

# Dutch duo ensure Amber Link's successful South African return

In the 1980s the DeKalb layer breed held a strong international position and dominated the South African market. Then everything changed. Now the DeKalb Amber Link is making a comeback in South Africa and recently International Hatchery Practice visited Beskop Layer Chicks in Potchefstroom to find out more.

The company is run by Jan Serfontein and his son Jannie. The family's interest in poultry started some 70 years ago when Jan's father, Petrus, who was, at one time, president of the South African Poultry Association, pioneered the breeding of table egg birds in South Africa with birds such as the Rhode Island Red, New Hampshire and Barred Rock.

In fact, he imported the first Gamble incubator into South Africa having met the company at the then Johannesburg Poultry Show in the late 1930s.

## Early success

This venture into table egg layer breeding was a success, but, eventually the international breeders with their superior breeding resources and ability to fulfil bigger orders took over the market and the Serfonteins' fortunes in poultry declined.

Then followed a period when the business



**The hatchery in the old army canteen.**

operated as a broiler hatchery and used Ross parent stock. This was in the late 1980s and 90s.

By 2000 Jan felt the time was right to return to the egg laying sector. Having looked at potential partners Jan Serfontein visited Hendrix Breeders in the Netherlands and a rapport was established between Jan and Hendrix's owner Thijs Hendrix.

An empathy developed because at that time Hendrix was not the major company it is today but Jan saw in the Hendrix team young, capable poultrymen whose thinking and vision coincided with his own.

In the DeKalb Amber Link, which had recently joined the Hendrix layer portfolio, Jans and Jannie saw a bird that would be good for the South African market.

This was because it produced a good sized egg and had a large end of lay bird which, for the independent table egg producers, provides a good income as these birds are sold live into the local African communities where they are very popular in the pot.

The first parent flock of Amber Link was placed in 2004 to test the market. Initially, orders were slow, but as soon as the egg

farmers heard that it was delivering, from the few who had been brave enough to

*Continued on page 9*

## Jannie Serfontein checking eggs.





**SmartSet setters with inspection window.**

*Continued from page 7*

place the 'unknown' layer, the orders started to flow.

This was a success so the following year Amber Link grandparents were placed and a new business based on the Amber Link was launched on 10th June 2005.

Nowadays a grandparent flock is placed every six months and there are some 45,000 parent stock birds on the ground.

The business can provide up to 70,000 day old Amber Link pullet a week in orders that range from 10 to over 10,000 chicks.

The business focuses on day olds and does not produce point of lay pullets as some table egg stock providers do because Jan strongly believes that he should not compete against his own day old customers with whom the company cooperates to ensure the table egg sector gets Amber Link birds as and when required.

For this venture, the Serfonteins have an unusual site – they purchased an army train-



ing centre that was surplus to the South African government's requirements.

Several accommodation blocks were converted into breeder housing and the canteen and kitchens were converted into the hatchery. All of these were connected by high quality roads.

### **Incubator choice**

When it came to choosing incubators to place in the old army canteen the Serfonteins looked closely at the options available in the international market place. Eventually they decided on Smart setters and hatchers from Pas Reform.

This decision was based on the machine itself plus the support and guidance the local and Dutch Pas Reform teams provided when different options were being evaluated.

The Potschefstroom area is some 1450m

above sea level and has a high humidity and this, plus the large egg size of the Amber Link, presented some interesting challenges for the Pas Reform machines.

These were quickly overcome by Jannie Serfontein and the Pas Reform team by applying basics and fine tuning the Smart-Hatch machines.

They ended up with a slightly lower set temperature in the setters and at transfer and they achieved the desired weight loss of 12.0-12.5%. In addition, some subtle changes to air flow were made.

Now hatches of fertile nicely over 95% are regularly achieved with good chick quality.

So, why is the Amber Link such a popular bird in the South African independent table egg sector?

First and foremost, it is a hardy and robust bird and, as Jan describes, it is a forgiving bird capable of coping with the high temperatures, poor quality nutrition and disease

*Continued on page 10*

**SmartHatch hatchers with inspection window.**





*Continued from page 9*

challenges that are often encountered in this country.

In addition, it produces a lot of eggs of the right size (60-62g) for the local market and quickly moves from medium to large eggs.

The bird has very good persistency of lay, with flocks being quite capable of going through to 83 weeks, and has a low level of reject eggs.

Finally, there is a very good live bird market for end of lay birds and culls in the local black communities.

## Future goals

Currently the Serfonteins have some 15-18% of the table egg day old market and their goal is to double this over the next few years.

At the moment they distribute day olds throughout The Orange Free State, the Northwest Province and Northern Cape with some orders going further afield.

These are vaccinated in accordance with customers' wishes which, in some instances, means day old vaccination with an oil adjuvanted Newcastle disease vaccine as this disease still challenges table egg flocks in some parts of South Africa.

The breeder flocks are salmonella and mycoplasma free and comply with the high health requirements needed for export.



**The building earmarked for the new hatchery in 2010.**

Some exports have occurred to Lesotho and Mozambique but Jan has defined the local South African market as the number one goal!

The present hatchery has served the formative period of Boskop Egg Layers very well but now demand for the Amber Link has meant that it has outgrown the old army canteen and early next year the hatchery

will be moving into a larger building on the same site and the number of SmartSet setters and SmartHatch hatchers from Pas Reform will be increased.

This hatchery will also be more automated in order to reduce labour requirements.

International Hatchery Practice will look forward to continuing this story next year – when the new hatchery is operational. ■