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BASIC PIG BREEDING

PROFITABLE pig raising depends on the turnoff of efficiently grown animals. Breeders should be selected for growth rate, and proper care of the breeding sow will ensure that her litters are large and healthy.

By P. McNAMARA*

A rapid increase in the number of breeding sows in Western Australia suggests that some relatively inexperienced breeders may have started raising pigs. This article sets out the best pig breeding methods as a guide to beginners and a reminder to more experienced pig raisers.

Rearing breeding stock

Potential breeders should be grown to slaughter weight as quickly as possible to assess their potential for important commercial qualities, including growth rate and carcass quality. Litter mates of selected breeders should be inspected "on the hook" whenever possible to give a guide to quality. The inspections ensure that growth rate and carcass quality are considered when selecting which gilts and boars are to be kept.

Gilts should then be run in the paddock for the next 2 months and fed so as to gain 1 lb. per day. This requires a ration of 4 to 5 lb. per day. If gilts are allowed to get too fat breeding difficulties may arise. They will be ready to serve at about 8 months old or 260 lb. weight.

Boars can be used for occasional service from 6 months, but must not be overworked. They require good feeding and plenty of exercise and should be 9 months old before being used to any extent.

The breeding cycle

Young gilts may begin oestrus at 5 months but, if mated at this age, will probably produce small litters. It is best to wait till about 8 months or the third heat period. The gilts should be mated on a rising plane of nutrition, but it is again emphasised that they should not be fat.

Service should be in the middle of the heat period, as very early or late service will result in poor litters.

There are two methods of mating:

• Gilts on heat are withdrawn from the herd (an easy task if individual feeders are used) and mated. They are then penned separately until the following day when they are introduced to the boar for a second service. They are allowed to settle down for a few days before returning to the herd. A record should be kept of the service date and also the date to watch for possible return to service after 3 weeks.
Individual sow feeders make it easy to separate the animals to be mated from the rest of the herd.

• The sows are run with the boar in the paddock. In the first method every gilt is individually served, but because considerable labour is involved the second plan is commonly used. A better plan is to run the boar with a few animals to be mated each day and withdraw him at night for feed and rest. In summer the boar can be run with the sows at night when temperatures are lower, and rested during the day.

**In-pig gilts and sows**

The best place for in-pig animals is a paddock where they can get plenty of exercise and where little labour is required to look after them. The feed requirement is not great in early pregnancy; only during the last few weeks is there any great increase in the size of embryos. Feed should be regulated (say, 4 lb. per day) to maintain body weight, but during the last few weeks can be increased to 5 lb. per day.

**Farrowing**

Farrowing pens must be thoroughly cleaned before the sow is brought in. All muck must be removed with a hose and by scrubbing with washing soda and water (a double handful of washing soda to each bucket of water).

The pen should be disinfected and allowed to stand, then washed down and allowed to dry. If possible, the sun should get to the pen.

The sow should also be cleaned. She should be brought into a pen about a week before she is due to farrow, wormed, scrubbed down, and freed from lice and mange by treating with a proprietary preparation. She is then ready to go into the clean pen.

The duration of pregnancy varies, but the time used for calculation is 112 days. As this usually underestimates the time by a few days, 107 days is a good time to get the sow or gilt into her quarters.

Experience is the main guide as to when the sow is about to farrow. She will be restless and make a nest, and it will be possible to squeeze milk from the teats. Her feed should be cut back and at least half the ration substituted with bran to ensure that she isn’t constipated. She must have plenty of water.

Attendance at farrowing is sometimes helpful, but the beginner may do more harm than good. It is best not to interfere unless the sow is in difficulty, and then only when you can really help. Breeders should gain the confidence of the sow before farrowing by talking to her and handling her.

Immediately the piglets are born they will seek a teat, the first born securing the best positions in front.

Swabbing the navels with tincture of iodine is a precaution against some infections.

**Feeding the sow and litter**

The sow should not be overfed after farrowing. On the first day no feed at all should be given but plenty of water. Feed should be built up slowly over the first week until a basic ration of 6 lb. a day is reached, plus ½ to ¾ lb. per piglet in the litter. A sow and litter of 8 should get 10 to 12 lb. a day. This is only a guide and some sows need more.
Creep feed
Special tasty, highly nutritious food should be placed in the creep area from a week after farrowing. This food must always be fresh and clean and piglets must be encouraged to eat it at an early age. The more creep the pigs eat, the better will be the weaning weight.

Many pigmen use sugar and cornflakes to get their piglets eating, then change over to a standard creep ration.

Anaemia
Pallid skins, poor doers, white pasty scour at an early age, even sudden death are all signs of anaemia.

Piglets have a high iron requirement which cannot be met from the sow’s milk alone. When reared out of doors the piglets will make up their supply of iron from the soil, but on concrete this is not possible. Iron should be given to all pen-reared pigs as a routine, either orally or by injection.

Ear marking
Litters should be identified by earmarks so that their progress can be watched. Special pliers are used and the job can be done at the same time as the iron supplement is given.

Teeth
Many pig raisers clip piglets’ teeth to prevent them lacerating the sow’s teats or the faces of other piglets in the litter. Clipping is not always required, but a watch should be kept for trouble that may make it necessary. It can be done in combination with ear-marking and iron administration. Electricians’ side cutters are ideal, but care must be taken not to damage the gums.

Castration
Piglets may be castrated as early as one day old, but most people find 2 weeks a suitable age. Castration should not be left until weaning as it imposes tremendous additional stress on the piglets at that time.

The area should be cleaned with mild disinfectant and the incisions made with a sharp instrument such as a scalpel. Cuts should be made so that they will drain easily.

Weaning
The traditional age to wean is 8 weeks, and in most cases weaning at 7 or 8 weeks is still the best.

By this time piglets will be eating large amounts of creep feed and the sow will be well on the way to drying off. When the piglets are weaned there will be no difficulty in getting her in pig again within 3 or 4 days, and the piglets will hardly miss her.

Weaning can be earlier, but to be successful piglets must be encouraged to take creep feed at an early age so that they are independent of the sow by weaning.

Weaning by weight rather than age has proved successful, but only if the standard set is high enough. An average weight of 30 lb. is suggested; this can be achieved in about 6 weeks.

If weaning earlier than 8 weeks, the sow must be properly dried off or she will not come into season, and any advantage hoped for will be lost.