



Continual improvement: the key to successful beef production

KwaZulu-Natal beef farmer **Rustin Shawe** was recently crowned the province's 2018 Young Farmer of the Year. He told **Lloyd Phillips** that planning strategically and then putting those plans into action had helped him take his already thriving farming business to even greater heights.





Behind his friendly and seemingly carefree demeanour, Rustin Shawe is an astute, highly disciplined farmer who keeps impeccable records in his stud and commercial beef business, and consults these frequently. Testament to this is his comprehensive analysis of his operation, Grassfields Beef, that far surpassed judges' expectations in the Toyota/Agri SA Young Farmer of the Year competition.

Shawe by no means spends all his time in his office, however. He values a hands-on approach to running his operation, and, while inspecting his cattle, can provide a production history from memory for most of them.

A third-generation farmer in the family business, Shawe has been farming in partnership with his father, Hubert, for the past 16 years. Shawe Snr, a veteran with 54 years' farming experience, is slowly handing over the reins to his son, who already owns 50%.

"I'll eventually own the entire business as I gradually buy my father's shares from him. I already make most of the management decisions, but still use my father's knowledge and experience," Shawe says.

ABOVE: Grassfields Beef's sourveld grazing comprises 7 000ha of hills and plains in northern KwaZulu-Natal's Groenvlei area.
 RUSTIN SHAWE/ANDRÉ PRETORIUS FOTOGRAFIE

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE: Each calf spends the first week of its life with its dam in a group of 30 pairs to allow each cow time to bond properly with her offspring.

BELOW LEFT: Rustin Shawe has planted pastures from which he bales fodder for winter and on which he also grazes his cattle when the farm's veld grazing is poor ahead of spring.

BELOW RIGHT: Shawe joined the Grassfields Beef family farming business in 2003 and is building on the solid foundation established by his father.
 PHOTOS: LLOYD PHILLIPS

Grassfields Beef is situated in northern KwaZulu-Natal's picturesque Groenvlei area (between Wakkerstroom and Utrecht), which comprises largely grass-covered mountains and plains. Shawe currently owns 3 162ha of land and leases 3 875ha from his father and 1 560ha from two other local landowners. This brings the total area of his operation to just short of 8 600ha.

He runs a Droughtmaster beef stud of 350 breeding cows and heifers, and a commercial Beefmaster x Droughtmaster herd of 1 500 breeding cows and heifers that he is breeding towards becoming a Droughtmaster-type herd.

CONSTANT IMPROVEMENT

Shawe explains that when he joined the family farming business in 2003, his father had been running a Beefmaster-type commercial herd for over 40 years. However, between 2003 and 2010, and while starting to take increasing control of Grasslands Beef from his father, Shawe learned of the Droughtmaster breed.

Impressed by what he saw, he eventually decided to establish his own Droughtmaster herd that he could use both to breed marketable stud animals for other



FAST FACTS

- Rustin Shawe established Grassfields Beef Africa Droughtmaster Stud in 2010 as a means to improve the productivity and profitability of his beef farming operation.
- To improve fertility in his enterprise, Shawe retains only those cows and heifers that conceive within the first 60 days of being put to a bull.
- He believes in farming with integrity and will not fabricate production statistics for beef animals that he intends selling to other farmers.

South African beef producers and also to convert and improve his commercial herd to better suit Groenvlei's extensive ranch-style sourveld conditions. Grassfields Beef Africa Droughtmaster Stud was launched in 2010. Because the Australian-developed Droughtmaster is not yet an officially recognised breed in South Africa, the stud and its animals are currently registered in Namibia.

"Over the past eight years, because of their predictability, the Droughtmaster genetics have already increased the weaning weights and improved the cattle

LIVESTOCK Beef Production

uniformity in my commercial herd," he says. "I've also been able to dramatically increase the commercial herd's size. This is contributing towards my ultimate goal of having 2 000 commercial Droughtmaster-type breeding females to put to my Droughtmaster stud and commercial bulls every year."

He retains most of his own-bred commercial weaner heifers (currently about 500) each year to speed up the herd-building process.

During this growth phase of the business, Shawe is prioritising improved fertility in his cattle. He does this by retaining only those heifers and cows that are in-calf within the first 60 days of being put to a Droughtmaster stud bull or Grassfields Beef ranch bull during the breeding season. For the 24-month old heifers and the cows, this season runs from November to February.

While breeding females not in-calf within the first 60 days of the season are allowed time to conceive, they are sold via auction as in-calf females instead of being retained for the Grassfields Beef operation.

THE HERD'S CONCEPTION RATE EXCEEDS 90% ANNUALLY

As part of the improvement of his commercial herd, Shawe selects only those cows in the Droughtmaster stud that produce the best calves. Any animal that produces an "average" calf is sold. This is a calf that at the weaning age of seven months fails to meet the strict standards set by Shawe and his breed consultant, Ian Currin.

Shawe points out that this strict stud herd management strategy is building on the already strong fertility that he and his father have promoted in Grassfields Beef's constantly evolving commercial herd.

The two men are pleased that the herd's conception rate for the past 20 consecutive years has been at least 90% for each annual 90-day breeding season.

"I've reduced the annual breeding season to 60 days now as the next step for continued improvement in the fertility of my breeding females," Shawe says.

He is also determined to breed for and produce beef cattle that are profitable with the minimum of feed inputs.

KEEPING RESOURCES ON-FARM

"My only income is from beef. I therefore plant all my arable land to fodder crops or pasture grasses that I can then utilise through my cattle, so that these resources stay on the farm," he says.

For this purpose, he currently grows 35ha of dryland silage maize, 20ha of dryland kikuyu (*Pennisetum clandestinum*), and 210ha of cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*) and fescue (*Festuca* spp), of which 45ha are irrigated.

These arable lands are used twice a year: the first time for cutting 4 000 large round bales as stored winter feed, and the second time as winter grazing for the cattle.

With the Groenvlei area having numerous marshy patches, he also harvests and bales 300ha of the grass annually for what he calls "vlei hay".

For him, this is the cheapest form of stored cattle feed for winter as he does not have to fertilise the marshy areas.

He explains that when the nearby Slang River floods these marshes every few years, the silt deposited by the floodwater provides natural nutrients for the grass.

To save money on fertilising his planted pastures, he plants legumes such as clover and hairy vetch to fix atmospheric nitrogen in the soil.

Shawe also practises resource conservation in the management of his 7 000ha of natural veld grazing, which includes



ABOVE:
As part of his marketing strategy for Grassfields Beef, Shawe has built top-class cattle sales and loading facilities on his farm.

boat grass (*Monocymbium cerasiiforme*), red grass (*Themeda triandra*) and black-seed grass (*Alloterospis semialata*).

"My main practice is to understock my grazing camps at 1 LSU/4ha. I find that leaving grass reserves in a camp enables these camps to rejuvenate very quickly by the time spring comes around.

"During the past two years, I started rotational grazing of camps in the summer months. I have a three- or four-camp rotational system per 150 cattle. Each herd spends two weeks in one camp before being moved to the next. This gives camps a resting period of four to six weeks," he explains.

Although his present rotational grazing system is relatively new, Shawe has already noticed that the farm's cattle-carrying capacity has increased, conception has remained at at least 90%, and weaning weights have increased.



LONG WEANERS

Adding to Grassfields Beef's income is its ever-increasing production and sales of long weaners. This currently stands at 600 animals a year that are sold to feedlots via auctions.

"I take them from the end of April, when they are weaned at 210 days, through to November at minimal cost," says Shawe. "I find that while the weaners lose weight during winter, they compensate for this by growing twice as fast on the following green spring grazing. If I were supplementing them in winter on a high-energy ration, I'd be losing money on animals that would have gained this growth naturally anyway in spring."

His long weaners each weigh 40kg to 60kg more than a weaner, and when they are sold in November and early December, they usually achieve a premium of R2/kg to R5/kg over average weaner prices as the animals are bought by



TOP: Grassfields Beef's Droughtmaster stud and ranch bulls are all tested for trichomoniasis and fertility after each breeding season and again before the next.
 RUSTIN SHAWE

ABOVE: Planted pasture species for baling and grazing on Grasslands Beef include 210ha of cocksfoot and fescue.

feedlots to supply the following high-demand Easter season.

"Feedlots also like my long weaners because they adapt far more easily to feedlot conditions than weaners do," he adds

VACCINATIONS & TESTING

Animal health at Grassfields Beef is managed without compromise. Shawe implements what he describes as a "strict" dosing and inoculation programme.

He strives to keep calf and dam deaths to a minimum during calving season by working with his stockmen to constantly monitor in-calf females and assist any that have calving difficulties.

Cows and first calvers are moved out of calving camps as soon as the calves can walk. The calf-and-dam pairs are then put into groups of 30 pairs for the next week to allow the dams time to bond well with their new calves before the pairs are moved into a herd of up to 150 cows and calves.

"As soon as my bulls are removed from the females after the breeding season, and again before the next breeding season, they are tested for trichomoniasis and fertility," Shawe says.

'RUN WITH INTEGRITY'

During the Young Farmer of the Year competition adjudication process, Shawe told the judges that his farming operation was run "with integrity".

"I dislike it when farmers give misinformation about weaning weights and conception rates, or mislead fellow farmers with other false information. When you're selling a production animal to a fellow farmer, your information must be honest. This makes sense if you want to build a long-standing business relationship with people."

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