

Nigerian Dwarf Breed History

by Tom Rucker

Like many breeds of domesticated livestock, the complete history of the Nigerian Dwarf is incomplete. Through the years and stages of development, records were not always kept, or if they were, they are sketchy at best. Developing the history of the breed is much like putting a jigsaw puzzle together that is missing many of its pieces. To reach the present day Nigerian Dwarf, one has to use a combination of documented facts, speculation, deductive reasoning and a little imagination.

What is known is that throughout tropical Western Africa, there is a type of goat referred to as the West African Dwarf (WAD). These goats are used as a food source, both meat and milk, for the local population. Due to economic hardships, keeping "pets" is not an option. It appears that little thought is used in breeding and it is truly a survival of the fittest phenomenon taking place. In the writings about Albert Schweitzer and his work at his hospital in Lambrene in the country now known as Gabone, the local goat is often times referred to, and in fact is credited with supplying the milk for the hospital. The imported breeds typically known as dairy breeds weren't able to withstand the Tse-Tse fly, and therefore were not productive. The WAD goats continued to survive and thrive. Throughout books on Dr. Schweitzer, pictures of goats similar in type to what are referred to as a Nigerian Dwarves in the U.S. can be found.

Exactly how the WAD goats came to American soil is one of the missing pieces in the puzzle. One theory is that as the big cats were shipped to zoos, goats were loaded on to the vessels as a food source for the cats while in transit. The goats that weren't consumed went on to the zoos. As early as 1918, Joseph Crepin reported in the second edition of *la Chevre* that WAD goats had been imported to the United States. Additionally, there were a number of documented importations from the 1930s to the 1960s.

The beginning of the breed in this country lies in zoos. The first miniature goats to appear in this country were part of zoo exhibits, and occasionally research institutions. As the population began to grow, it became necessary to reduce the number of animals and individuals had their first opportunity to own these unique goats. Originally, all small goats of WAD origin were indiscriminately referred to as pygmies. In the beginning, "pygmy" was used more to describe a size of goat rather than a specific breed, much like "Swiss" is often times used to refer to the various erect eared breeds hailing from Europe.

As time went on, breeders began to notice differences in type within what had become the Pygmy breed. It became apparent that there were two distinct types: the shorter legged, heavier bodied, round bone animals more typical of what is known today as a Pygmy, and the more refined, angular animal that has become today's Nigerian Dwarf. As breeders began to communicate, they discovered there were others in the United States and Canada that had similar observances. Mrs. Bonnie Abrahamson of North Ogden, Utah, while working in a zoo in California was one of the first to notice the distinctive difference.

Mrs. Abrahamson brought several black and white animals that she referred to as "Nigerian Dwarves" to an AGS Pygmy certification committee. Despite their more refined type and dairy

appearance, these animals were accepted into the AGS Pygmy herdbook. At about the same time, Mr. Heabert Woods of Alexandria, Indiana, had animals similar in type to Mrs. Abrahamson's, but brown in color, refused entry into the National Pygmy Goat Association's herdbooks because of their color.

These two breeders petitioned the International Dairy Goat Registry (IDGR) to open a herdbook for Nigerian Dwarves. IDGR opened a separate herdbook for the breed, complete with a standard emphasizing dairy characteristics, and on July 24, 1981, Mr. Robert Johnson's Bullfrog Alley's Johnny Jump-Up #2, a buck bred by Mrs. Abrahamson, became the first Nigerian Dwarf registered by any registry. By January 1987, there were 384 animals registered in the herdbooks of IDGR as Nigerian Dwarves, with 93 of those registered the previous year alone. In part, largely due to the fact that IDGR does not sanction shows, the popularity of the registry has waned over the years.

The early Nigerian Dwarves were seen most often in three distinct color lines, all of similar type, even though many of the early breeders attempted to keep each color line separate from the others. A majority of these early animals were brown, black or gold, all with or without random white markings. Possibly because of the limited number of representatives of the breed, breeders did begin to mix the color lines fairly early on, although references to specific color lines could still be found as late as 1988.

In 1984, the American Goat Society (AGS) opened a herdbook for Nigerian Dwarves, and by September of the following year, 82 animals, representing breeders from 8 states and Canada had been registered. The first AGS registered Nigerian Dwarf distinction goes to Wrights Pansy, AGS # D-1f, owned by Francis Wright of Indiana. Mr. Woods was instrumental in getting a separate herdbook for the breed with AGS, and was made chairman of the Nigerian Dwarf committee. Mr. Wright and Pat Freeman of Dutton, Ontario completed the original Nigerian Dwarf committee for AGS.

To form the foundation of the breed, applications were submitted to the committee, along with a clear photograph of the animal and a measurement of the animal at the withers. If the committee unanimously agreed that the animal, that had to be at least one year of age, met the breed standard, the animal was then eligible to be registered as a purebred Nigerian Dwarf. Animals that were accepted for registration using this process are often times referred to as a "committee animal." Some of the animals submitted, such as Mrs. Abrahamson's, were previously registered as Pygmies. It also would include animals with unknown backgrounds that showed true Nigerian Dwarf characteristics, and as time went on, animals that were of registered ancestry but which did not have the paperwork kept up. Many times, it was easier to submit the animal for certification than to retrace paperwork for several generations.

The original closing date for the herdbook was set at December 31, 1987. A change in the standard that year, however, would allow animals that previously were ineligible and the date was extended to December 31, 1990. In 1990, with fewer than 400 Nigerian Dwarves registered, the AGS Board voted to extend the deadline until December 31, 1992 to allow for a sufficient genetic base of foundation stock. The certification process did end in 1992, and all animals registered through this point, whether by ancestry or committee approval, carry an "f" suffix to their registration number to indicate that they are considered a foundation animal.

Unfortunately, accurate records were not kept as to exactly how many animals were admitted via certification, but by the end of 1992, a total of approximately 2000 Nigerian Dwarfes had been registered with the American Goat Society. There was still some concern that the breed needed a broader genetic base, and a progeny program was put into place until December 31, 1997. An unregistered animal would still be considered for registration if, when bred to several different AGS registered Nigerian Dwarfes (3 for does, 4 for bucks), the animal and all surviving offspring met breed standard and received unanimous approval of the Nigerian Dwarf committee. Again, accurate records were not kept, but one committee member recalls very few of these coming through committee. In keeping with AGS' philosophy of closed, purebred herdbooks, since January 1, 1998, the only way to be registered as a purebred Nigerian Dwarf is to be the offspring of two registered purebred Nigerian Dwarfes. (A breakdown of AGS registration numbers can be found in the Pedigree section of this proposal.) While undoubtedly there have been animals of varied background admitted to the herdbook, essentially since 1992 we have had a closed herdbook. All breeds begin somewhere, and what is more important is that what we started with, is where we are going. Using the wide genetic base created through the open herdbook, breeders are now molding the breed into a superior milk-producing animal of unmistakable dairy goat type that also happens to be small. While the Nigerian Dwarf and the Pygmy share common ancestry, they have clearly become two, distinct breeds through the efforts of breeders of both of the breeds.

The popularity of the breed has continued to grow, in part because of AGS sanctioned shows being held across the country. The first show that offered a separate sanction for the breed was the 1985 AGS National Show held in Graham, Texas. Only two exhibitors of Nigerian Dwarfes were present (Shaula Parker and Kathleen Claps), and the breed wasn't official, but there has been no looking back since. Pine Cone Valley Black Satin, a doe that is listed as an original import, owned by Ms. Claps, had the distinction of being crowned the first AGS National Champion Nigerian Dwarf. While the popularity of shows skyrocketed after this, another AGS National Show wouldn't be held until 1996. Through the hard work of Nigerian Dwarf breeders, an AGS sanctioned National Show has been held every year since. Please see the pictures of our 5 beautiful National Show winners at the end of this section. Interestingly, the 4 does to win the national after Black Satin all trace back to her many times.

From the first show in 1985 with a few animals, it is now not uncommon for a show of Nigerian Dwarfes only to approach 200 animals. AGS sanctioned shows are being held in almost every part of the country, and Nigerian Dwarf breeders are traveling thousands of miles a year to promote the breed and their herds.

Looking back at the breeders that have made this all happen, we need to start with Mrs. Abrahamson. It was her vision that the breed be classified separately from what was known as the Pygmy. Due to her failing health, Mrs. Abrahamson was forced to sell her herd in 1981, and Robert Johnson, owner of IDGR, purchased her herd. Her Bullfrog Alley herd can be found in many of today's Nigerian Dwarfes, either directly, or more commonly through Mr. Johnson's Pine Cone Valley herd. Of course, Mr. Wood, working primarily with the brown line, was quite influential, and Highland Woods animals are evident in many pedigrees. Mr. Wood worked closely with Mr. Wright of Wrights Acres, and those animals appear in many pedigrees as well. Ms. Freeman's Braco herd, primarily through the popularity of one buck, can be found in many pedigrees. Of these early breeders, unfortunately many are no longer alive or no longer active. Ms. Freeman still breeds goats, but her herd is known more for its Pygmies.

Moving a bit forward, we find three other prominent herds that have heavily influenced the Nigerian Dwarf breed. Fortunately, for ANDDA and the breed, all three are still actively breeding and are members of ANDDA. Mrs. Sandra Mason, now of Medina, Ohio, but previously from Texas and then Washington, owns the Brush Creek herd. Much of her original herd traced to the San Antonio zoo that reportedly had direct imports. Mrs. Mason has been breeding Nigerian Dwarves since 1982 and is the current AGS Nigerian Dwarf committee chairperson and current ANDDA Director-at-Large. Also beginning in 1982 was Mrs. Shaula Parker of Willow Park, Texas. Breeding under the herdname of Willows or Willow Creek, Mrs. Parker's animals can be found in pedigrees throughout the country. Additionally, Mrs. Parker was the breeder of the 1996 National Best of Breed doe. Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Mason have formed a very close relationship, and animals from each herd can be found in the other. Also, these two ladies co-edited the first breed publication, Footnotes*. The last herd to be mentioned is that of Ms. Kathleen Claps, now of Dripping Springs, Texas. Her Goodwood animals have stamped a very distinctive type across the breed. The achievement of the Goodwood animals is nothing less than remarkable. The first Master Champions wear the Goodwood name, the 1997 National Best of Breed doe was a Goodwood doe, the first animals on test were owned by Goodwood. Ms. Claps was also the founder of one of the original breed organizations for the breed, and following the decision to stop publishing Footnotes*, Ms. Claps began the breed magazine, Ruminations, remaining its editor until recently. These three ladies have done more than most of us will ever know in the formation of the breed to what it has become today.

But, not to rest on our laurels, the breed can be equally proud of our "new" breeders. We now boast a breeder of multiple ADGA National Show champions, previous owners of large commercial dairy goat operations, and a past ADGA President. Of course, we also have the beginner that has never owned a goat before and the enthusiasm that brings, and breeders of every currently recognized ADGA breed. Through this varied mix of individuals, the breed's future is secure.