

# Selecting the Best Quality Layers at Point Of Lay

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As the egg production sector in Zimbabwe continues to grow we have a considerable number of new players coming on board. Over 70% of the small scale egg producers we have today depend on hens raised by others which they procure at point of lay. Whilst this avenue is preferred by a lot of farmers owing to the fact that it takes away the hustle of raising the birds from day old and also saves time. It is indeed a good experience to place layers today and start picking eggs in the few days that follow and hit the market. It is however important to draw the attention of producers to the fact that this method also harbour some demerits which are ruinous to business especially for those attempting the egg production venture for the first time. It needs be known that the productivity exhibited by the hens as from beginning of lay till the end is founded strongly in the rearing phase of the birds. Given the fact that one has not been part and parcel of the rearing process, that farmer is not wary of the foundation that has been laid so far up to point of lay and it is possible to be saddled with problems emanating from poor pullet rearing management. In as much as it is impractical for every farmer to raise their own pullets, this article serve to equip the farmer with the cardinal physical aspects to look out for in a bid to get an insight of the quality of birds as well as their potential to produce before purchasing. Do not be hoodwinked by enticing marketing statements, just pay attention to the characteristics discussed hereafter.

### **Body weight**

Upon settling to purchase some point of lay pullets from your chosen source, make sure that you know the strain or breed of bird that you are buying. This is important because the recommended weights at which you stimulate the birds into production varies according to breed or strain. For instance Lohmann Brown Classic layers attain reproductive maturity at 1.6 -1.7kg whilst the Hy-line Brown layer's target weight at commencement of production is 1.4-1.6 kg live-weight. Armed with that information a farmer should check if the point of lay birds on offer have reached the recommended body weights, if not avoid such hens because research as well as experience has shown that forcing underweight birds into production does not yield good results. The fact that the birds will have reached maturity age yet underweight is indicative of poor husbandry practices experienced during the rearing phase that subjected the birds to serious growth retardation. Underweight birds could also result from birds that were poorly introduced to feed during the first few weeks of their lives resulting in a flock characterised by poor appetites. Such hens cannot perform to expectations during the laying period as they will be unable to eat enough to sustain high levels of production. It is more profitable to delay the onset of lay whilst you feed the birds on a nutrient rich diet until they have attained the target weights because if they are rushed into production they will produce very few , small eggs and persistence after the peak production period will be low.

### **Flock uniformity**

The uniformity of the flock is as important as the attainment of target body weights. This is so because egg production is best when a batch performs optimally, not individual birds. The

expectation is to have all the birds housed dropping an egg each per day for a uniform and constant daily pick. It is therefore imperative for a farmer to ensure that as they buy point of lay birds 85% of the birds are within 10% of the average weight of the flock. This follows the fact that poor pullet body weight uniformity complicates proper feeding plans especially the laying period as birds of different weights require different quantities and at times even different formulations of feeds. If there is wide variance in terms of weight, one will be confronted by a situation whereby the pullets come into lay at different times as a result of the fact that underweight birds tend to commence laying late and also produce very small eggs.

In addition to the scenario portrayed above, lack of uniformity allows you to have an insight into how the pullets were raised. A flock characterised by birds that suffered from enteric diseases such as coccidiosis, Infectious Bursal Disease, bacterial enteritis and runting and stunting syndrome are likely to exhibit apparent lack of uniformity due to these growth checking diseases. Moreso greater variation in weights is observable in flocks that were raised under overcrowded conditions whereby competition is rife at the drinkers and waters or rather the birds were given inadequate poor quality feeds. Undue water restrictions which in turn suppress feed intake also cause lack of uniformity as does exposure to stressful conditions. Avoid such birds; they will deal you no good.

### **Breast Muscle Development**

The examination of the extent of breast muscle development is another easy way of determining whether you are buying quality pullets or not. A good pullet at the aged 18 weeks should have a well developed breast muscle and this serves as an indicator of a well groomed pullet with good future productivity prospects. The essence of the good muscle build –up is that whilst it is a direct contributor to target weights alluded to above, muscles have the responsibility of storing glycogen. Glycogen forms the rapidly available source of energy for egg production especially at commencement of laying and during peak production. As such a pullet that comes into egg production without insufficient muscles will not harbour sufficient energy to power the high levels of egg production as is expected of the modern layer. Vigorously select against birds with poor breast muscle.

### **Skeletal frame**

This is just but one factor that can easily be used by any farmer to select good layers at point of lay without partaking in any cumbersome measurements. From just the look of the skeletal frame size, one can choose a productive hen. Generally the larger the skeleton, the better the production from that bird. This is so owing to the fact that, a larger skeleton presents a better skeletal mineral reserve which enhances lifetime productivity. There is huge skeletal mining and loss of structural bones during the early production phase mainly due to the hen's inability to derive all its requirements from dietary intake. The minerals taken from the bones are channelled towards egg-shell formation which is an essential part of the egg formation process. The frame size is so important to productivity that it is advisable to purchase a lean but large framed pullet than an obese but small framed bird even if they are of the same weight, because the small framed bird despite its huge muscle and fat reserves will not be able to sustain high productivity and maintain good shell quality as does the large framed hen

## **Vaccinations**

There are a number of diseases which every pullet should have been vaccinated against by the time it reaches 18 weeks of age. Some of the major diseases to watch out for in layers are Marek's disease, New Castle Disease, Infectious Bronchitis, Infectious Bursal Disease Egg drop syndrome and fowl pox. These diseases have been identified as the most important in as far as egg production is concerned. They however vary widely in their impacts on the egg production enterprise, from those that can cause wide spread mortalities, some cause sudden cessation of egg production and other cause the surfacing of inexplicable phenomena like soft shelled eggs, flat sided eggs or worse still shell-less eggs. It is therefore expected that someone selling off point of lay birds should have vaccinated against these disease. Nevertheless what we have observed is that a good number of point of lay growers cheat when it comes to vaccination against the aforementioned diseases in a bid to minimise costs. They are quick to point out that their stock was vaccinated against the whole array of diseases when in actual fact the opposite is true. It is therefore advisable to request for evidence that can serve as verification that indeed all the pertinent vaccinations were undertaken or simply stick to reputable sources of layers.

**In order to steer clear of problems, it is advisable to procure the point of lay birds from reputable and trusted producers whose quality control is beyond question. I however am cognisant of our situation here in Zimbabwe whereby one might fail to acquire the pullets from the reputable sources due to one reason or another. In such cases one can surely scout for an alternative suppliers, but to hedge in your investment please do check out for parameters discussed earlier.**

**For all questions and comments: email [philemonburuzi@gmail.com](mailto:philemonburuzi@gmail.com). Responses will be provided within the shortest possible time.**

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