



The gift that keeps on giving to the Hills

Yarrowonga Waco genetics have been the cornerstone of the Hills' Dirranbandi operation for a quarter of a century, as **HELEN WALKER** reports.

A GIFT of 100 Santa Gertrudis heifers some 25 years ago firmly set the foundation for Dirranbandi beef producer, Ben Hill, to manage a quality commercial breeding herd.

According to Ben, it was not long after he left school that his parents John and Rose gave him these heifers, which were based on Yarrowonga Waco bloodlines, and he has not introduced a breeder to his base herd since.

Ben, his wife Melly, and their two children Jeremy, aged 15, and Jaynee, 11, operate a three-way farming and grazing enterprise at Oakey Park, some 60km south-west of Dirranbandi.

"Traditionally, I am a cattle producer and not a farmer," Ben explained.

"However, our operation does revolve around some 3000 acres of dry-land farming, plus 600ac of oats, and

running 4500 sheep for wool production."

Their properties, Oakey Park and Balmoral, incorporate 13,770 hectares of back soil flooded country, running to grey gidyea through to red mulga buffel country and natural pasture.

The Hills run about 500 Santa Gertrudis breeders based purely on the Bassingthwaighe family's Santa Gertrudis bloodlines.

And while the past seven years the seasons have been horrific, they have managed to keep their breeding herd in tact during such trying times.

"To maintain our breeders during the 1990s' dry years, we trucked them as far south as Wilcannia and placed them on agistment."

"However, during the past few years, we have managed to keep the breeding



Ben and Melly Hill, pictured with their children Jaynee and Jeremy.

“We will keep an older cow to eight years or older if she is still productive.”

herd in tact at Oakey Park, feeding out supplement, cotton seed, and giving them access to low mulga.

"To keep going last year, we actually forfeited our wheat crop," Ben said.

"We were probably looking at a yield of three bags to the acre, but we opted to put our breeders onto it, to save them from being trucked off onto agistment."

"As well, we bought plenty of grain last year, and that gave us some direction in management terms, as well as some turnover.

"We were able to feed the steer portion and the dry females for market.

"And while we are an EU-accredited property, we really produce what the sky allows us to produce."

All steers are sold over the hooks direct works to the Oakey abattoir.

Both steers and culled heifers are sold into the EU market, realising a pre-

mium of above \$370c/kg, while older cows return about 280c/kg or better.

"The Yarrowonga Waco bulls suit our EU operation because of their superior bone structure and their noted weight for age factor," Ben explained.

The Hills have a clear management philosophy regarding the management of their female herd.

"Both Melly and I class the heifers prior to joining, and we retain those heifers that meet our standards for structural conformation, temperament, and overall femininity," he said.

"It depends on what sort of season is ahead of us, and at times we have classed out one-third of the heifers.

"This year, due to the drought, we will cull about 25 percent and keep the balance."

Ben is a strong believer in keeping an older proven breeder that is still in production, in favour of a younger heifer looking for another chance.

"We will keep an older cow to eight years or older if she is still productive."

Another management technique at Oakey Park is the time and effort placed on the handling of weaners at weaning time.

"We lock up all weaners in the yards and they are hand-fed with round bales, and I spend as much time handling them as I can," Ben said.

"We walk them through the cattle race daily, and work them with the dogs.

"This is really the basics of educating young cattle, and if done properly, really

means a lot in the overall management and temperament of our cattle further down the track."

Mustering is a family affair, with the expert help of local contractor Clayton Hegarty.

All heifers are joined at 24 months, and Ben has a strong opinion as to why he does not join them younger.

"I really don't believe in a younger joining due to the strong chance of drought in this country, and if they are in calf at a younger age, it doesn't give the heifer a chance to grow.

"I feel that at 24 months they are fully grown and are prepared to handle both the environment and their calves."

All females are joined to bulls at a ratio of 3pc, and are joined from October until the end of March.

The Hills manage a spring calving, with an 80pc calving rate.

When the calves are about seven months of age, the weaning program commences.

"We wean according to what sort of season is ahead of us," Ben said.

"If it is shaping up to be a tough season, we pull the calves off earlier to give the mothers a better chance, and if the season is favourable, we leave them on longer to keep the milk supply up to them."

Weaner heifers receive two inoculations against leptospirosis six weeks apart in the first year, bringing them in line for the annual booster shot given to all breeders annually.



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Santa Gertrudis

Stud No 114

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