

GOAT BREEDERS ASSOCIATION OF ZIMBABWE

Illustrated breed book

the

Matebele

INDIGENOUS

An illustrated history, breed standard and husbandry guide for the large indigenous goat of south-western Zimbabwe (also Matabele or Ndebele goat)

GBAZ breed book, first edition, 2026

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KEY FACTS

Type	Indigenous, southern African lop-eared family; medium to large frame
Range	Matabeleland North and South, parts of Midlands and Masvingo
Mature does	About 39 kg on station; 30 to 35 kg in communal flocks
Mature bucks	50 to 55 kg on station
Birth weight	2.5 kg (905 records, Matopos)
Litter size	1.54; 62 percent twins; 160 kids born per 100 does mated
Height at withers	57 cm in communal flocks; 65 to 70 cm well managed
Standard	First written standard by GBAZ with the VALUE project, 2021; registrar: Zimbabwe Herd Book

CHAPTER 1

Origin and history

The Matebele goat, also written Matabele and sometimes called the Ndebele goat, is the large-framed, lop-eared indigenous goat of south-western Zimbabwe. It belongs to the same southern African lop-eared family of goats from which the Boer Goat, the Kalahari Red and the Savanna were later selected in South Africa, and it is the northern representative of that family, found across Matabeleland North and South, parts of the Midlands and Masvingo, and in adjacent areas of Botswana and the Limpopo valley. The name records the Ndebele people who settled the region in the 1830s, but the goat type is older, descended from the lop-eared goats that spread through southern Africa with pastoral communities over many centuries.



Dawn over savanna grassland in Hwange, Zimbabwe: Matebele goat country.
Photo: Birger Strahl, Unsplash

Unlike its South African relatives, the Matebele goat has never been through a formal selection programme. What shaped it was Natural Regions IV and V: low, erratic rainfall, long dry seasons, thornveld and mopane browse, heat, ticks and heartwater, and the need to walk far for food and water. The result is a goat that is prolific for an indigenous type, kids without assistance, rears twins on the veld and tolerates drought and disease that would kill an exotic goat, while carrying a larger frame than the Mashona goat of the north.

The breed has been studied for longer than any other goat in Zimbabwe. An experimental flock of indigenous Matebele goats has been kept at Matopos Research Station near Bulawayo for about a century, and work there by Arrowsmith and Ward in 1981 and Tawonezvi and Ward in 1986 gave the FAO breed description of 1991 its figures for birth weight, growth, litter size and fertility. Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu followed the weight and body condition of does in communal flocks through their breeding cycle in 2000, and studies on the effect of kidding season showed how much the dry season costs a doe and her kid. In 2023 Moyo and colleagues at Lupane State University published a morphometric and morphological baseline for 120 communal Matebele goats, and found them lighter and smaller than the research-station figures, a result they cite as the case for structured selection.

Recognition as a breed came in 2021, when GBAZ, with the EU-funded VALUE project under the Zimbabwe Agricultural Growth Programme, published the first written breed standards for the Matebele and Mashona goats, compiled by the indigenous goat specialist Joe Sikosana. The standards were written for conservation, selection and the recognition of indigenous stud breeders, and the 2025 GBAZ Goat Indaba in Bulawayo was devoted to them.

The southern African lop-eared family of goats

Type	Where	Status
Matebele goat	South-western Zimbabwe, eastern Botswana	Indigenous; standard 2021 (GBAZ and VALUE)
Tswana goat	Botswana	Indigenous; same family
Boer Goat	Eastern Cape origin, worldwide	Improved meat breed; standard 1959
Kalahari Red	Northern Cape and Namibia origin	Improved meat breed; status 1998
Savanna	Northern Cape origin	Improved meat breed; society 1993

CHAPTER 2

Breed standard

The GBAZ and VALUE standard of 2021 for the Matebele goat is a qualitative framework. It describes the type, the structure that makes the goat functional in the south-western veld and the faults that exclude an animal from breeding, and it leaves numeric minimums for weight and height to be set by GBAZ from the Matopos, Lupane and recorded-flock data. Its purpose is to improve size and uniformity within the breed while keeping the adaptation that makes it valuable.

GBAZ applies the standard summarised below at inspection. Matebele animals that pass are recorded in the GBAZ register and may be registered with the Zimbabwe Herd Book, the statutory registrar, which issues the registration certificate. Because the breed was never selected for a single colour, all solid and mixed colours are accepted; the standard concentrates on pigment, frame, structure and function.

The GBAZ and VALUE 2021 breed standard for the Matebele goat, a qualitative framework compiled for conservation, selection and the recognition of stud breeders. Numeric minimums are to be set by GBAZ from the Matopos, Lupane and recorded-flock data.

General type

A medium to large, hardy, lop-eared goat of the southern African family with a straight face, a short smooth coat in any solid or mixed colour and a frame that can walk long distances. Does feminine, with a slight wedge to the front; bucks masculine, heavier in the head, neck and forequarter. The animal must breed throughout the year, kid unassisted, rear twins on the veld and tolerate drought, heat, ticks and heartwater.

Head

Medium to long, with a straight profile, a strong jaw and a correct bite; alert eyes with pigmented lids; broad lop ears of medium length, sometimes with the tip turned up; horns, where present, strong and backward, flattened in bucks, finer in does, and never pressing on the neck. A beard is acceptable in both sexes.

Neck and forequarter

A neck of medium length, well joined to the shoulder; a deep chest; shoulders firmly attached; withers slightly lower than the sacrum is typical of the breed; strong, straight front legs with dark, hard hooves.

Barrel

Long and deep, with well-sprung ribs, a strong back and good rumen capacity for coarse browse. Faults: a weak or dipped back, slab sides.

Hindquarter

Wide, with a reasonably sloping rump; well-muscled thighs; strong hocks; tail carried up.

Legs and feet

Strong, correctly placed and able to walk long distances; dark, hard hooves. Faults: knock knees, bandy legs, cow hocks, sickle hocks, weak pasterns, hooves pointing in or out.

Skin and coat

Loose, pigmented skin; short, smooth hair, patchy or plain; a degree of pigment on the hairless parts is required. A longer coat or a cape of hair over the shoulders in bucks is acceptable. All solid and mixed colours are accepted; white, cream, black, brown, fawn and pied patterns are common.

Sexual organs

Does: a well-attached udder with two functional, well-placed teats. Bucks: two equal, well-developed testes in one scrotum, with no split or twist.

Disqualifications

Jaw faults (over- or undershot); blue eyes; pink or unpigmented skin; split or calabash teats; cryptorchidism or a split scrotum; leg deformities; dwarfism; wry face; horns pressing on the neck. Animals outside the type (for example short-eared Mashona type or animals showing obvious exotic blood) are not registered as Matebele.

Reference measurements for setting numeric minimums (to be fixed by GBAZ)

Measure	Matopos station	Communal (Sibanda 2000)	Lupane 2023	Well-managed (extension)
Mature doe weight	39 kg	30 kg at mating, 35 kg after kidding	19 kg at 24 months, 31 kg at 48 months	30 to 45 kg
Mature buck weight	50 to 55 kg		26 kg at 24 months	40 to 65 kg
Height at withers			57 cm mean, 64 cm in 4-year-old does	65 to 70 cm
Birth weight	2.5 kg			2.5 kg
Weaning weight	15 to 16 kg at 140 to 150 days (females)			12 to 16 kg

CHAPTER 3

Role in Zimbabwe

The Matebele goat is the goat of the south-west. In Matabeleland North and South, where cattle numbers fell with repeated droughts and where goats are sold throughout the year to meet school fees and household needs, the Matebele goat is the main source of meat and cash for communal and resettled farmers. Of Zimbabwe's roughly five million goats, the great majority are indigenous, and in the communal areas of the south-west almost all are of the Matebele type. The 1982 census counted only a few thousand goats on commercial farms in Matabeleland; the breed has always been a smallholder animal.



A farmer among goats at sunset. The Matebele doe is the preferred dam for crossbreeding in Matabeleland.
Photo: Thato Moiketsi, Pexels

Its economic role is changing. The Matebele goat is the preferred dam line for crossbreeding in Matabeleland: Boer and Kalahari Red bucks on Matebele does produce first-cross kids that wean several kilograms heavier and dress out better while keeping the dam's tolerance of drought, ticks and heartwater. Cooperatives such as the Queens of Reds group in Umzingwane, the Mzilikazi stud in Umguza and the FAO and Sustainable Wildlife Management crossbreeding work in Binga have all built on Matebele does. ZimTrade's goat-meat export model, piloted in Gwanda with GBAZ in 2025, depends on offtake from exactly these flocks.

The breed is also kept pure, and increasingly on purpose. Matopos Research Institute's flock and the flocks of agricultural colleges conserve and teach the type; Matopos won the indigenous goat doe class and Esigodini Agricultural College the indigenous buck class at the Bulawayo Agricultural Show in 2026. GBAZ's 2021 standard allows a communal or commercial farmer who selects the larger, better-framed Matebele goats, records them and presents them for inspection to register a recorded or pedigree flock with the Zimbabwe Herd Book and sell bucks at a premium. The Lupane authors argue that the breed's small size in communal flocks is as much a management and selection problem as a genetic one, and that structured selection can recover the frame recorded at Matopos without losing adaptation.

For GBAZ the Matebele goat is a conservation priority as well as a commercial one. Uncontrolled crossbreeding with exotic bucks is the main threat to the pure type, and the association's advice is that every crossbreeding flock keep a nucleus of pure Matebele does bred to a selected Matebele buck.

Milestones for the Matebele goat

Year	Event
1981 and 1986	Matopos Research Station performance data published (Arrowsmith and Ward; Tawonezvi and Ward)
1991	FAO breed description of the Ndebele (Matebele) goat with Matopos figures
2000	Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu: live weight and body condition of Matebele does in communal flocks
2021	First written breed standard published by GBAZ with the VALUE project
2023	Lupane State University morphometric baseline for 120 communal Matebele goats
2025	GBAZ Goat Indaba in Bulawayo devoted to the Matebele and Mashona standards; ZimTrade goat-meat export pilot in Gwanda
2026	Indigenous goat classes judged at the Bulawayo Agricultural Show

CHAPTER 4

Performance and production

The Matopos Research Station flock is the best-recorded indigenous goat population in southern Africa, and its figures, reported by the FAO in 1991, set the benchmark for the breed. Mature males weigh 50 to 55 kg and females about 39 kg. Kids are born at 2.5 kg (905 records), weigh 13.9 kg at three months and about 15 to 16 kg at weaning at 140 to 150 days (twins about 13.5 kg), and females reach 31 kg at 18 months, 35 kg at 30 months, 38.7 kg at 42 months and 39 kg at 54 months. Average daily gain is 109 g from birth to 12 weeks, 97 g to 20 weeks and 39 g after weaning. Castrated males of about two years dressed out at 43.5 to 43.7 percent at 31 kg live weight.

Reproduction is the breed's strongest trait. At Matopos the litter size was 1.54 (549 records): 36 percent of does kidding had singles, 62 percent twins and 1.6 percent triplets, and two-thirds of does mated gave birth to more than one kid. Fertility, the percentage of does mated that kidded, was 87.5 percent, and 160 kids were born per 100 does mated. The breed kids throughout the year; age at first kidding of 14 to 23 months and kidding intervals of about 240 days are reported for communal flocks.

Communal performance is lower, and the gap is the measure of what management and selection could recover. Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu found that adult does in communal flocks in southern Zimbabwe weighed about 30 kg at mating and 35 kg after kidding, with first-kidders at 24 kg, and that kidding in the late dry season cost a doe about a quarter of her post-kidding weight. Studies of kidding season in farm flocks recorded weaning weights of about 9.7 kg overall, with kids born in the best season weaning 6 kg heavier than dry-season kids. The 2023 Lupane sample of 120 communal goats averaged only 21 kg, with males 26 kg and females 19 kg at 24 months and females 31 kg at 48 months, and a mean wither height of 57 cm; 85 percent were horned, about 30 percent bearded, and black-and-white was the commonest colour pattern.

The lesson of the figures is that the Matebele goat is genetically capable of 39 kg does and 55 kg bucks, 160 percent kidding and 15 kg weaners, and that communal flocks get perhaps half of that because of dry-season nutrition, uncontrolled mating and no selection. Both the gap and the way to close it are known.

Growth of Matebele goats at Matopos Research Station (FAO 1991; females unless stated)

Age	Live weight	Note
Birth	2.5 kg	905 records
3 months	13.9 kg	
140 to 150 days (weaning)	15.2 to 15.9 kg	Twins 13.5 kg; 759 records
18 months	31.3 kg	Twins 28.6 kg
30 months	35.0 kg	
42 months	38.7 kg	
54 months	39.1 kg	Mature doe
Mature buck	50 to 55 kg	

Reproduction and carcass at Matopos (FAO 1991)

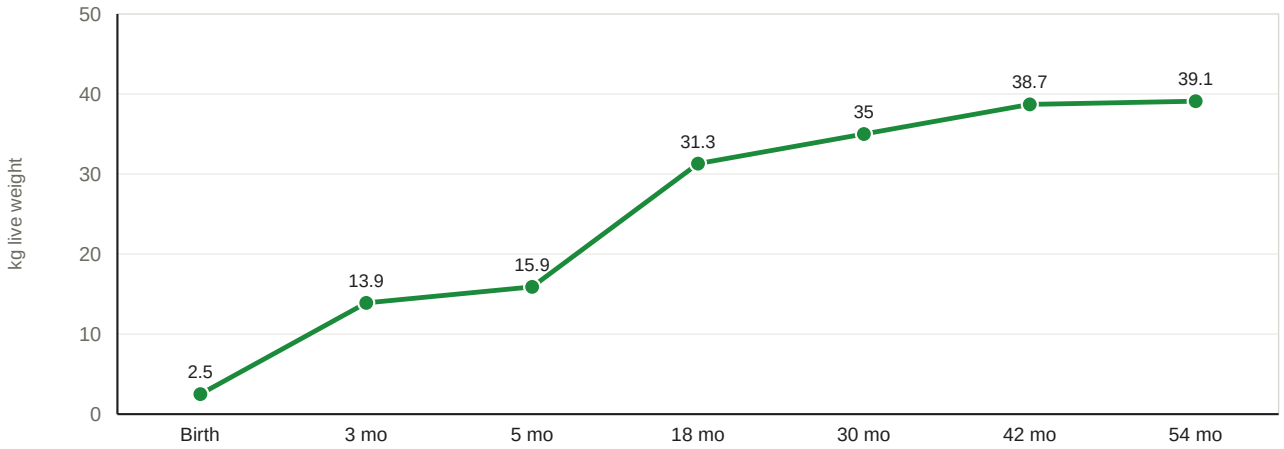
Trait	Value
Litter size	1.54 (549 records)
Birth type	36.4 percent single, 62.0 percent twin, 1.6 percent triplet
Fertility (does mated that kidded)	87.5 percent

Trait	Value
Kids born per 100 does mated	160
Daily gain, birth to 12 weeks	109 g
Daily gain, birth to 20 weeks	97 g
Daily gain after weaning	39 g
Dressing percentage, castrates about 2 years	43.5 to 43.7 percent at 31 kg

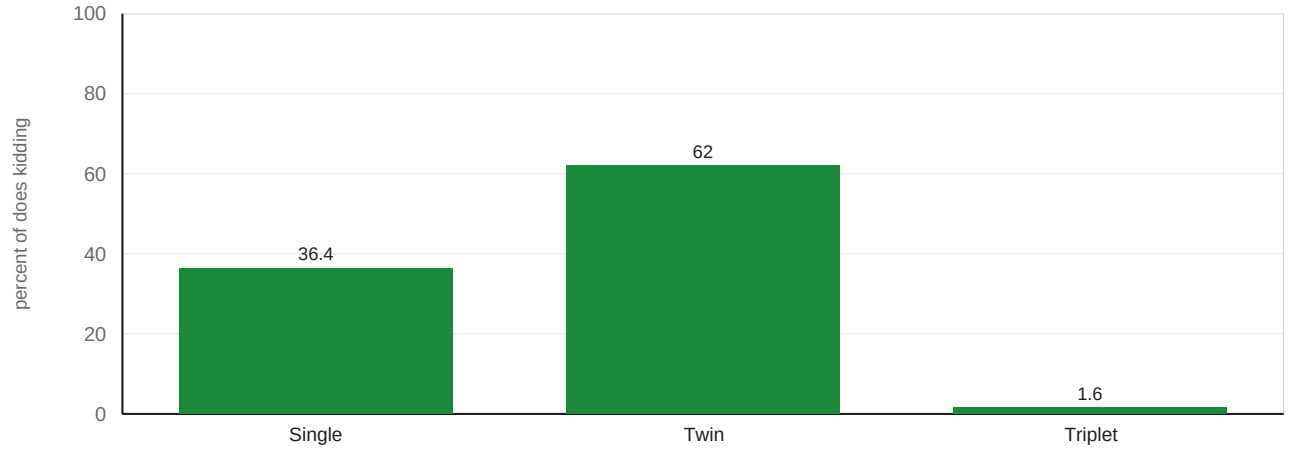
Communal flock performance (Sibanda et al. 2000; kidding-season studies; Moyo et al. 2023)

Measure	Value	Source
Adult doe weight at mating	about 30 kg	Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu 2000
Adult doe weight after kidding	about 35 kg	Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu 2000
First-kidder weight	about 24 kg	Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu 2000
Weight loss from late-dry-season kidding	about 25 percent of post-kidding weight	Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu 2000
Weaning weight, farm flocks	about 9.7 kg; best-season kids 6 kg heavier	Kidding-season study (BSAP proceedings)
Mean live weight, 120 communal goats	21 kg (males 26 kg, females 19 kg at 24 months)	Moyo et al. 2023
Wither height	57 cm mean; 64 cm in 4-year-old does	Moyo et al. 2023
Age at first kidding; kidding interval	14 to 23 months; about 240 days	IntechOpen review 2021

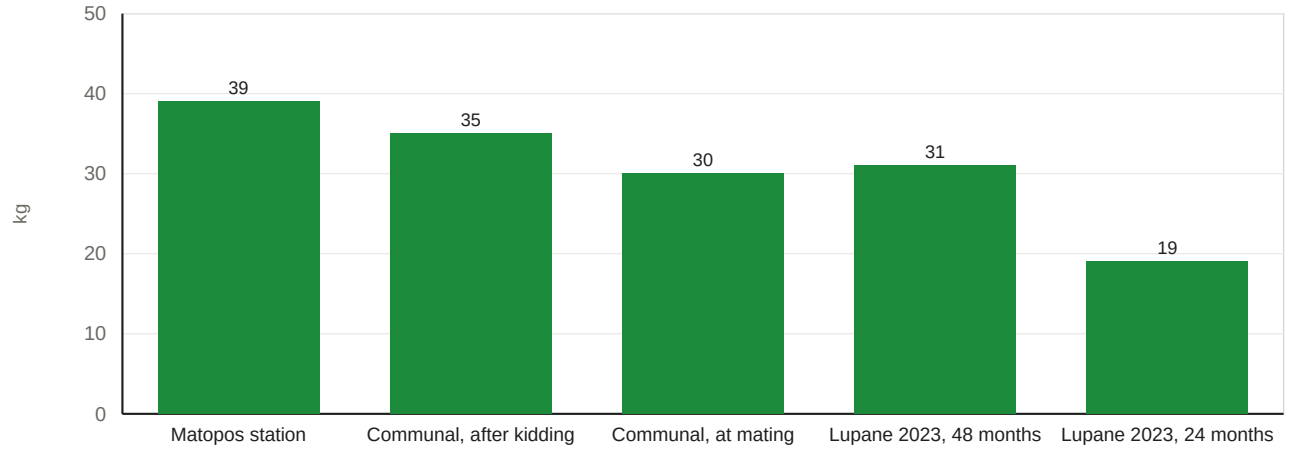
Growth curve of Matebele females at Matopos Research Station (FAO 1991)



Birth type of Matebele does kidding at Matopos (FAO 1991)



Mature doe weight by source: the gap between station and communal flocks



CHAPTER 5

Adaptation and husbandry in Zimbabwean conditions

The Matebele goat is excellent in Natural Regions IV and V and good everywhere else. It survives drought and heat, tolerates ticks, heartwater and internal parasites, walks far to browse mopane and acacia, and kids unassisted. The husbandry that pays is not the husbandry of an exotic stud but the removal of the losses that the research identifies: dry-season weight loss in does, kidding in the wrong season, predation and straying of kids, and uncontrolled mating.

Nutrition is the first lever. Sibanda and colleagues showed that a doe kidding in the late dry season loses about a quarter of her weight, and the kidding-season studies showed that dry-season kids wean 6 kg lighter than kids born on green browse. A protein lick or legume hay for does in late pregnancy and early lactation from August to November, and access to browse rather than grazed-out grass, protect both the doe's next conception and the kid's weaning weight. Water within a few kilometres is essential in the south-west's dry months.

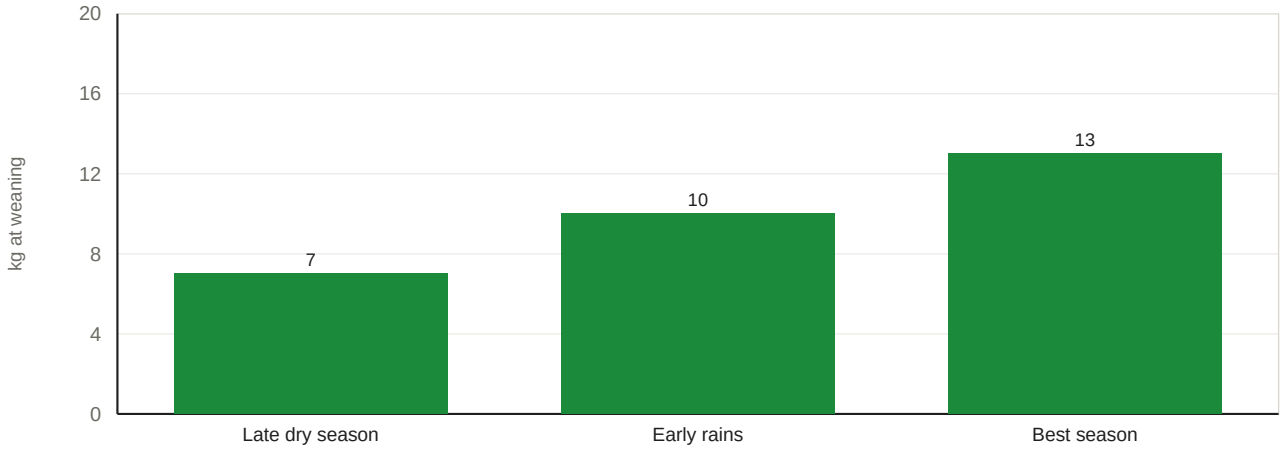
Mating management is the second lever. Separating the buck and mating in April and May so that kids arrive in September and October on the first browse, or in October for March kidding at the end of the rains, puts kids on the ground when the doe can feed them. Where bucks cannot be separated, a buck apron or a cluster rotation of bucks between households achieves the same. One selected buck to 25 to 35 does, replaced every two seasons by an unrelated buck, prevents the inbreeding that follows from using the flock's own sons.

Health care can be light but should be deliberate. Tick control during the rains, FAMACHA-guided deworming rather than blanket dosing, a clostridial vaccine where available, and a dry, secure night kraal that keeps kids from predators and mud will keep losses low. The breed's loose, pigmented skin and short coat resist sun and external parasites; its main health risks are at kidding, in kids in the wet season, and in does under drought stress.

A low-input calendar for a Matebele flock in Natural Regions IV and V

Month	Flock task	Health task
March to April	Select does for mating; cull does that have not kidded in 18 months; condition-score	Deworm by FAMACHA after the rains; trim feet
April to May	Controlled mating, 1 buck to 25 to 35 does	Check buck feet and testes; dip if ticks persist
June to August	Browse and crop residues; keep does walking to water	Vaccinate where available
August to October	Protein lick or legume hay for late-pregnant does; prepare kid pens	Watch for heartwater in bont-tick areas
September to October	Kidding on first browse; tag, weigh and record kids	Navel care; predator-proof kraal
November to January	Kids follow does; creep area for twins	Tick control as rains begin; coccidiosis watch
February to March	Wean at 140 to 150 days; weigh and record; select replacements	Deworm weaners if FAMACHA indicates

Effect of kidding season on weaning weight of Matebele kids in farm flocks (indicative, from the kidding-season study)



CHAPTER 6

Breeding and selection

Selection within the breed is the purpose of the 2021 standard and the explicit recommendation of the Lupane study. The Matopos flock shows what a Matebele goat can be; the communal sample shows what uncontrolled breeding makes of it. Choosing replacement doelings from the larger, early-kidding, twin-rearing dams, and bucks from the heaviest weaners with correct structure, broad lop ears, full pigment and horns that do not press on the neck, recovers frame size within a few generations without losing the adaptation that natural selection built in.

Because 62 percent of Matopos does bore twins, twinning is already in the breed and does not need to be imported. What needs selecting is the doe that rears both twins to 15 kg at weaning, which depends on milk and mothering as much as on frame. Records of birth type, weaning weight and dam identity, kept with ear tags from birth, are the tools; GBAZ's farm record templates provide the registers.

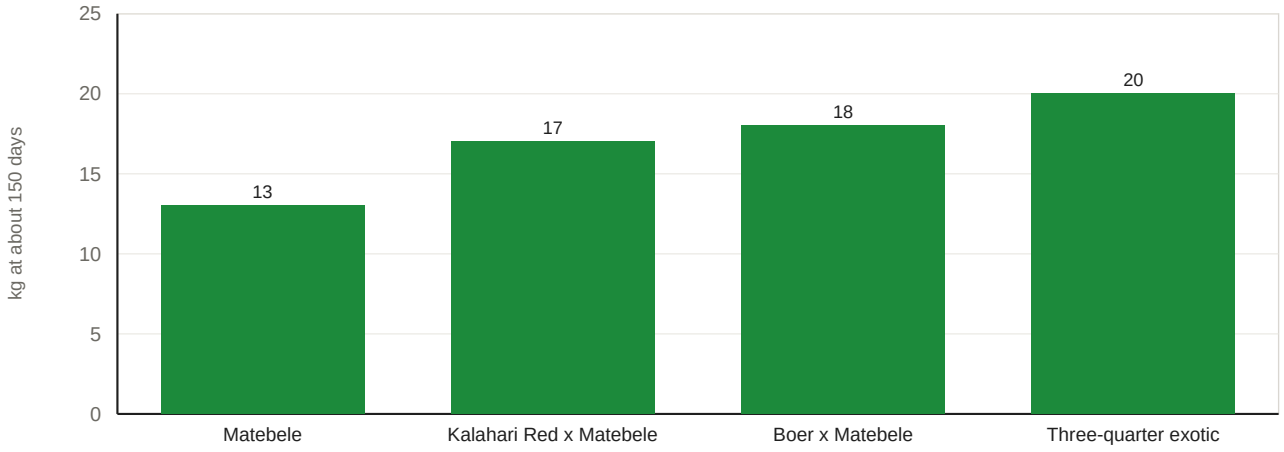
Crossbreeding is the breed's other role, and it works best when it is deliberate. A Boer or Kalahari Red buck on a Matebele doe produces a first-cross kid that weans 3 to 5 kg heavier and dresses out better while keeping the dam's tolerance of drought, ticks and heartwater; the Kalahari Red cross is favoured in Matabeleland for its colour and camouflage, the Boer cross for its weight, and the Savanna cross for its hardiness on hard browse. The first cross should be the end product for meat. Grading up beyond three-quarters exotic in a low-input flock trades away the disease tolerance that makes the system work, and a flock that crosses everything loses the pure dam line within a decade. GBAZ advises every crossbreeding flock to keep a nucleus of pure Matebele does mated to a selected Matebele buck for replacements.

Breeders who want to register Matebele goats should tag kids at birth, record dam and sire, birth type, birth weight and weaning weight, and present the flock for GBAZ inspection. The numeric minimums under the standard will be set from exactly these records.

Breeding options for a Matebele flock

Mating	Kid	Use	Caution
Selected Matebele buck x Matebele doe	Pure	Replacement does; registered indigenous breeding; conservation nucleus	Rotate unrelated bucks every two seasons
Kalahari Red buck x Matebele doe	First cross	Meat kids 3 to 5 kg heavier at weaning; red colour	Feed the doe in late pregnancy
Boer buck x Matebele doe	First cross	Heaviest meat kids	Larger kids; does in good condition at mating
Savanna buck x Matebele doe	First cross	Hardy white crosses for hard browse	Scarce sires
Improver buck x first-cross doe	Three-quarter bred	Commercial dams, heavier kids	Needs lick, dip and drench like an exotic

Indicative weaning weights: pure Matebele kid, first cross and three-quarter exotic kid under communal management



CHAPTER 7

Shows, judging and registration

Indigenous goat classes are now part of Zimbabwe's shows. At the 2026 Bulawayo Agricultural Show the indigenous goat doe class was won by Matopos Research Institute and the buck class by Esigodini Agricultural College, alongside Boer, Kalahari Red, Savanna and Saanen classes, and the GBAZ Goat Indaba, which devoted its 2025 programme in Bulawayo to the Matebele and Mashona standards, includes indigenous classes and demonstrations. Judging follows the 2021 standard: the judge looks for the Matebele type, handles for muscling and condition, checks the mouth, the pigment, the ears and horns and the sexual organs, and places the animal on frame and functional correctness within the breed, not on size against exotic breeds.

Registration follows the GBAZ path that applies to every breed. The breeder, or a cluster of breeders, joins GBAZ and applies for a stud prefix once a recorded flock exists. A GBAZ inspection classes the animals against the standard and records the inspected stock, with a GBAZ Livestock Record Certificate for each recorded animal. The stud breeder then registers the animals with the Zimbabwe Herd Book, the statutory registrar, which keeps the pedigree and issues the registration certificate. Foundation animals from communal flocks without known parentage are entered as foundation stock; their recorded descendants build the pedigree.

GBAZ encourages smallholders in the south-west to register as clusters that share an inspected buck, keep a common record and present animals together at inspection and at sales; the ZimTrade export pilot in Gwanda works through such clusters. A society for the indigenous breeds under GBAZ is expected to follow the Boer Goat Society of Zimbabwe.

From communal flock to Herd Book: the registration path for Matebele goats

Step	Who	What happens
1	Farmer or cluster and GBAZ	Membership; stud prefix; tags, birth notifications and weights recorded
2	GBAZ inspector	Animals classed against the 2021 standard; Livestock Record Certificate issued for recorded animals
3	Zimbabwe Herd Book	Foundation and pedigree animals registered; registration certificate issued by the statutory registrar

CHAPTER 8

Timeline

Key dates in the history of the Matebele goat and its recognition as a breed.

Before 1800	Lop-eared goats of the southern African family are kept across the south-western plateau and the Limpopo valley.
1830s	Ndebele settlement of the south-west; the region's goat takes the name Matebele.
Early 1900s	An indigenous goat flock is established at Matopos Research Station near Bulawayo and kept for about a century.
1981 and 1986	Matopos performance data published by Arrowsmith and Ward and by Tawonezvi and Ward.
1991	FAO breed description of the Ndebele (Matebele) goat: 2.5 kg birth weight, litter size 1.54, 160 kids per 100 does mated.
2000	Sibanda, Bryant and Ndlovu publish doe weight and body condition changes in communal flocks.
2012 onwards	Kalahari Red and Boer bucks used on Matebele does by studs and cooperatives in Matabeleland.
2018	GBAZ re-founded as the umbrella body for all goat breeds in Zimbabwe.
2021	GBAZ and the VALUE project publish the first written breed standard for the Matebele goat, compiled by Joe Sikosana.
2023	Lupane State University morphometric baseline for 120 communal Matebele goats published.
2025	GBAZ Goat Indaba in Bulawayo devoted to the Matebele and Mashona standards; ZimTrade export pilot in Gwanda.
2026	Indigenous goat classes judged at the Bulawayo Agricultural Show, won by Matopos Research Institute and Esigodini Agricultural College.

CHAPTER 9

Sources

This book was written from the sources below. Figures are quoted with their origin; where sources disagree the range is given. The GBAZ and VALUE standard document of 2021 is not published online; its framework is summarised from press reports and the association's own material, and numeric minimums will be set by GBAZ from recorded flocks.

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14. Goat value chain scoping study report (VALUE project)
ActionAid Zimbabwe
https://zimbabwe.actionaid.org/sites/zimbabwe/files/publications/Goat%20Value%20Chain%20Scoping%20Study%20report.pdf

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CONTACT

The Goat Breeders Association of Zimbabwe

GBAZ sets breed standards, inspects animals, trains breeders and judges, and supports registration of inspected animals with the Zimbabwe Herd Book, the statutory registrar of pedigree livestock. Questions about this book, breed standards, inspections or membership may be sent to the office.

Goat Breeders Association of Zimbabwe

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Register your animals: GBAZ members apply for inspection through the website or the office; inspected animals receive a GBAZ Livestock Record Certificate and may be registered with the Zimbabwe Herd Book, which issues the registration certificate.