The State of the Basotho Pony in Lesotho

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Introduction

The origin of the Basotho Pony can be traced back from that of the Cape horse, which formed the foundation stock. According to Thomton (1936), horses were first sent out to the Cape by the Dutch East India Company in 1652. They were Java horses of a strong Persian and Arab strain. Murphy (1997) says that the first horses appeared in Lesotho around 1825, captured from the Zulu and later from the Boers. In 1870, the Basotho Pony was known among Europeans as a breed or type. Exports of the ponies grew, and their fame spread throughout South Africa and became enhanced during the Anglo-Boer War. Some authors claim that the Basotho Pony was known and recognized as a distinct breed around 1850. This horse has been developed through natural selection (Rantletse, 2001).

The total Basotho Pony population in Lesotho is estimated to be 98 000 to 112 000. Of these, 63 percent are found in the foothills and mountain areas. The horse is a source of pride in Lesotho and there are a large number of competent riders in rural areas. In some areas of the country the horse is the only alternative to travelling on foot. Horses are used mainly as a mode of transport over the rugged topography of Lesotho. Basotho Ponies are also used by tourists for trekking, which is a source of income for a few communities. In some parts of the country, horses are used as draught animals, mainly for ploughing, planting, carding and cultivating the fields (Rwelamira, 1998).

For many years, Lesotho, like many other countries, regarded the horse as having lost its place in the modern world, because it had ceased to be an animal of economic importance. The Basotho Pony is a natural resource of the country, but, as yet, no serious efforts have been made to exploit it commercially.

The Basotho Pony is famous for its stamina, docility, extremely hardy hoof, endurance, good temperament and sure-footedness, and the name has remained a valuable "trademark" to this day. Basotho Pony populations have been observed over many years. There have been declines in population caused by outbreaks of diseases and poor control of them. The reaction of Basotho horse breeders was to cross-breed the ponies with newly introduced breeds, which led to a loss of the Basotho Pony characteristics. In 1975, this deterioration was revealed by a study.

The reasons why the Basotho Pony has developed such a good reputation among horse breeds are as follows: Lesotho presents an ideal environment for the breeding and rearing of horses as it has a dry mountain climate with consequently low incidence of pandemic diseases. Its mountain pastures and

high veldt have the potential to yield ideal grazing for horses, and farmland can produce high-quality fodder.

Basotho Pony development

The main report of the Lesotho National Livestock Development Study in 1999 demonstrates that the accelerated development of the Basotho Pony began with the Basotho Pony Project, when Arab blood from Egypt and the Connemara Pony from Ireland were introduced. The latter breed has a common Arab ancestry with the Basotho Pony and has similar size, conformation, temperament, stamina and hardiness, but larger bones, better hind legs and superior fertility rates.

In the early 1950s, the Basotho Pony was facing extinction. For many years there had been demand for the Basotho Pony from countries such as Kenya, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi and South Africa, but it was only on 8 May 1973, during a donor conference, that Ireland agreed to establish the Basotho Pony Project to respond to the demand from countries where the Basotho Pony's potential was known. In 1978, the National Stud was established under an agreement reached between the Governments of Lesotho and Ireland in 1976. The stud covers approximately 1 500 hectares and comprises rangelands and arable land.

In 1984, a marketing and trekking centre was also established to use and market the Basotho Pony. This centre extends over 436 ha, comprising rangelands and 6 ha of arable land at Molimo Nthuse.

In order to survive the harsh environment, the Basotho Pony developed particular genetic characteristics such as the ability to endure extremes of temperatures and live on variable quality grazing. It developed thick-walled hooves to negotiate the mountain terrain, an ability to triple (tripling is a two-time lateral gait, slightly fasten than a trot, in which fore and hind legs on the same side work together), a relatively docile temperament, intelligence and good speed.

The breed reached its peak quality by the turn of the century and during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. The rapid decline in the quantity and quality of the breed in the twentieth century is generally attributed to a number of factors including the following: up to 30 000 of the best stock, particularly stallions, were sold to both sides during the Anglo-Boer War. By 1906, Lesotho was depleted of its best stock as the stallions, sold to the belligerents during the war, had been castrated.

Export demand for good geldings led to further depletion of available good-quality stallions for domestic breeding. The blizzard of 1902, combined with malnutrition and bad management practices, depleted the numbers and quality of Basotho Ponies further, hastening the decline in conformation and performance. Breeding and cross-breeding was largely unregulated and the introduction of thoroughbred stallions led to further deterioration in the skeletal quality and the ability to endure the harsh environment. There was no central marketing strategy for ponies and both breeding and trade were unregulated. Ponies were not regarded as marketable commodities in the same way as cattle, sheep and goats.

Production system

The production systems can mainly be divided into intensive and extensive systems, whereby intensive refers to the activities of the National Stud and the Marketing Centre, while extensive refers to the mare camps system.

The National Stud (intensive system)

The National Stud produces top-quality young stock follies and colts, which are sold to Basotho horse breeders at subsidized prices to enable them to improve their horse herds. The National Stud is a research and resource centre. It conducts research on different types of horse fodder. It is visited by horse breeders who wish to obtain appropriate zootechnical knowledge about horse breeding and management. Record-keeping at the centre is of a high standard. The stud is an educational centre for scholars all around the country. The stud was planned to accommodate 40 breeding mares and four high-quality Sesotho stallions to fulfil its objectives. The problems currently faced by the National Stud and the Marketing Centre are horse poisoning by senecio, snake poisoning and those arising from their status of not being fully commercialized.

The mare camps (extensive system)

This is another branch of Basotho Pony breeding activities, operating throughout the country. The duties of the part of the Equine Section (Department of Livestock Services) responsible are to inspect and register mares, stallions and the progeny of the registered stud herd. In addition, farmers are trained in Basotho Pony breeding and management principles. In order to achieve this objective, the field extension programme encourages farmers to form an association that breeds horses using pasture breeding. This is described by Marrow (1986), who judged it to be the most adequate system to be employed in horse breeding because of its biological aspects of reproduction.

Marrow (1986) emphasizes the importance of pasture breeding and the mare camps were established based on the following:

- The stallion performs all the work and the owner only needs to supervise the herd.
- The stallion is much better than his human companions at heat detection, thus, in natural breeding the herd will have a better conception rate than in hand breeding.

Regular ovulation and conception occur in mares in contact with a stallion, although this is not the case with mares kept with a stallion throughout the year. Marrow (1986) sets out the disadvantages of pasture breeding, which are encountered in the mare camps, although they are of limited importance in the case of the Basotho Pony. The greatest disadvantage is the loss of supervision. When valuable animals are involved, pasture breeding is impractical because the risk of injury is high. However, this applies to breeds other than the Basotho Pony, because of the latter's temperament. The ponies are both gregarious and shy by nature and quickly establish a social hierarchy in which inexperienced stallions will always be exposed to injury while the "boss" mare will prevent other mares from being covered when she is in oestrus.

It is also dangerous for young foals to be turned out with a stallion that is not of comparable size, because when he takes over a group of mares for any reason, he will attack the foals that he has not sired. Again, this does not apply to Basotho Ponies as they have good parental character. Marrow (1986) describes these disadvantages as opposed to the advantages of hand breeding, which was used in Lesotho when stallions were kept at livestock-improvement centres. The

hand-mating system had very poor conception rates, while in mare camps the conception rates and foaling percentages have improved tremendously since the introduction of extension and registration programmes. History shows that hand mating has been employed unsuccessfully since 1906, when valuable Arab stallions were used to assist the development of horses in Lesotho. McCormack (1986) explains that mare camps are a key to the future role of extension in correct breeding management and encouraging teamwork and cooperation among farmers. Mare camps have the following advantages, as observed by equine technicians:

- They provide a controlled breeding programme and good management.
- They encourage cooperation among farmers, because they control the centres.
- Farmers do not have to take the trouble of going to the livestock-improvement centres during the mare oestrus.

The mare camps, like any other established centres, have disadvantages, too:

- Mares are grouped together and therefore are easily accessible to thieves.
- There is little commitment of the government to combat stock theft.
- Mare camps are not fenced, hence stallions of inferior quality are able to intrude.
- A reliable herder is needed, however difficult to find, as he/she must fully understand his/her role in keeping records.
- Unless horses are tested prior to breeding, transmission of venereal diseases such as dourine could cause havoc.

Policy and strategies of the Equine Section

The policy of the Equine Section is governed by the following broad objectives:

- To ensure that the Basotho Pony continues to provide an efficient mode of transport for the rural population, particularly those who are living far from roads;
- To maintain and improve the genetic and phenotypic characteristics of the Basotho Pony;
- To develop the export of the breed and internal markets for it.

The development programme of the section is promoted by the following strategies:

- Facilitating the formation of Basotho Pony Associations;
- Investigating, controlling and testing for diseases that can hinder improvement in the quality and quantity of the breed (e.g. dourine);
- Supporting the horse owners in organizing races and attendance at shows;
- Facilitating increased commercialization of the Basotho Pony in order to make an additional contribution to farm income.

In order to achieve its objectives, the Equine Section is involved in the following activities:

- Countrywide extension;
- The Marketing and Trekking Centre at Molimo-Nthuse;
- The Basotho Pony National Stud at Thaba Tseka.

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