

BREEDING STRATEGY FOR TANS

By. Joseph A. Kim

[Note: The following article was originally printed in the 4th edition of the ATRSC guidebook. Permission has been granted from the author for this article to appear on the ATRSC website. While we encourage dissemination of this article for educational purposes, written permission is necessary if you wish to publish this article on your own website, newsletter or any other publication.]

The Tan fancy has experienced substantial improvement in the last decade. Markings have become cleaner, tan factor has become deeper and body type has become more uniform. It is up to the fancier to continue and improve the breed by placing more emphasis on continuing areas of weakness. With periodic changes made to the point allocation in the Tan Standard of Perfection the fancier has come to transform the Tan into an attractive and stunning animal.

Linebreeding: The Key to Consistent, Predictable Success

For the novice breeder just getting started with the Tan breed, it is important to remember that success with the Tan rabbit is no different than with any other breed. Line breeding is an essential ingredient to success. It is true that an exceptional animal may be produced through a wide out cross. However, in succeeding generations the ability for the breeder to maintain consistency is dependent on limiting the gene pool in order to fix the strong traits and cull out the weak ones. While periodic outcrosses are necessary for long-term improvement, the continued outcrossing will introduce too many alleles and produce a Tan herd lacking in uniformity and genetic potency. When a breeding program based on multiple outcrosses produces an outstanding Tan, the ability of this animal to consistently pass long its strengths becomes heavily handicapped. Linebreeding will breed success, consistency and predictability. Furthermore, experience will also tell you that an exceptional individual out of an otherwise mediocre litter will not end up doing much for the breeding program. Such animals make better show animals than breeding stock. It is best to keep animals which are out of exceptional litters. They tend to be more potent breeders.

It is helpful to maintain different lines in order to improve the herd and maintain quality within the Tan herd. Provided the breeder has adequate time and space available a fancier should maintain a line for I) Tan factor II) Type III) Chest and IV) Fur.

Line 1: Tan Factor

The intensity and uniformity of tan factor accounts for 15 points of the Tan Standard. Achieving deep, rich tan coloring is often the most difficult attribute to improve and perfect. Most judges as well as breeders know the psychological impact of turning a Tan on its back to discover a deep, intense mahogany color which starts at the jowl and continues into the tail. Tan factor is often spoiled by I) a lack of intensity, II) the lack of

uniformity and III) any lightness or streaking in the groin areas, hind legs, crotch and tail. The fancier should strive to carry a deep and intense tan factor all the way from the jowl into the tail itself. We still see too many animals manifesting a deep, even belly color only to find a white or very light tail and crotch area. Deep, intense tan factor is a quality that cannot come out of a herd lacking the attribute. If you do not have it, you will not get it from your existing stock. You will need to resort to an outcross to attain the highly desired, deep, rich tanning. When introducing a new bloodline to improve tan factor the fancier should remember to maintain a line specifically for this trait so he can go back to the color line as he is attempting to improve the other areas.

Line 2: Type

Tan type is often difficult to describe. Even the Tan Standard states that the Tan has a type “unlike any other breed.” However, as it accounts for 25 points of the Tan Standard, it is a key element in breeding a winning herd. The most important element in breeding for Tan type is balance. No longer are we breeding the short-limbed, cobby Tan that we saw two decades ago.

The Tan should have a sleek, elegant appearance. It should exhibit medium-fine bone and possess a good length of body in order to exhibit a full-arch spine which is deep, round and gracefully arched from the nape of the neck to the base of the tail. Viewed from above, the body should taper slightly and smoothly from the shoulder to the hips exhibiting a smooth transition from the shoulders into the midsection and finally into the hindquarters. Viewed from behind, the body should appear to have more depth than width.

The Tan should have good extension of its front and rear limbs. The legs should carry the body up off the table to show daylight. The back legs should be set as wide as the body and carried parallel. When it is moving naturally on the judging table, the Tan should appear light on its feet and exhibit fluid, graceful movements.

An animal that is too long in body will lack the adequate depth of body due to a flat spine. An animal that is too short in body will appear too short and cobby. We still see animals on the show table which are either too large or too small. In order to find the correct balance, one should first look at an individual animal's bone. Breeding a Tan that is heavy boned will result in a Tan that is too wide. These large animals lack the elegance and grace of a slender, deep bodied Tan which will exhibit significantly more daylight under the animal as it moves about on the show table. A breeder should also avoid producing animals that are too fine in bone. An animal that is overly fine boned will often appear too narrow in the shoulders. These animals will show a lot of taper between the shoulders and hindquarters when viewed from above and will often appear racy. The definition of ideal Tan type has long been and probably will continue to be in debate both here in the U.S. and the U.K. Type is an important consideration on the show table and the fancier should remember what he is aiming to achieve when planning a breeding program.

Line 3: Chest

A clean, wide chest can be a difficult marking to maintain consistently on the Tan. The chest edges should form a clear, straight and distinct line separating the body color from the tanning. Too often we see animals, especially seniors who have a salt and pepper colored chest giving off a dirty and smutty appearance. Many Tans with narrow or indistinctly marked chests also lack a cleanly defined collar, which should be visible as the animal is moving about.

Many tan fanciers have come to accept that chest edges will fray and narrow as an animal approaches 6 months or so. Strict culling and the use of those individuals with extra wide and clearly defined chests will allow the breeder to eventually rid of most chest problems. It is possible to maintain a clean wide chest almost indefinitely on older animals, especially bucks. One exception to be noted is that does will oftentimes pull their chest fur in building a nest. Repeated litters will sometimes result in narrowing or indistinctly marked chest which will result in a salt and pepper appearance. While these does will not win on the show table, they should not be culled for any weakness in the chest provided their chest was sound prior to kindling.

When a tan approaches the age of fourteen (14) weeks or so, the fancier should strictly cull out any animals exhibiting any frayed chest edges. It is almost unheard of that the chest marking will widen and clear up in its demarcation line as the animal grows past 14 weeks of age. While some juniors may exhibit chests appearing to be too wide, the fancier must realize that as the Tan mature its shoulders will broaden and the chest will proportionately narrow to balance with the rest of its body.

Line 4: Fur

Tan fur is a vital component of creating an ideal Tan. While the standard only allocated ten (10) points to fur in reality it can account for far more. An ideal Tan coat should be short in length, silky fine in texture and dense enough to provide a snappy flyback. A short coat sits close to the body and lies flatter than a long coat. This will provide for much crisper and sharper markings than a long coat. This Tan will go through four (4) different types of coats in its lifetime. The first coat is its baby coat which will be very soft and silky in texture but lacks density and flyback. At around 10-14 weeks the Tan will come into its junior prime and exhibit a coat that will be short, silky and dense with tremendous sheen and gloss. No other breed including the Satin can match the slickness and sheen a Tan will possess at this stage. This junior prime coat will usually hold for about another 6-10 weeks depending upon the strain and other variable conditions such as weather and temperature. While some believe that a Tan looks best in its junior prime due to the slickness of its finish, the deepest tan factor will be achieved in its senior coat. A Tan will come into its first senior prime at around 5 ½ - 6 ½ months. As the Tan matures into adulthood, its fur becomes denser, slightly longer in length and thicker in diameter. Thus, while the Tan will still exhibit a short, silky coat with snappy flyback, it will lack the tremendous amount of “wet” sheen exhibited by the same animal in its junior prime.

Nevertheless the underside tanning will appear much deeper and redder at this stage in its life and the body is more developed giving the animal a more complete appearance. While some Tans can be shown into an age well beyond 8 or 9 months, such animals will lack the flash that a younger adult will exhibit. As the Tan grows into its second senior coat, the coat will grow in longer and coarser. Some will continue to exhibit animals well into this phase of its life. I prefer to keep the animals of this age at home. This gives an opportunity for the younger stock to exhibit their talents and also protects these valuable breeders from contracting any disease from other animals they are exposed to at shows.

Linebreeding: Putting the Puzzle Together

If you wish to maintain a desired trait within your herd, you must resort to a breeding program which involves mating on a line of succession. This is the only way to develop consistency in your herd and gauge your level of improvement. Such a program will involve several animals each will be carrying a desired trait. Does are equally if not more important than the bucks in such a breeding program. While many will keep and breed with a mediocre quality doe and often refer to such an animal as a "brood quality doe," experience has taught me that a doe that produces healthy, quality youngsters is the most valuable animal in the herd. Such a doe can be bred to several different bucks at different times and each time produce youngsters carrying the doe's attributes as well as passing on the new desired qualities of the buck. This is essential to improving your herd. I like to keep replacement breeders out of litters which exhibit quality AND uniformity. Chances are that an outstanding animal from an otherwise mediocre litter will not prove to be an excellent breeder. My breeding program utilizes does to carry the desired lines such as color, type, markings, fur, etc. My herd bucks are balanced animals resulting from the blending of two lines and carry two or more of the desired traits for which I am breeding. I constantly mix and match each of my desired lines in order to produce a new generation of animals that are equal to or better than their parents. Sometimes I succeed and other times I will produce a litter of inferior animals. The secret is to breed often and maintain excellent records and your odds of predicting successful matings will improve dramatically. Tans which have been linebred will prove to breed true. Remember to resort to an outcross only if your breeding program has failed to produce the traits you desire.