A Genetic Progressive Improvement In Foxes

PART IV

(G. Ennis Smith, Superintendent, Experimental Fox Ranch, Summerside, P.E.I.)

A discussion of the general principles underlying a progressive genetic improvement may give fox breeders a clearer insight regarding, on the one hand, the extent to which good judgment must be exercised to develop desirable types, and on the other the limit to which selection, no matter how judiciously carried out, can or will influence a progressive genetic improvement. A progressive genetic improvement will result from breeding along sound fundamental lines, but it must not be confused with the results obtained when breeding for a certain type, which may or may not be a progressive genetic improvement.

In the last few years there has been a swing in the market towards full silvers, which are most in demand at present, with the result that fox breeders have been breeding for pales and extra pales. Foxes in the ranches now present an entirely different picture than that of a few years previously. Considering the relatively dark type of foxes forming the breeding stock of the majority of ranches, when the market began to swing towards pales it is to the credit of fox breeders that they have risen to the occasion and in a very short period are producing a preponderance of pale and extra pale silvers to meet the demand. But that by no means can be claimed to be a progressive genetic improvement; it is simply a successful achievement to produce a type of foxes that the market demands.

Of course with sound breeding methods there should still be a progressive genetic improvement, independent of whether the fox breeders are attempting to breed either silvers or medium or dark medium foxes. The present drift being towards all silvers would not be expected to retard a true progressive improvement. If the market should swing in a few years towards dark or medium silvers, undoubtedly the fox breeders would rise to the occasion and would produce a prepondrance of dark and medium foxes, and by the time the breeding stock became mostly medium and dark silvers, the progressive genetic development would be no more or no less than if there had been a continued demand for medium and dark silvers, and the fox breeders had been continua ly striving to produce dark and medium silver foxes instead of all silvers.

Genetic Improvement

Contrary to what appears to be the general expectations breeding and producing prize winning foxes may not lead to any marked progressive genetic improvement. From for small Poland China swine of 1900 to 1910 the show ring called the lard type, but after that period began to swing to the other extreme in size and length to more of the bacon type. Authorities are not prepared to recognize that there was a progressive genetic improvement in swinging from one type to the other.

There is every reason to believe that with some of the outstanding champion foxes there has been an exceptional genetic improvement, but these can only be considered as freak cases; immediately that they are bred to other animals in the same or other herds the offsprings will approach the general level of the herds. Fox breeders may produce champion foxes, but that is not evidence of a progressive genetic improvement. How many cases are there of several successive generations winning grand-championships or even championships? That is to say, how many cases are there of a grand-champion fox producing a grand-champion son or daughter, and so on for two or three generations in succession? Despite the fact that champion females have produced numerous offsprings, and there are scores of such champion females, yet out of that vast number of offsprings produced from champion females, there are very few cases, if any, of champion females producing champion sons or champion daughters; they are more the exception than the rule. Champion males, being used polygamously, produce a great number of pups, among which it might be expected that there would be a number of champion foxes, yet there are very few, if any, of such cases.

Breeding To Type

It would not be feasible to attempt to sidestep the probability that this might be due to false standards used in judging the foxes. Whilst there may be many reasons to believe that those standards are still far from the ideal, yet the fact that champion or grand-champion silver foxes have failed to produce champion or grand-champion sons or daughters, as is often the case with other animals, it is questionable from a genetic standpoint if it can be in any way attributed to the standards by which the foxes are judged, at least when those standards have been impartially adhered to, but rather because a stage in the genetic progressive improvement with silver foxes has not been reached where the foxes can be expected to breed true to type. Slowly but surely that stage will eventually be reached if the fox breeders breed along fundamental lines.

Fox breeders, to produce a certain type, must continually be making a discreet selection in breeding their foxes, particularly with regard to producing any desirable types of silver, conformation and other favourable characters, but a progressive genetic improvement is more dependent upon breeding along sound, fundamental lines than on the judgment of the breeder. Breeding authorities will not recognize that the selection made by the breeders has or could influence to a pronounced extent the progressive genetic improvement that has taken place with different breeds of animals; in any case the effect would only be very slight. The individual inherited traits of foxes and of all mammals are innumerable. At the present time no actual measure has been made of the vastness of their number. At the best only a very few traits have been recognized, and probably there are less such traits with silver foxes than with other animals. Considering the small number of traits that could be selected and recognized in comparison with the host of unidentified characters, it could not be expected that selection would influence a progressive genetic improvement. Selection simply helps to breed to a type when that type has been recognized. Fox breeders can achieve a great deal by exercising their judgment discreetly, but many attempt the impossible and because they inevitably fail are inclined to blame the foxes rather than question their own ability and judgment. As the matings planned invariably did not produce the results to their expectations they have drifted into indifferent methods of breeding.

Improper Feeding

Examination of the pelts coming into the different co-operative marketing establishments clearly show the fact that numerous good foxes are ruined by improper feeding as would be expected the way the majority of foxes are fed at the present time, but that is not evidence that the foxes are getting worse, but that they have not been fed properly. One might just as well say that there is no improvement in automobiles because somebody tried to drive a 1937 model without oil. Further, the examination also shows that there is an enormous number of off-type pelts being placed upon the market during these last two years, which is evidence that the foxes are not being mated properly. The very best foxes will produce spurious offsprings if mated irrationally. One thing is quite certain that the majority of fox breeders are not giving enough thought and attention to a systematic method of mating. There are different reasons for this; one has a ready been mentioned. Many fox breeders appear to be quite satisfied if they can get their foxes mated, but on account of the wide use of commercial feeds many cannot even do that. Cases have been reported where fox ranchers have not been able to mate a single female with any of the males in their own ranches, and every female that came in heat had to be taken to other ranches to be mated. Other ranchers have a most vicious method of mating their foxes. They report they mate females as soon as they show the first signs of being in heat, and then mate them up to another dog the next day, and still another dog on the third day. There is probably no other livestock industry that would survive the haphazard methods of mating as that carried out in the silver fox industry. It is only because pelting gives the opportunity to immediately eliminate the misfits and by luck there happens to be sufficient fluke offspring to replenish the breeding stock, that the industry has not gone to the wall long ago.

Many ranches I have visited annually during these last ten years have made a remarkable improvement in their breeding stock, yet they have no system whatever in mating their foxes. I have suggested that it would well repay to work out some system and one replied, as far as they could see they might as well select their female pups by placing the numbers in a hat and draw also for the matings as going to a lot of trouble; if they can get their females mated they do not worry about anything else. Out of the six or seven hundred pups produced annually there had always been a sufficient number of fluke results not only to maintain but slightly improve their breeding stock. Their salvation has been breeding within their own breeding stock.

Pelt Quality

It has never been my contention that the quality of the pelts produced at the present time is on a par with the improvement that there has been in the breeding foxes. While I have felt that I must conscientiously state that from my observations there was an improvement in the general class of pelts marketed in recent years in comparison with those of ten and twelve years go, yet I must more emphatically set forth that the quality of the pelts coming unto the market is away below and no way near the standard of the breeding stock throughout the country. I am more than doubly conscious that in recent months I have visited ranches where out of common decency I have forced myself to tell the owners that their breeding stock was down to such a level that it was an injustice to other fox breeders to breed an inferior type of foxes, but they are the exception rather than the rule, and repeatedly in visiting the ranches I have been amazed at the general improvement in the breeding stock, and from the facts that I have seen and from those that have come to my attention I cannot begin in any way to condone with the contention that the foxes are getting worse. I am not the least surprised at the class of pelts that are being marketed at the present time. Receiving as I have recently nearly a score of foxes within a few days from two or three different ranches that have died after being fed commercial feeds, how can anything else be expected? I have previously mentioned the handicap fox breeders are working under with regard to their food supply. Even the very best breeders are only using half breeding methods, not to mention the general haphazard methods throughout the fox industry, which condit ons will inevitably lead to a wholesale production of spurious and off type pelts from real good foxes on account of the fact that through a lack of the proper standards the fox breeders have failed to cope with their breeding problems.

(To be Continued)

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ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

So far as Canada is concerned in the breeding of pigs there is a strong tendency to concentrate on the bacon type. While this type is not confined exclusively to any one kind, some breeds lend themselves moreso than others to the production of the class of bacon mostly in demand.

"It is true that the majority of farmers breed hogs for market, and so are not particular about registration, though a pure-bred boar should always be used, as he is more certain to have this type fixed by several generations of careful breeding and, consequently, is much more likely to give you more uniform results than a grade.

Pigs for breeding should always be selected from large litters of good uniform type. If this method is followed, one may be fairly certain in having large litters of good bacon type hogs.

Farmers who are near a stockyard for example may be able to purchase store pigs for feeding and finishing that will pay him some profit, but ordinarily it is better to breed your own pigs for feeding. In this way you can get hogs of a good quality and you can arrange the arrival of your litters to be fed off in six months and be marketable at a time when pork is likely to command the best prices.

There are two periods in the year when hogs have usually had a firm market and producers should aim to be ready for that market, and to be ready with hogs that have been fed so as to weigh approximately 200 pounds when six months old. Feeding hogs until they are eight or nine months old in order to reach market weights means losing profits that belong to the big feeder. A hog's time is worth a good deal when you are marketing him for pork. Keep him going every day.

The Canadian market for hogs is generally strong in August and September, and again in March and April. This is not an inviolate rule, and will vary to some extent, but to plan for delivery about these times has been a very good rule of recent years.

To meet the August and September market it will be necessary to have pigs farrowed in February and March. This is early and they require more attention, but it is usually only the things that require attention that pay dividends.

The March and April markets can be met by pigs farrowed in September and October. This is a good time for young pigs to arrive for winter feeding. Late litters in the spring mean also late litters in the autumn, if you are breeding twice a year, so that the man who drops back in this business finds himself just about a jump behind the top prices all the time.

Nothing is more fatal to farming than being behind with any farming operation. Keeping up with the procession is highly important to every man making a living on the land.

Hogs are produced quickly, and farmers frequently fancy they can get into them when the price is high and out when it drops. This is not good policy. Men who try this lose when going out, as it is only when the price has dropped that they quit, and they fail to get in again in time to make the profit on the rise in values.

It may pay to breed less extensively when hog prices begin going down, but by no means should a farmer go completely out. He should always keep up a fair stock, so when values begin to stiffen again he has sows enough on hand to get in strong on the upgrade in prices. As pork prices rise the demand for breeding stock advances very rapidly and the farmer who stayed in hogs is ready to reap a very considerable harvest in marketing breeding sows.

This is a feature of the business not to be overlooked, and by breeding purebred hogs of approved bacon type, a farmer always has a few gilts on hand that will sell well for breeding purposes. This is one of the advantages of purebred breeding.

In breeding pigs, as in every other phase of agriculture, the successful man is the one who follows up lines that make for good farming practice, and yield good average profits, and who keeps at it consistently.

Sheep play a useful part in farm economy, but be sure to have your farm fenced to hold them before you begin stocking up. As weed destroyers they are a distinct aid to clean farming, and will help to pay their keep by the destruction of these farm enemies.

Early lambs generally find a high market. If you can produce hothouse lambs for the Easter trade you will get a premium for them. This is not always possible, but lambs in February and March are quite easily taken care of. There is time to give them attention at that season. They get a good growth in the pens and when the grass comes the lambs are ready to feed on it, and the ewes flush up in their milk, which gives the lamb a double chance to grow and put on flesh. Lambs in this way are ready for a June or July market, bring a good price, and the ewes will have a chance to get in good flesh before the breeding season in the fall.

Securing the best market is a very important feature of farming, and times and seasons must be reckoned with when you are preparing any product for sale. Sheep that produce good mutton and fairly good wool are the kind to breed in Canada. You must select the breed that pleases you, and by all means get good individuals.

If you have a purebred flock, there are always a few sales to be made of breeding stock at prices well advanced over the mutton market. Do not keep too many ram lambs, register only the best, and be sure to identify your lambs early, so as not to be guessing at their parentage later.

And now a word about poultry. In poultry "the strain is the thing." Some breed may take your fancy and it is the one to use. Heavy laying strains have been developed in almost all the breeds and it will pay you to secure either eggs or baby chicks from such a strain. If you only get a few such birds to begin with, you can easily multiply them.

For farm flocks, the American or English breeds are preferable to the Asiatic breeds of poultry, as farmers want table birds as well as eggs. Rocks, Wyandottes, Orpingtons, Sussex or Rhode Island Red are good breeds for farm purposes.

The poultry on the farm can be made a very considerable asset, and should not be neglected. Turkeys, geese and chicks are also profitable, and they greatly improve the table fare of the farmer and his family, which is something that should by no means be overlooked."

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TIMELY NOTES ON TOPICS CONNECTED WITH Silver Fox Farming

The report of C. M. Lampson & Company silver fox sale, December 16-22, 1936, London, England, has come to hand and makes very interesting reading. Some months ago this old and reliable firm incorporated the fur department of Frederick Huth & Company to their own extensive undertakings. This removed a very aggressive and active fur consignment firm, but apparently it has not had a damaging effect on the market, as both the Hudson's Bay Company and Lampson's sales for December were strong, with approximately 90 per cent of offerings sold with rising prices.

Lampson's say: "We catalogued 21,143 skins and are pleased to report a large attendance of buyers and spirited competition for all color phases, especially the fine grades of clear, full-silvery and three-quarter silvery, as well as for the lower grades costing up to £6 each. It was noticeable that there was a much better demand for the dark and quarter-silvery kinds than has existed for some considerable time.

The quality and color were in average somewhat better than the previous season's skins and we are pleased to report that over 90 per cent was sold. In average the offering sold at 7½ per cent advance. In view of the strong demand still existing, we anticipate a satisfactory sale of silver fox at the auctions to be held in January."

Believing that nothing interests our readers more than the prices obtained for our products, the writer has gone to considerable trouble to figure out Lampson's statement in dollars and cents, and here are the results: BLACK & SLIGHT SILVERY—560 ordinary skins were sold at an average of $23.75; 86 of a better quality were sold for an average of $27.75, and 8 selects were sold for an average of $37.50 The highest price realized for this class of skin was $45.

QUARTER SILVERY—1,075 ordinary quality realized $29.75 average; 205 good quality averaged $32.75; 6 selects brought an average of $44, while the best specimen of the lot realized $57.50.

MEDIUM SILVERY—2,656 ordinary quality averaged $32.25; 350 good quality brought $41.75 average and 25 selects averaged $63.75. The highest priced skin in this lot realized $85.

THREE-QUARTER SILVERY — 4,734 ordinary quality averaged $34.50; 1,456 good skins averaged $45.25, while 51 selects averaged $74.50.

SILVERY—or as we know them, pale silvers—3,344 ordinary averaged $36; 1,309 good quality averaged $52.50 and 121 selects averaged $76.50.

INFERIOR AND DAMAGED — No less than 3,113 or over one-sixth of the entire offering came under this category. They averaged $18 each.

The total number of skins sold was 19,100 and these brought in Canadian dollars approximately $636,542 with the pound figured at $4.90. That would make the average of the entire offering about $33.32, from which would have to be deducted the commission for selling. If we disregard the inferior and damaged skins (total 3,113) and deduct the amount which they brought from the grand total of the sale, we find that the other types averaged $36.66.

Later on in these notes you will find the results of the Hudson's Bay Company sale which commenced in London on Wednesday morning last with an offering of over 30,000 skins, the largest that has ever been catalogued in the history of that Company. The retirement of Frederick Huth & Company means that the other auction houses will be called upon to market more skins and probably the increase of over 5,000 skins in this January sale of Hudson's Bay Company compared with a year ago is due to that factor. We hope so, rather than to an increase in production and marketing of silver fox furs.

Next week will see a continuance of silver fox sales with C. M. Lampson & Co. and Anning & Cobb doing the marketing. Lampson & Co. will handle a bigger quantity, with Anning & Cobb no doubt getting a larger patronage than last year due to the division of Huth's business.

From Winnipeg comes the following by Canadian Press. The figures are interesting as showing the relative quantities of silver fox and mink farmed there and prices obtained last season.

WINNIPEG, Jan. 4—(CP)—Thousands of little dark brown animals running about in pens on Manitoba fur farms attested today to the belief of fur farmers that mink soon will surpass silver fox in popularity and value.

There was a time when fox farming was the thing to do. Prince Edward Island breeders passed on their secrets to fellow breeders in other provinces, and for years the fox was king. Today, the mink threatened to oust the fox from its premier position.

Next May's Coronation in London has had no little to do with the growing popularity of mink. Prices for the fur have been steadily rising as the demand in London and New York increased.

In 1935, the latest figures available, 8,125 silver foxes were marketed in Manitoba at a price of $297,419. The 4,730 mink sold brought $46,372. With 514 breeders in the province, total fur production was valued at $351,076.

Though figures for 1936 will not be available for some time, indications were that fur farmers more and more were turning to mink to increase their returns. The number of breeders increased. Many of Manitoba's youth left the cities to seek their fortunes on mink farms.

Fur of Canada, published in Winnipeg, carries in its December front page a leader headed, "The Price of Mink Pelts," and says: "As forecast in these pages for several months back, the market for mink pelts this season is unusually high. Many breeders have reaped rich harvests and many new people are already being attracted to the industry because of the spectacular prices ruling this year. A few years ago it was common to hear the opinion expressed that the prices of silver fox pelts would always be high, but are they high today? It is not our function to be discouraging, but it is our duty to plead for an attitude of proportion and sanity. Let us regard the mink market as it may be in normal average years and base our calculations on those years. Two factors influence the price of mink this season. First, the Coronation, second, the discovery of mink as a youthful fur by the stylists, with consequent ascent and publicity of the article.

But the fur trade knows there is a definite limit to the outlet for fur coats that must be priced anywhere from $2,500 to $10,000. Taking these facts into consideration the mink farming industry may be still a good profitable one with pelt prices very much lower. There cannot be a Coronation every year. The interests of the style people will move to other articles. Many things can happen in the fur trade."

Anent the above warning to mink breeders not to lose their heads, we note where the mink breeders in the United States have already taken action through a recently formed National Association to organize a campaign of advertising directed to the wearers of mink and to appeal to the United States government to place a duty on mink pelts equal to that placed on silver foxes—50 per cent. If they can persuade their government to do this it will mean that the greatest market for mink in the world will be lost to Canada. At present not only are ranch raised mink sold there, but also large quantities of wild caught mink.

Hudson's Bay Company's silver fox sale in London was concluded yesterday afternoon as expected The offering of 30,700 skins could not be disposed of in the usual three days so the sale will continue on Monday, today being a holiday in the fur trade. All telegrams received regarding the sale are encouraging. For instance 80 per cent of the offering has been sold each day and declines and advances about balance. The bright clear silvers show strength, while the definitely faded low grades have declined about 4 per cent. The average of prices will therefore be about the same as December, which was a highly encouraging sale.

The writer had a letter from Archie H. Campbell of Saskatoon a few days ago stating that he has enlarged his ranch and will winter 57 females. On his recent visit to this province during the Charlottetown Fox Show he purchased from Ed Burleigh, Ellerslie, three males and seven females. These are doing fine and he is hopeful of a good increase. He has also purchased three male and seven female mink from the Homer Mink Farm, St Catherines, Ontario. Mr. Campbell says that the fox and mink show at Winnipeg was a great success and that Winnipeg is, in his opinion, the biggest mink centre in Canada.

Archie is a chap that is bound to be successful in fox farming because he has an excellent edueation and a faculty for getting to the bottom of things through persistence and capacity for research. His many friends here will remember him because of some months spent at Summerside with the Canadian National Fox Breeders' Association.

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