droughtmaster, Dexter, and Ankole herds.

Initially, the Droughtmaster was brought into the operation in order to diversify the business.

“When we brought the Droughtmaster in, we already had a bit more experience in stud farming. We bought 25 female animals and a bull,” says Simeon. The stud has since grown to around 500 head.

“When we started with the Droughtmaster, we didn’t go hard at first. The animals we brought in were pedigreed animals and their registration was run through the Namibia stud breeders society. But as demand for and prices of the Droughtmaster has increased, and with the breed being registered in South Africa, we have changed our focus a bit.”

The brothers also run a Dexter herd, which, says Simeon, is used as a lawnmower.

“We tried sheep at first, but found that they simply did not eat enough. We then brought in the Dexters, and they are very efficient at clearing patches of grass!” They also run an Ankole stud.

Hurwitz Farming is active across the entire beef value chain, with the operation including a feedlot, a silage-making operation and a deboning plant.

The silage contracting business operates countrywide, and is a significant part of the growing enterprise, says Simeon.

Hurwitz Farming is contracted by farmers to make silage on the contracting farmer’s farm.

Simeon says that before establishing the silage contracting business in 2017, they were already making silage on the farm for their cattle.

This was despite them not having much knowledge on the methods and processes involved.

“We were eventually told by a representative of a company that sold inoculants for silage production that the silage we were producing was, to put it bluntly, rubbish. He said it was unpalatable for the cattle, and that we could have problems with mould due to how it was being packaged,” says Simeon.

“Jarren immediately booked a flight to Germany to study how to make good-quality silage.”

While in Germany, Jarren learnt about methods of making silage and silage bagging that were not being used in South Africa.

“The whole of Europe was using these methods, but they weren’t being used in South Africa,” says Simeon.

When Jarren returned to South Africa, the brothers ordered their first silage bagging machine, and began employing the methods Jarren had learnt about in Germany. The quality of their silage rapidly improved, and these bagging methods have since been employed by others in South Africa, thanks to the legwork done by Simeon and Jarren.

## **Challenges**

Simeon says that their biggest challenge for the year so far has been the drought.

“We’ve been farming in these parts for a number of years, and it’s definitely the worst we’ve ever seen it. The dams are bone dry,” he says.

“We’re just not used to this kind of weather, particularly at the end of October.”

He adds that farmers around the country are running out of feed for their animals.

“Either they have no food for their animals, or their feed is drying up.”

Unfortunately, some opportunists have taken advantage of the situation, and Simeon warns farmers to be careful when buying feed.

“The scammers are absolute professionals, and have the personal and business details, such as VAT number, of the farmer they are impersonating. So even when doing your due diligence, you could still be caught up.”

The anticipated La Niña phase is late, and above-average rainfall is only expected from the end of December or early January.

“We still have some time to go before we may receive the promised rain, which is putting a lot of pressure on farmers. And while we use borehole water here, we have other challenges such as theft and a lack of electricity, which means we can’t pump as much as we need.”

Despite this, Simeon remains hopeful that the upcoming year will be another good one for the Boran in South Africa. With the brothers’ positive mind sets and the increasing popularity of the breed, the future looks rosy indeed.