

Here's a switch. . .

South African on American fact-finding junket

By Jim Cotton
Editor

He speaks in terms of "rands" and occasionally must become bilingual. His office much of the time is the "rostrum" from where he must be adept at marketing all manner of "pedigreed" species. He's an auctioneer, a South African auctioneer in fact.

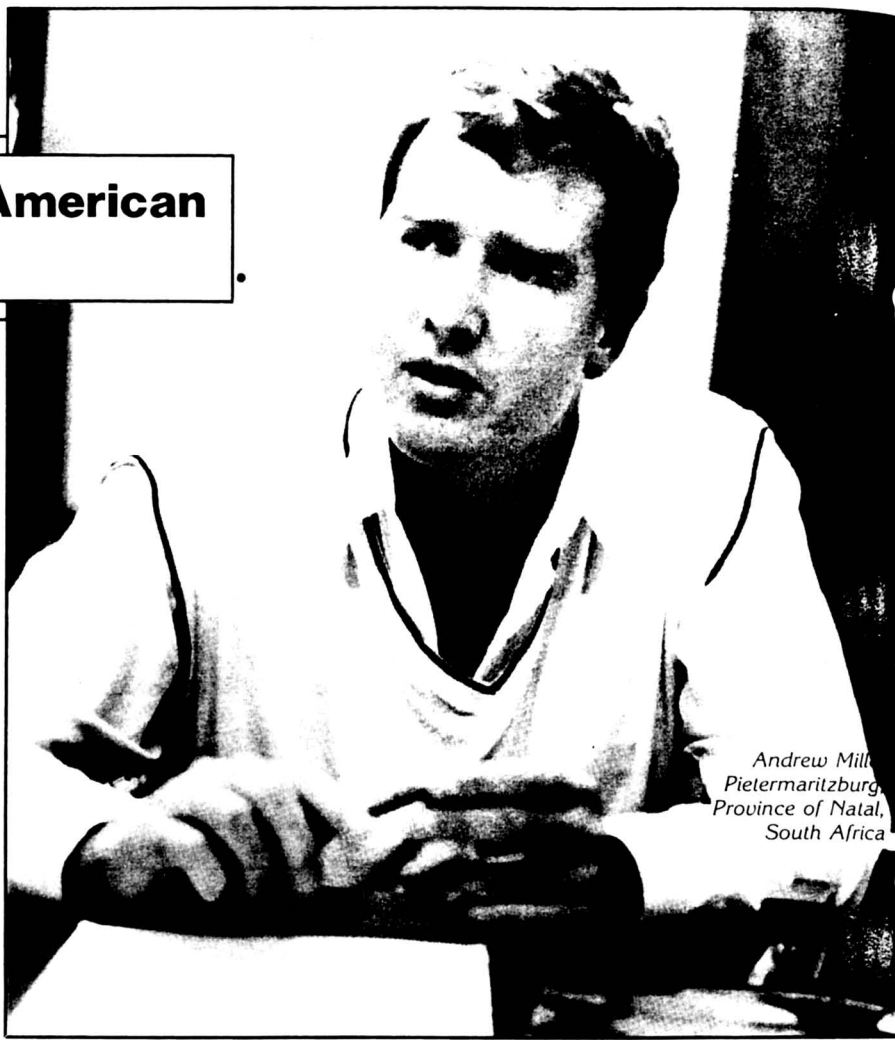
Andrew Miller included the American Angus Assn. headquarters as one of his many stops during a five-week tour of American livestock herds and marketing facilities. Arriving in St. Joseph, Andrew was fresh from a week on the road with familiar Angus auctioneer Mike Jones of West Point, Ga., attending and observing purebred sales on the Atlantic seaboard and other coastal areas.

"Last week was a great week. We've exchanged a lot of ideas with Mike."

Miller also lectured during the course of his eastern leg of his visit to a class in agricultural marketing at The Pennsylvania State University, made a number of herd visits, and climbed into an American auction block, selling the last two lots at the Mason-Dixon sale last October.

"Tom Burke was telling the crowd, 'We've got the greatest auctioneer in all of South Africa here with us today.' And I was saying, 'Tom, don't do that because that's not the way it is. I'm still learning—I'm just a country boy.'"

Andrew Miller represents the purebred or "pedigreed" segment of a massive cooperative there in the South African province of Natal known as Stock Owners Co-operative Limited. This firm, a product of the worldwide



Andrew Miller
Pietermaritzburg,
Province of Natal,
South Africa

depression of the 1930s, is a conglomerate structure incorporating all the services a stockgrower might need. It employs a field service for consultation, an abattoir for butchering, a research farm, a sale and marketing agency, a property management and real estate firm, and serves as lending institution. It now employs a staff of more than 340 dedicated to the welfare of the livestock farmers of Natal Province. Natal, Andrew explained, is one section of South Africa, equating it to approximately the size of Great Britain and facing the Indian Ocean. Durban is its major port city.

Andrew's department of Stock Growers is devoted to "stud-auctioneering" and the buying and selling of pedigree livestock through auctions or private treaty sales. In this capacity, he's sponsored by the company to study U.S. marketing methods as well as observe the performance

programs of various breed organizations. His mentor, Dallas Kemp, preceded him in 1984 touring the United States and adopting some of the auctioneering methods used here.

One innovation Kemp brought back to province sales was the two-man approach.

"In the past, the auctioneer opened the sale, sold the sale, read the performance data, and introduced the lot numbers. Plus the auctioneer had to spot the bids himself. When you have four or five hours of this on the rostrum, you don't want to talk to anyone afterward as the concentration has been terrific. When Dallas came back in 1984, he introduced the method where one person introduces the animal and the other man sells it. We're probably the only auction company in South Africa that does this. We sell for an hour at a time, because that's about all the best concentration you can get.

With some of the Association staff at "break"



Visiting with Dick Spader

Dallas will do the commentaries, and I'll do the selling, then we'll switch. I just can't believe how much more quickly our sales are moving. And, we're not leaving too many rands (dollars) out on the benches. It eases the responsibility because if it's a bad sale, we're both up there doing the talking. Dallas has been a pioneer with it, and other companies have been favorably impressed in the way it goes.

"Dallas and I have a very good understanding. We know when we've got to run it a bit, talk it a bit, and look around for a bid. A lot of people don't realize it when we're selling we're also talking to each other at the same time. We've got a system that signals if we've got to back-track a little or go ahead."

Another contrast between the South African and American auctioneering is the method of starting the bid. American auctioneers are in the practice of leading the bid or as Andrew described it, "calling for the next bid, whereas in South Africa, we take the bid and simply announce it as current."

He thinks the ringman system of the U.S. tradition could be helpful in his homeland. There, "spotters" are kept in position throughout the crowd, but they won't work the buyers as American ringmen will. Encouraging the bidding would ease the pressure on the auctioneer, Andrew thinks, and he hopes to direct more emphasis on that strategy when he returns. "It

would reduce the workload even more."

Another item of interest to him is training. "There are no auction schools in South Africa. That's why I'm going down to Kansas City to visit the auction school there as I think there's a great need for one with us."

Confidence is a vital matter, both Andrew and Mike Jones agree. "Buyers at a commercial sale buying slaughter cattle day in and day out will try to destroy the auctioneer's confidence in the animal and the price so they can get the animal as cheaply as possible. At a purebred sale, it's the other way around. Instead of the auctioneer struggling to retain his own confidence, he's trying to win the confidence of the commercial bull buyer who may only attend one or two sales a year and is not accustomed with the auction method. Once you've won the confidence of the commercial buyer, you come across as genuine and honest as possible but at the same time, you're helping the seller get top dollar."

As South Africans speak both English and afrikaans, Andrew must be prepared to deal with another language. "I do speak it. Most people can switch from one to the other quite comfortably. I can understand the language perfectly, but there are some days when I can be fluent and others when I feel stilted. And the numbers are all back to front in afrikaans. For example, they'll say five and 20 for 25. Even afrikaans

auctioneers will say the numbers in English as it's less awkward."

A bilingual situation creates its greatest challenge, however, through the added expense for advertising. "There are afrikaans journals and English journals. The expense in getting material translated simply doubles the cost. It's a significant problem. Don't go bilingual if you have the choice!"

Tongue-twisting enough auctioneering in one language, one would think, without switching between two while trying to keep the sale paced and buyers and sellers satisfied.

As to his impressions of American Angus, Andrew Miller found things here "exciting." Everything is so progressive and aggressive here. There's been a lot of U.S. semen coming into South Africa. Some of our breeders are not performance-oriented but rather pick a bull because it's American and the photograph looks good.

"Over there, it's the medium-frame bulls that win the shows. Commercial buyers have backed away from extreme bulls of the breed.

"Overseas judges have a lot of clout regardless of breed, especially if that judge is used to frame and scale extremes. Our commercial men have seen through that straightaway. They won't use that type. It's been difficult in recent years to try and draw a mean.

"I've learned a great deal already," Miller says of his American trip.

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