Introduction and history of the breed

The origins of the Drakensberger can be related back to the indigenous cattle of the Khoi and other indigenous groups of the Cape and adjacent areas. As early as 2 December 1497, Vasco da Gama mentioned the "fat, black ox" that he obtained in a trade. Vasco da Gama states "We found him (the ox) very fat and his meat as toothsome as the beef of Portugal". Today, more than 500 years later, Drakensberger cattle are found across Southern Africa with its meat still as ‘toothsome’ and its popularity as an indigenous, well adapted and well tempered cattle breed rapidly growing.

The Drakensberger cattle breed was officially founded with the establishment of the South African Drakensberger Cattle Breeders Society on 7 November 1947. In May 1969 the Drakensberger Cattle Breeders Society was allowed to the SA Studbook as an associate member, and in 1972 as a full member. In 1980 the breeders society decided to make performance testing compulsory for admission to membership. Ever since, only performance-tested animals became eligible for inspection and registration. Because the whole breed is subject to performance testing, the first analysis according to BLUP (Best Linear Unbiased Prediction) in South Africa was done on the database of the Drakensbergers.

The Drakensberger today is a very popular breed and definitely a profit breed which thrives in relationship and harmony with nature. It is often forgotten that the breed dates from a time where animals had to be naturally adapted to survive. Because no dipping fluids or proven medicine was available, they had to be able to withstand flies, mosquitoes, ticks and parasite-borne diseases.

Description of the Drakensberger

The Drakensberger is a medium-framed beef animal with a smooth black coat, has a strikingly long and deep body with a mild temperament. It is one of only three indigenous cattle breeds in South Africa. The breed has been born, bred and developed in South Africa, resulting in the Drakensberger enjoying advantages over other breeds in terms of adaptability, robustness and natural resistance against diseases, especially tick-borne diseases. Continuous emphasis has been placed on economically important aspects such as adaptability, fertility, strong milk production traits, longevity, growth ability, feed turnover conversion and carcass quality. Nonetheless, appearance still ranks high and selection is done strictly according to the Standard of Excellence (www.drakensberger.co.za).
The particular value of the Standard of Excellence in the development of the breed is easily recognised in the uniformity and general appearance of the Drakensberger.

The Drakensberger as a dam line is very popular and sought after, with genetically pure Drakensberger cows active in both stud and commercial herds estimated to be in excess of 230 000. This is extended into statistics indicating that about 8% of all cattle are indeed Drakensberger or Drakensberger type (640 000). Emphasis is on fertility, ease of calving, raising a healthy calf and re-conception. Data confirms the weaning mortality of 3.22% to be well below the average of 6.16% of 9 breeds compared.

Longevity is well known and 8% of productive, stud Drakensberger cows are older than 10 years.

Drakensberger bulls are known for virility, growth, feed conversion and carcass quality (P. E. Strydom, ARC). Studies published in 1989 already showed the superior performance, with regards to meat quality, of the Drakensberger, compared to that of other feedlot animals. In this study the percentage of expensive meat per 100kg hind quarter was evaluated and compared. The results of the study are shown in the graph below. It was furthermore found that 85% of Drakensberger cattle naturally carry the gene responsible for marbling.

![Percentage expensive meat / 100kg hind quarter graph]

Distribution

The wide distribution pattern of the breed is as a result of its outstanding ability to adapt to climatic and environmental conditions. The Drakensberger thrives on:

- Gall sickness and red-water veld of the sweet bushveld.
- The snow-covered peaks of the Drakensberg mountains.
- The grassy plains of the Free State.
- The sour veld of Mpumalanga.
- The shrub veld of the Karoo.
- The dunes of Namibia.
- The North-West with its above average heat.
- The cattle regions of Australia.

Drakensbergers are also found in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique and even further north in the warm and humid climate of Equatorial-Guinea.

Because of it being a pure bred animal with reliable and trustworthy genetics, it lends itself to exceptional cross breeding potential. The hybrid vigour of the Drakensberger has increased weaning weight in uncountable calves, leading to financial security. The praise worthy mothering ability of the cow further compliments the already well known “Queen of cows” phrase.