

Nigerian Dwarf Goats, What's all the Hubbub?

by Patricia Stewart
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“So what’s up with Nigerian dwarf goats? They seem to be everywhere. Why?” I’ve heard this from goat breeders for years. Until the Internet, Nigerian dwarves (ND) were a rare breed in the USA, developed from Pygmy stock. Since the Internet, they have taken over. But how did they get started and then become the phenomenon that they are now?

Until the 1970’s and early ‘80’s, ND’s were primarily zoo food. Since they were small, reproduce rapidly, and mature pretty quickly, they were a great choice for zoos to feed their lions, tigers, leopards, etc. These West African Dwarf (WAD) goats were imported and displayed in zoos. Around that time several individuals noticed that some West African dwarf goats came in two distinct forms. One was a heftier, stockier, and more meat-like goat. These became the Pygmy goat, easily adopted into small farms and menageries through the country.

Other WAD goats seemed to have longer, leaner necks, longer bone patterns and represented more of a dairy-type of goat. These became the foundation animals for the Nigerian Dwarf goats that were first accepted by the International Dairy Goat Registry in 1982. The registry accepted horned goats, with a standard height of 18” for does and 20” for bucks. The following year, the American Goat Society opened a herd book for the breed, using a 20” height for does and 22” for bucks. Their ideal height was 19 inches at the withers. The herdbook stayed open until 1997 though it had closed for a short time, and reopened to allow for a more diverse gene pool.

As different associations and registries developed, the standard has increasingly gotten taller. The Nigerian Dwarf Goat Association still uses the original AGS standard because they value a truly miniature goat. AGS and the American Dairy Goat Association, value more of a working miniature, so the



CH Castle Rock Tahitian Sunset 2019 National Champion ADGA Doe, (Photo by Steve Pope)

height as gotten taller in those registries.

Why the height changes? Partly due to outcrosses that were made in the development of the breed. Standard sized goats were crossed with ND’s and that gives us the tremendous range of colors that we see now. Also, veterinary science has finally recognized goats, so more research is done about their parasite reactions, diseases, and other issues that effect growth. Lastly, the nutrition of goats has changed dramatically from the days when they were fed horse feed and pasture, to now where there are specially formulated dairy rations, fermented alfalfa, and chelated minerals, all which make it easier for goats to be healthy longer.

When the breed first came to America,



Gladys Porter Zoo's Usiku, (Photo by Katrene Johnson)

the focus was on reproduction for the sake of available food. Once the goats became valued on their own, people began really focusing on production and conformation. In 1988, Kathleen Claps, owner of the Goodwood herd, put the first doe, Goodwood Rosa

Parks, on test. Rosa Parks earned her Dairy Star (*D since it was through AGS) with 427 pounds of milk, 25 pounds of butterfat and 20 pounds of protein as a first freshener. Today's top performers in the breed are milking over 2000 lbs, with more than 100 lbs of butterfat and 70+ lbs. of protein. That is a change over 33 years! That is amazing progress.

Visibly you can see the difference between the early ND represented by Gladys Porter Zoo's Usiku, (Photo bottom left by Katrene Johnson) one of the early registered stock, and recent ADGA National Champion Doe, (Photo top left by Steve Pope) CH Castle Rock Tahitian Sunset 2019 National Champion ADGA Doe.

While there are definite similarities, you can see the depth of barrel has increased, as has the circumference of the barrel. The udder is much more developed, though Usiku is a yearling in the first photo (opposite page bottom photo). Here is another picture of her, in milk (top middle photo this page). Certainly the udder has changed a great deal over the last 25 years.

So why are these little goats so popular? From a dairy standpoint they have superior milk solids and butterfat, making their milk sweet and rich, wonderful for cheesemaking. While these does above are



Usiku, Photo from Ruminations 1995

single colored, they come in a wide variety of color patterns, none of which is supposed to have anything to do with their value as a dairy goat - but tell that to the Internet. They are prolific, able to be bred year round, with freshenings yielding 1-6 kids, though recently 7 kids have been delivered from several different does.

When the first ND showed in the ADGA National Show it was met with disdain, until they took the ring. Suddenly people who had been downplaying the breed were seeing truly wonderful representations of the dairy goat, in a more manageable size. For older goat breeders the chance to continue in the goat world without having to deal with full sized Nubians or Saanens sounded appealing.

Lastly, ND's love people. While I know of some nasty ones, generally they

are relatively easy keepers who love kids, their owners, and attention. They are portable and are now found in several cities throughout America. They make a great little backyard milkers, and are perfect 4H projects.

I got into Nigerian dwarfs because I wanted to help develop a breed. Now that breed has the highest number of registered goats of any breed in the US. They have gone from obscure to popular, all within my lifetime. An amazing feat for four little hooves, times many.

Pat Garland Stewart, Raised in the suburbs of Detroit, Pat Garland Stewart found her home in the barn of several farms, finally her own. She started Hames & Axle Farm as a way to teach children where their food came from, and now uses those skills to teach people how to care for their goats, support local farms and uses her Surfing Goat Soaps to bring it home to her customers. Hames & Axle Farm started in 1996 and has been raising Nigerian dwarf goats ever since.

The Kentucky Sheep and Goat Check-Off Program began

in 2010 and collects \$.50 for every \$100 worth of sheep and goats sold in the Commonwealth. According to Kentucky law, Check-Off funds must be used for the purpose of promoting the increased use and sale of sheep and goats.

TO DATE, CHECK-OFF HAS PROVIDED:

- **\$50,000 in New Farmer Recruitment loans** have been given to 25 new/beginning producers in Kentucky since 2012
- **\$50,000** given for special projects to help producers increase marketing efforts throughout the state since 2012
- **\$10,000** spent in promotion of sheep & goat products in 2018

KY Sheep & Goat Check-Off Sponsors the Try Something Different Tonight marketing campaign

of people who tasted lamb and goat products: **26,000**
 # of people who have learned about products and cooking techniques: **5 million**



To learn more about the Kentucky Sheep and Goat Check-off Program visit

www.kysheepandgoat.org/Check_Off.html

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