

Merino farming is her forte

Karen Southey



On a typical day, Tinus and Yvette Snyman may be found in a dusty Karoo sheep kraal, working sheep together. Like a well-oiled machine, they go about the job at hand effortlessly – one dosing the sheep, the other inoculating. Although a husband-wife farming team like this is not a common sight, they attribute much of their success to their teamwork. With a title like Northern Cape Female Farmer of the Year to her name,

Yvette clearly holds her own in a male dominated environment.

She enthusiastically tells of her love for farming and how she has aspired to be a farmer since her youth. Her love for farming she ascribes to her father, a seasoned Merino farmer, who let her hand rear lambs and do farm work for pocket money while she was growing up. “My Dad always told us that if you feed a Merino well during droughts and look after a ewe and her lamb well, then a Merino will look after you,” she says – words that have proven themselves to be true through her years on the farm. Yvette adds that she has tried to instil this same love for animals and nature in her two children, Zandri and Ingemar.

Sharing backgrounds in sport and education, Tinus and Yvette are both qualified teachers with sporting talents. Prior to their farming days, Yvette taught for two years before pursuing a career in professional tennis coaching. She also played tennis for EP and Griquas for many years. During this time Tinus was a physical education teacher in Middelburg. Living there allowed them to be near the family farm, Groot Boesmanspoort, situated in the Victoria West district.

They settled at Groot Boesmanspoort at the end of 1990. In 2003 Yvette bought the neighbouring farm, Slagberg, with financial assistance from her father and brother who initially advised her not to buy it, owing to the bare patches covering areas of the farm. With the use of a pitter plough (“hap ploeg”), Yvette reclaimed much of the veld and in the past five years those bare patches have become covered with bushes and grass - some of the best veld on the farm. Tinus and Yvette now farm the two farms together, with Merino sheep being their primary enterprise.

They eagerly tell about their success with Merinos. Having fertile sheep that boast a weaning percentage of 105% - 130% per year, they have over the years deliberately selected rams with more wool. Currently, they shear 5kg of wool per head every nine months. Tinus says these figures have convinced him that the perception that sheep with more wool are less fertile, is not always true. Sheep are mated in October and March every year, and lambing occurs intensively on the lands in small camps. After three weeks on the lands, the sheep are moved to the veld. To minimise losses, horsemen ride through the ewes and lambs on the veld every second day until the lambs are weaned. At the time of visiting them this season, they had lost only one lamb – out of a total of 356 ewes and 476 lambs.



Rehabilitated veld after reclaiming bare patches by use of a pitter plough (“hap ploeg”) only five years ago



Wheat- (winter grazing) and lucerne lands (summer) under permanent irrigation are used for lambing purposes



This lamb shows the characteristics the Snymans select for – fine body pleats for more wool, good conformation and high fertility

Although Yvette talks casually about the daily sacrifices they make to ensure that losses are kept to a minimum, the good results do come at a price. Every year she hand rears many lambs, as many as 89 one season, taking in abandoned lambs as well as those that look as though they may not thrive on the veld. Yvette believes that doing everything herself - from washing bottles to measuring their milk - ensures a high success rate. At night the lambs are kept under infra-red lights and she checks on them every two hours! Tinus and Yvette also ensure one of them is always on the farm to keep tabs on everything, only going away together twice a year, mostly to support their children at horse shows and other activities.



Yvette hand rears many lambs each year, keeping them warm in a shed under infra red lights at night

Another committed lady with an unusual job description on Groot Boesmanspoort is Tinus and Yvette's domestic help, Hettie. She works in their house from 6:00 until 9:00 in the mornings and after that goes out to trap jackals, keeping problems with vermin at bay.

Yvette light-heartedly tells of the challenges of running a household whilst also farming all day. She does the laundry and ironing in the evenings, she says. And while she mostly tries to plan ahead and let food cook slowly while she's out working, she adds that they also sometimes just "make a plan" or make do with left-overs. She laughingly recalls her children asking, "Are we only allowed to eat bread during shearing?!" when household matters like cooking were low on the list of priorities during shearing time one year. Tinus in turn adds that they have all learnt the value of being flexible and not insisting on things being "just so" - like not expecting a set meal every day.



Proud parents of achieving children: Tinus and Yvette's daughter, Zandri, has represented South Africa in Saddle Horse Equestrian Riding since 2010, in 2012 being the captain of the 5-gait Protea team competing in the World Cup competition. She will begin her studies in veterinary science next year. Their son, Ingemar, is currently in Grade 8 at Paarl Boys' High. He was named the 3-gait u/14 champion at the South African Saddle Horse Championships this year and also enjoys golf and rugby.

This kind of flexible and supportive attitude has been a key in their relationship. Although they jokingly admit to the challenges, they both talk enthusiastically of the benefits of working together and the synergy it creates. "Seeing a situation from two different viewpoints and discussing issues ensures a more thorough approach," Tinus explains. "One of us might notice something that the other missed, and so we complement each other." They also clearly enjoy working together, getting a job done more quickly and efficiently than either would have alone.

Although her out-of-the-ordinary role as farmer initially invited some criticism from outsiders, Yvette is adamant that being involved in the business is a key to success. When asked what advice she would offer to farmers' wives who aren't sure of their role on the farm, Yvette advocates that there are many benefits when wives involve themselves in the farming in some way. She confidently says, "If something should suddenly happen to Tinus, everything in our business could still carry on." She adds that, by being involved together, couples can support each other better. "When things are tough on the farm, the wife can better understand her husband's challenges and stress." She quickly interjects, " - and times are often tough in farming!"



Tinus and Yvette find that by working together they get a job done quickly and efficiently

A tough challenge of a different kind came across Yvette's path when, during the recent Rift Valley Fever outbreaks, she contracted the disease. Having inoculated all their sheep with live Rift Valley Fever vaccine annually since 1992, they suffered no losses or abortions during the outbreak. But they had bought

three stud rams that had become infected and whilst caring for the sick animals she contracted the disease too. She relates the severity of the illness: bleeding under the skin and from the nose and ears, and she has lost much of her eyesight. She acknowledges the grace of her Heavenly Father in sparing her life, and says how this ordeal taught her how dependent she is on the grace of Jesus every day. She also admonishes farmers to heed the severity of this disease and to inoculate their animals.

Despite the challenges she has faced, Yvette is optimistic about the future of farming in South Africa. She speaks positively about the relationships she built with the agricultural advisor and others from the Department of Agriculture, during the times that she was entered for "Female Farmer of the year" competition. Her competence was rewarded on both occasions: In 2003 she was named *Northern Cape Female Farmer of the Year: Top producer (Export market)* and in 2011 the categories had changed and she was runner-up in the category *Livestock*. She encourages communication, the building of relationships and working with the authorities, rather than resisting change.

In today's climate of constant change, the unchanging principles of hard work and building strong relationships are some of the things that will stand any farmer in good stead. And with Yvette's enthusiastic and committed approach to farming, the future looks as bright as the Karoo sun on a summer's day.

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