

CHICKEN RUN

REDCAPS
AT
FRITS MEIJER'S

By: Elly Vogelaar
Photos: Aviculture
Europe

As soon as we found out that the Redcap was back in The Netherlands, we were onto it in a flash! We tracked them down in Grashoek, a tiny village in Limburg in the south of the Netherlands. This very rare breed has not been seen in show pens for many years, but recently Frits Meijer showed some... and they were fairly good quality indeed!

Frits Meijer

Frits Meijer (photo above) and his wife live in rural Grashoek, a beautiful and quiet area furnished with green meadows and a forest across the road. They have two pretty little daughters, a huge dog, several cats and a lot of chickens including Barnevelders and yes... Redcaps! The family likes animals very much, and formerly Frits used to do training courses for police dogs. But that is not a nice 'sport' for little girls, so he looked around for a new hobby. When moving to their present home – which had to be almost re-built – they were presented with some Welsummer fowls and soon fell in love with them... always quiet and calm and laying eggs in spite of all the building works around them. Once the house was finished Frits decided to build some proper hen houses and started



inquiring about chickens. He joined the poultry breeders club in the village nearby and soon he was the proud owner of some Barnevelders. This was about 10 years ago. The first Redcaps arrived in 2003.

Some history

*Source: Bulletin of the Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities.
Courtesy of Mr. Craig Russell, President SPPA*



Head of Redcap cock

The Redcaps arose in a time when the common fowl in Britain were Games and the Old Five Toed Fowl (not yet known as Dorkings). The group that would later be known as Hamburgs was probably next in numbers, but mostly restricted to the north. Here and there were a few members of the Spanish group (mostly around the cities and towns). It should surprise no one that crosses between these groups were tried and that useful and unusually attractive fowl were retained to become the basis of new varieties. Just as Dorkings were not originally called Dorkings, the term "Hamburgs" was not originally applied to these so-called Pheasant Fowl.

Whatever they were called, they were probably the most important group of fowl for the show community. In the English speaking world, poultry exhibition began with this group. For many years prior to the all breed shows as we know them today, the various members of this group all had their admirers. Specialty clubs were formed for the Moonies, Crescents or Half Moons, Pheasants, and Corals or Redcaps. These clubs were dedicated to breeding the respective types to perfection. To encourage their members, prizes were offered and awarded to the best fowl. Occasionally multiple club meets were staged and in time the modern all breed show developed.

Even the Redcaps, which came far closer to dual purpose status than the Hamburgs, were a point of controversy. Names such as Derbyshire Redcaps, Yorkshire Redcaps, York Everlayers, Copheads, Redheads, Rosetops, Corals, and Creoles all had their supporters. Then there was the matter of how the comb should be formed. During the club show period the breeders endeavoured for a comb perfectly circular, without a point at the back. When the modern standard was adopted with a more typical rose comb, many breeders complained that this was not only wrong, but a sign of a Hamburg cross. We think that the more typical rose comb had finally been adopted simply because it was easier to breed consistently. While the perfectly round comb was possible, such combs were frequently pitted and often exhibited an inverted leader or spike and those without such flaws were not infrequently rectangular or oblong in shape.

Historically, the Hamburg was an egg farmer's or fancier's fowl, while the Redcap was more likely to be found on a diversified farm since it was competitive as a layer and a better table fowl. Its game heritage also



won the Redcaps some adherents. There were several strains that were considered competitive pit fowl.

In those days the Redcaps usually sported 8 lb. (3.6kg) males and 7 lb.(3.2kg) hens (some large strains attained 9 and 8 pounds), but they were standardized at 7.5 and 6 pounds. In my youth many were 8 and 7, but today fowls approaching even the standard weight are unusual. In *Stairway to the Breeds*, Ian Kay puts the current British weights at 6.5 and 5.5 pounds (3kg and 2.5kg).



The Redcap

Of course the most striking part of this breed is its distinctive, large and wide rose comb, square in front, the top of which is covered with numerous small points, and ending in a short straight spike. At the male it could be measuring 3 inches (8 cm) long by 2 1/2 inches (6.5 cm) wide. A good comb is proportionate to the bird without being heavy or exaggerated and it should never overhang the eyes. A lop-sided comb is a miserable sight. The Redcap is one of the few breeds with red earlobes that lay white-shelled eggs. The eyes are bright red.

They are medium sized with a long, rather round body, broader in front and tapering to rear. The breast is broad and prominent; the back is of medium length and sloping well to the tail; the neck is rather long with full hackle; the tail is carried rather upright but not fully erect, with abundant coverts and well curved sickles. Shanks and toes (4) are slate coloured or a leaden-blue. Standard weight in The Netherlands: cock 6.5 and hen 5.5 pounds.



They are recognised in only one colour; the male is Black Red with fringes and tips in black on the (rather dark) red feathers. The body feathers of the hen end in a half moon black spangle, the rest of the plumage being a rich deep brown. The tail of both cock and hen is all black.

Already in 1930 there were bantam Redcaps in Britain, but they never became very popular.

Left (and former pages): Redcap cocks and hens.

In Holland the breed was kept by some fanciers during the 80s, but then probably disappeared. Germany imported the Redcap from Holland in 1985 and the breed was standardised in the same year. Even a German Redcap breeders club was founded in 1988, but it was not easy to breed perfect birds so interest waned very quickly, and only a handful of breeders stuck with the breed.

Frits on his chickens

The Barnevelders are his pride and I think that deep down Frits would have appreciated more if we had come to see his beautiful Barnevelders! And that is understandable; they are in top condition, graceful and voluminous birds, the hens perfectly double-laced, even up to the tail feathers! Some of the hens are over five years old but still laying and in the breeding pen. His cocks have remarkable, well-serrated combs and fine formed wattles, not oversized – even in the old birds. During the outbreak of bird flu in 2003 in the area, all of his birds had to be killed under government rules. It was a black day for the Meijer family (and lots of others in their neighbourhood!)

Right: One of his beautiful Barnevelder cocks.

But Dutch breeders, through the Barnevelder Breeders Club, arranged that birds would be quickly available to all those breeders affected.





So Frits made a new start and this time also got some blue laced Barnevelders – a rare variety, not easy to breed. The birds came from several different breeders (e.g. W. Brink) but matched up quite well.

Left: Blue laced Barnevelder hen; notice the perfect double lacing!

The Redcaps

He obtained the Redcaps from the United Kingdom, with 24 brooding eggs and two chicks. A friend was always asking about the Redcaps and he knew the breed from pictures in old chicken books. He did not plan to seriously breed them, rather he just wanted some for fun. In the 80s, several Dutch breeders had kept Redcaps but there was no trace of the breed left. Finally Mario Griekspoor, a Dutch fancier and poultry judge who often visited England, promised to look around for the breed and succeeded in bringing back the brooding eggs.

**Right: Redcap chicks.
Photo: Frits Meijer.**



The eggs hatched successfully, with Frits and his friend deciding to take 12 of the hatchlings each, just in case if something went wrong, not all of them would be lost. As the birds matured he began to like

them more and more. When he took some to the local club show, the judges were astonished to see he had penned Redcaps.

Right: A Redcap chick. The broad comb is already showing.
Photo: Frits Meijer



The positive reaction and the uniqueness of his new breed encouraged him to improve his Redcaps, as they were not particularly good – the colour and markings were not uniform, most of the hens had spurs and a lot of them also had duck-feet. He enquired about Redcaps in Germany and through Rüdiger Wandelt, chairman of the German Redcap Specialty Club, he found a breeder willing to sell him some of his birds. Although meeting the German Redcap breeders was nice, the birds were not much better than the ones he had from England. It was obvious several in-crosses had been made since 1985 to maintain vitality; the offspring of the German birds lacked uniformity, coming in a range of various colours. The combs and wattles were better sized and formed however, but the tails were carried too high and the problems with spurs and duck-feet remained. Strict selection and finding right breeding combinations seems the only option for improving the breed at present.



Left: The 16 separate pens. Each pair of adjoining pens share a little meadow where the birds are allowed to free range.

Below right: A Barnevelder hen and a Redcap hen, housed together.

Breeding and keeping

Each December Frits selects his breeding pairs. All selected birds are housed in the large chicken house that has 16 separate pens, each with its own number. Each pair of adjoining pens share a little meadow in which the birds are allowed to free range for some time each day. Some pens contain a cock and two hens, some have cocks only, but most have two



hens; always one Barnevelder and one Redcap. This way, Frits can always tell which egg is from which hen, because the Barnevelder egg is brown while the Redcap egg is white. From time to time he brings a hen to the cock. Mating follows almost instantly and the hen is returned to her own pen. Every egg is marked and after hatching the chicks get a wing tag. Everything is recorded in a computerised pedigree plan.

"When you start with this hobby, you soon realise that you don't know much about selecting your birds. Fortunately, the members of the local club are very helpful and I have a good bond with Lei Cuypers, a judge who used to come over and 'teach' me which things are important. I gradually learned how to select the right breeding combinations"

Frits said.

"I think that when breeding Barnevelders the best results come from separate pullet and cockerel pens. My cockerels are always higher quality than the pullets," he added.



Above: Frits with one of his Redcap hens. In the background you can see the 2 chicken houses for the upgrowing chicks, one each for pullets and cockerels.

Left: A close-up of the colour and marking of the hen.

When selecting Redcap breeding pairs it is important that the birds complement one another in colour and marking, and extra attention must be paid to the comb size and structure. The combs tend to stand less firmly when the birds become older, so it is important to keep records of each bird. Selecting is a never-ending job; from the 100 Redcap chicks there will only be six to 10 that are 'good enough' to keep. Duck-feet is noticeable at quite a young age, but spurs do not appear on hens until after the bird matures. The same applies for colour and marking as well as size and form of the big spiky comb.

"Birds with minor imperfections don't bother people who want this breed 'for fun'," Frits said. "They are mainly liked for their bizarre comb, but they are also excellent layers; especially the British line... some of those hens laid 300 eggs in a year, with only a few weeks break for moulting then continuing on laying... and they don't go broody. Also young cockerels produce good amount of quality breast meat!"



Links: In each pen there are 'home made' waterers and feeders, made from PVC pipe end caps.

The chickens are fed in the morning with a special mix made on request by the district's agricultural provider for the members of the local club. During the breeding season they also get a handful of various grains in the evening, to which a little cod-liver oil is added.

Right: It is early March and the first batch of chicks has already hatched and the incubator filled again.

Frits has an incubator from which the first Barnevelder chicks are already hatched. He believes it important not to move the little chicks from one pen to another, so they are housed for the first six weeks in a warm, spacious pen in the barn.



Left: The white eggs of the Redcap; not perfectly formed but they never are, according to Frits. Still they hatch without problem.

They are then moved outside to the grassy meadow and housed in one of the two chicken houses, both Barnevelders and Redcaps together, but with the pullets and cockerels separated. After the breeding season ends, the parent birds are allowed to free range out on the grass. The birds never fight as there is plenty of space for them to roam. At night they are supposed to return to the 'secure' chicken house, but often the Redcaps prefer to sleep in the trees. The breed can fly very well.

Right: Ideal head of a Barnevelder cock, with perfect comb and wattles.

Showing

Neither breed needs washing before the show, or else Frits would not have chosen them. He says he will definitely not wash a chicken! So only the legs are cleaned and rubbed with a little Vaseline. The comb gets extra bright and becomes a real 'eye-catcher' after a little massage with some oil. The Redcaps have scored 96 points (second best prize) several times and under different judges. He does not enter many birds; at most three Redcaps and five Barnevelders. His most impressive prize was Best Blue double-laced Barnevelder, which he won last season with a beautiful cockerel.

The whole family enjoys the chickens and the local club's activities. Last summer their young animal day was organised at Frits' property; a perfectly organised day, ending with a barbeque for all members and family. Frits' eldest daughter is now eight years old and cannot wait until spring when she will have her own chickens... Noord Holland Blue bantams, which she chose for herself.

To end with

Redcaps are hardy, long-lived, non-sitters, excellent layers, active, alert and well able to look after themselves. This makes them an ideal breed, so why not give them a chance!



**Above and left:
Head study of a Redcap cock (above)
and hen (left).**

It was good visiting Frits and his enthusiastic family, especially so for having the chance to see Redcaps 'in the flesh'.

We hope the Redcaps will stay around for a long time to come.