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Ennis zebu fancier shows her little dogies at the State Fair

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ENNIS — She calls herself “the zebu whisperer,” and watching the members of Dottie Love’s modest herd of miniature zebu cattle following her like puppies, it’s hard to argue the point.

Caesar, her younger bull, sidles up so she can scratch the top of his broad head. He stands motionless during her ministrations, almost purring with contentment.

Miniature zebu can get very attached. Given their size — a full-grown bull usually measures 42 inches or less at the hip, and cows are smaller still — it’s easy to think of them as pets, “like dogs with horns,” Love said.

“They’re my babies.”

Love brought four of her animals to compete at the State Fair of Texas, although she said such shows are mostly about spending time with other fans of miniature zebu. Still, it’s always nice to win a championship.

Miniature zebu look just like the 90 or so other varieties of zebu cattle native to India and Africa, except they are “naturally small,” she said.

“In the east, all cattle have humps and all are zebu, and they’re bred for different purposes — as draft animals, for milk,” Love said. “In a way, they are like Texas longhorns — they can fend for themselves.

“We think ... [miniature zebu] came to America as novelties, for circuses and things, sometime in the early 20th century.”

Now they’re gaining in popularity because of their size. Zebu don’t rely on bales of hay or grain troughs for the bulk of their sustenance, Love said. They wander and graze, although Love does give them an occasional grain treat.

And maybe because many people treat them like pets, they get bigger here than in other parts of the world, where food is harder to find and work responsibilities might be greater.

“We have a friend from Africa with zebu, and when he came to visit, he said, ‘These are fat cows!’”

But for Love and other fans of miniature zebu, the animals will be with them for decades. So relationships develop.

“Temple Grandin is my hero,” Love said of the Colorado college professor, expert on animal behavior and autism activist. “I cobbled together things from the horse whisperer guy and the cow whisperer, and now when I sell [a calf], I promise the people that in two or three days, it will be standing there looking at them as if it’s saying, ‘What are we going to do today?’”

The day before the fair opened, after leading her young bull and his full sister up a short flight of steps to the cattle barn at Fair Park,

Love looked around and decided there might be 20 to 25 zebu breeders at this year's competition.

That makes this a big show where she'll see many close friends — some for the first time.

"These are people I know from our email client list and social media," she said, "but I never meet them until I go to a show. And most of us have never shown cattle before."

Unlike the big-money competitions involving more traditional cattle breeds, "the most you can win is \$150," Love said, "and you get a banner, which is priceless.

"And last year, we got belt buckles," she said. "The bling was very popular."

She still isn't comfortable in the show ring — "I get too nervous" — but Love said her cattle know exactly what to do in the ring, "and when one of mine wins, I'm just so happy."

Still, none of the breeders raising miniature zebu see them as moneymakers, or a full-time business, Love said. "Almost all of us have day jobs."

Hers is teaching computer graphics at Hill College, in both Hillsboro and Cleburne. Even though she can trace her farming family back five generations in Hill County, Love's dad joined the Navy, and the family moved to New Orleans, Memphis and finally Chicago before he retired and came home.

Her love of cattle is part of her roots, though she never really spent much time with them until she discovered miniature zebu. Now she loves to study them.

"Cows are hierarchical and herd animals. The boss is always a female," Love said. "She tells the others what to do, and you don't see the others try to take that [authority] away. There's no telling who is going to be the boss. And here they have lieutenants" who enforce the rules of the herd.

"The bulls, they think, 'I'm the bull and I'm in charge here.' But it's really one of the females," she said.

Love practices what she calls "applied animal ethology." When she and her husband updated their home, they added a big window in the dining room that looks out over the yard so they can watch their cattle. And when she's out with them, one of her many dogs might station itself by the window to keep an eye on Love.

Her research into the breed has raised some possibilities for the future, she said.

Some breeders are crossing miniature zebu with some of the smallest European cattle types, she said — "a miniature Hereford is what that breed looked like in the '50s. And there are the Dexters, small but very broad."

The goal is to create a type of beef cattle that would produce a side of beef more in line with modern needs — smaller, for smaller families.

But she has a different plan.

"I'm going to milk them one day. ... There's a protein in the zebu milk that makes it OK for people who are lactose-intolerant" or have other milk-related problems, Love said.

"I plan to have a zebu milk empire," she said, "but I'm not sure the cows are on board yet with that idea."

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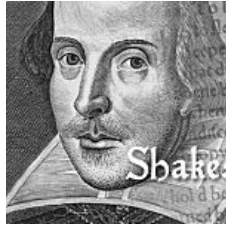
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