

Why Horns

By Robert L. Johnson

The IDGR has from the beginning advocated the retention of horns on animals born with them (that is, not polled} in all breeds, including dairy goats. This advocacy continues to surprise many breeders who have been exposed to the prevailing attitude, especially in dairy goats, that have persisted since the founding of the first dairy goat registry in America in 1904. So dominant has this attitude of ‘no horns’ been that breeders automatically assume that disbudding of kids is an essential, mandatory task, as basic to goat-keeping as regular hoof trimming, vaccination, and the provision of feed and housing; and today, horned dairy goats are disqualified from participation in goat shows sanctioned by the ADGA (American Dairy Goat Association.)

We do not know at the present time who started the idea that dairy goats should be hornless, or exactly when this happened. Certainly, horned dairy goats are the norm in all of the other countries of the ‘civilized’ world, and feeders, hay mangers and milking stands are designed for the accommodation of horns. We strongly suspect, however, that advocacy of hornless goats was initiated and perpetuated by persons who had keen interests in goat shows, combined with a wish to present animals that looked as different as possible from the common or ‘brush’ goats so despised by many people—including even dairy goat breeders! By removing horns, grooming, and close clipping of the natural hair coat, an artificially slick looking animal was obtained that in appearance was unlike the hairy, horned, brush goat of popular fiction. Virtually every magazine article and book that subsequently appeared on goat husbandry included routine instructions for clipping and disbudding, without any real analysis of the situation. Various ‘reasons’ were proffered—it was claimed that horned goats in close confinement would injure each other, and particularly the udders of lactating does; that they were more destructive to fences; that they tended to get caught in certain types of fencing; that they were injurious to people, etc. It is true that there is that occasional, if rare, circumstance where these claims were valid; the ‘exception proved the truth of the rule.’ But they are certainly not the norm. The bottom line was, and is, the fact that in some show enthusiasts’ eyes, the horned goat simply did not look as attractive, and hence horns had to go; proving once again that the influence of the show ring has, in the words of several persons of unquestionable wisdom and global experience, ‘destroyed (or seriously damaged) every breed of animal it has touched.’

Goats and sheep are not the only animals that possess horns. Fact: hundreds of types and breeds of animals carry horns, in many of which the size and mass of horns (or hornlike appendages such as antlers) is so great that it is unlikely that millions of years of evolution would have given rise to them if there were not very good reasons for their presence. Considering just their variety in shapes alone indicates that they are more important than we fully understand as yet. We do know a few of the rationales for horns, important both to the animals themselves as well as to their utility to their owners and the rest of Man. Some of these reasons for horns on goats are:

- (1) Horns are ‘social’ organs; goats use them to reestablish the herd ‘pecking order’ which they do on a near-continual basis. Removing the horns does not remove the genetic impetus to butt another goat, the goats’ normal social interaction, but does remove the protective effect of the horns, which are designed not only to give, but to receive blows, and protect the skull. (The outer visible layer of the horn is composed of protein, but it covers a hard bone core that fuses with the skull somewhere in the first year or two of life.)
- (2) Horns are thermoregulatory organs, regulating the temperature of the blood supply to the brain.
- (3) Horn size, shape, conformation, spacing, and direction of growth are important, under genetic

control, and subject to selection. In IDGR shows, horn conformation counts for points in the overall scorecard; and a hornless animal is as difficult to properly assess as a dairy doe with her udder amputated, or an Angora shorn of its fleece down to the skin.

- (4) Horns serve as indicators of protein metabolism and general feed conversion efficiency; the more massive the structure and the more and deeper the corrugations, the better the goat may assimilate and utilize its feed. They also indicate past experiences with serious illness.
- (5) Horns indicate the age of an animal; the 'annual rings' are usually easy to see.
- (6) Horns are convenient handles, enabling the herds person to control the goat's head when giving medications, dewormers, etc. and to lead a recalcitrant goat by; this is much less traumatic to the goat than the use of its ears for the purpose of control.
- (7) There is in dairy goat breeds a definite and established link between the incidence of hornlessness and hermaphroditism; and this link is believed to also exist in miniature breeds.
- (8) Horns have some utility as weapons; not in such degree as to protect the goat from all dog or other predator attacks, but small dogs and other animals can be definitely discouraged by an aggressive horned goat; at the least, horns may 'buy enough time' for the goat to fend off an attacker until help can arrive.
- (9) Horns are useful 'tools' to goats; they serve not only as 'back-scratchers' but also as working appendages to assist goats with small daily tasks. (Breeders may not consider this a 'plus factor' since goats are very adept at using their horns to open gates and feed bins, create and enlarge holes in fences, batter down boards in confined areas, etc.)
- (10) Horns are lovely; they are beautiful, intricate, interesting structures, just as seashells are. Before you are too quick to say that this is a matter of opinion, remember that there are tens of thousands of hunters, just for one example, who may profess to despise the miniature, dairy and common brush goats, but that expend much money and energy hunting wild deer, sheep and goats primarily for their antlers and horns!
- (11) And last but not least, horns have for countless centuries been used for the creation of many utilitarian articles and art objects, from the heads of canes, walking sticks, staffs, and shepherds' crooks, to elaborate snuff and tobacco humidors, smoking pipes, buttons, drinking vessels, dippers, combs, and a myriad other useful and decorative items. Many of these articles are now made of plastic. Plastic, which comes from petroleum, is not a 'renewable' resource; but goats can always grow more horns, given the chance.

With the domestication of goats we have learned that horns can cause some problems for us. Parents often fear that small children may be poked in the eyes by a horned Pygmy or Dwarf goat, suddenly raising its head while a child stands over it to pet it. Horns do make the design of feeders, hay mangers and milking stands a bit more difficult; keyhole feeders are obviously of no use with horned goats, and horned goats can be more destructive to fences and other structures. Hence there are individuals who prefer their goats to be hornless. This, best accomplished by disbudding of kids, is a choice each goat owner must make on his or her own, having, hopefully, carefully considered the list of rationales for horns given above. In a nutshell, the decision boils down to the fact that all the reasons for having hornless goats are based on our own convenience rather than the good of the goats themselves. The person who truly cares about goats will cherish and admire his animals with lovely, well-conformed horns, and take the few necessary measures to make their housing and feeding easier.