

ARE WE OUR OWN WORST ENEMY IN ANIMAL SELECTION

by Thomas K. Cadwallader

WAUSAU, Wisconsin: Back in 1980 I began working as Assistant Superintendent of the UW-Spooner Research Station heading up the sheep project.

As soon as I got there in June the sheep researcher in charge of the project, Art Pope, proposed the idea of trying something he had seen done in New Zealand called “easy care” lambing.

Normally ewes at Spooner were lambbed in the barn in either winter or early spring before they headed into confinement feeding or out to pasture once grass started to green up.

What Art was suggesting was to pick out a group of mature ewes, breed them to lamb in late May/early June, stick them out on a good set of pastures, leave them totally alone and see what they do.

I figured what the heck, we are a research station. Might as well give it a shot and see what happens.

Well, lo and behold, not only did they do just fine without me they actually had a lower mortality rate that year than our winter lambing group.

Boy, if that didn't make me stop and think about everything I learned over the previous 13-plus years.

Over our first three years on the project, we had a pre-weaning mortality rate of 7% in 1981, followed by 13.2% in 1982 and 16.5% in 1983. The barn lambing groups averaged around 8% each year.

When we looked back at our lambing records over all three years, we found that 55% of the lamb mortalities on pasture were from starvation in the first week to ten days caused by poor udders. The lambs would get up and look for something to eat and because of oversized teats, poor teat placement or lack of milk they would end up starving. The moms had good mothering ability but they couldn't feed their young.

The next largest cause of death was in fact poor mothering ability-ewes who wouldn't or couldn't take care of their young at birth regardless of how much milk they had.

All of those problems we created ourselves because we put up with those ewes when we put them through the lambing shed. We thought we were “good” shepherds and prided ourselves on our ability to save lambs.

What we were actually doing was creating a system that would never get any easier because we kept poor genetics.

After the 1983 lambing season we went through the pasture lambing ewes and culled heavily and in 1984 we were down below a 5% mortality rate.

There is no magic bullet in genetics. Livestock producers need to decide on the type of farming system they would like to work with and then select animals that consistently produce well in that environment.

Anytime you have to go out and find replacement animals, if they come from a different environment and management system, you'll find yourself right where I was when I went to pasture lambing, getting rid of a bunch of animals

that don't fit your system.

And believe me, it's tough to make headway when animals are leaving before they're paid for.

The one other thought that kept coming back to me is how complicated we've made our livestock production systems over the years in the name of progress. Reflecting back on my pasture lambing experience and hearing what graziers are doing around the country, it's amazing how little care we really needed to provide animals as long as we put good genetics on good pastures and then add just a touch of management to keep the system moving. Researchers and farmers just need to keep talking to each other to learn what those little bits of mangm't are.

DORSET NSIP PROGRAM UPDATE

As we reported in recent newsletters, the CDC is very fortunate to have Alan Culham as the data coordinator for the Dorset NSIP Program. Alan has been in contact with NSIP Dorset producers and has already processed the 2002 lamb crop data run. He is now working on getting the 2003 lamb crop data collected and plans on having that run completed by late June or early July. At this time, Alan will also develop the website for the Dorset NSIP Program and publish the Dorset sire summary and trait leaders.

The importance of getting production Dorset people involved with the NSIP program is essential in establishing and developing accurate Dorset EPD's and flock connectiveness. The more flocks involved the more accurate the data will be for the Dorset breed in the United States. If you would like more information about the program please contact: Alan Culham, 5108 E. Howell Rd., Webberville, MI 48892. Phone: (517)521-4870. e-mail: culhamab@aol.com

CDC DORSET PRODUCTION COMMITTEE NEEDS YOUR INPUT

The CDC has established a Production Dorset Committee to address the ever growing needs of the registered production Dorset type breeder. The CDC recognizes that the Dorset breed is and has tremendous potential and influence in the commercial sheep operations around the country, and would like to be able to serve the registered Dorset production producer with support programs so they in turn can better promote their product.

The committee will be meeting soon via tele-conference call to established some aims and goals for the committee. The CDC Production committee would like to hear from you with any ideas or thoughts you may have on the subject to help them develop these goals. Following is a list of the committee members with home phone numbers so you can contact a committee member directly or you can contact Deb Hopkins at the CDC Office.

- Rick Klampe, OR: (503)587-0650
- Ron Guenther, OH: (937)246-4477
- Kathy Soder, PA: (814)669-1374
- Jeff Hunter, IN: (765)589-7605
- Bruce Ankeny, OR: (208)463-0627

-Paul R. Cassell, VA: (276)228-2862

In the past the production Dorset breeder has felt that the CDC has abandoned their cause and doesn't offer much to them. The CDC has been trying to re-establish their connection with the production-type producer and establishing this committee is another step in the right direction. The CDC has already revised the Dorset breed standard to place more emphasis on the complete Dorset sheep, developed new registration papers with production records printed on the back of the papers for easier access to records, resurrected the Dorset breed partnership with the NSIP Program in hopes of developing more accurate EPD's for the Dorset breed as a whole and established a "Commercial Connection" section in the official breed publication to present ideas and open-up lines of communication to our Dorset breeders, thanks to the efforts of Bruce Ankeny.

The committee now needs to progress further in establishing other programs to assist the registered production Dorset breeder. The committee plans on going in front of the CDC Board at Sedalia with future ideas and plans so your input is definitely most welcomed and needed!!

CRISIS, OPPORTUNITY & SUCCESS

It seems unfair that in the world of agriculture we stand to benefit from the misfortunes of our brothers and sisters. We are in a time that the commercial U.S. sheep producers have the opportunity to be very successful over the next few years. In my part of the country you can get a drift of how the industry is going by watching the heavy hitters. When I see my neighbors buying ewe lambs like they are all going to disappear in the next year or so. Something tells me that a change is taking place, and it usually means opportunity. For a U.S. sheep producer to be successful in this time of unprecedented opportunity we must gear up and develop an infrastructure that will not fall apart when the window starts to close. We control our own destiny. This means we must set in place a marketing plan that will be strong and steady for the future growers. Hopefully this will stop the 2-3% per year loss in our sheep inventories. This is our chance to work together to secure our future as an industry. This is the opportunity for the Dorset Producers to be major player in this endeavor. It is our chance to bring to light the benefits of our breed of sheep and their moneymaking qualities.

Speaking of success. I heard by the grapevine that the Dorsets cleaned up at Louisville in November. They had the most sheep, the biggest sheep and the best sheep. I understood that the "all breed champion" ram was a dorset, the ram was 39" tall at the shoulders. Wow! I don't think my first pony was that tall. Now that we have our sheep tall enough to walk over sagebrush we should be able to compete with the Suffolk's on the western range flocks as terminal sires.

What makes me feel optimistic about the future, outside of watching my neighbor sheep growers? One, have you looked at the price of wool lately? Australia has reduced it huge inventories down to a mere pittance. The drought in Australia has reduced their flocks drastically to point that they have closed one mill that supplied 365,000 pounds of wool per week to China, Italy and Korea.

I've heard people in the west have turning down as much as \$1.35 per pound. I can remember when I was happy to get that on a per sheep return. Now that we have our wool count up on the Dorsets, producers can also take advantage of the higher prices for their wool.

Two, because of the ewe incentive and the pressure to rebuild our flocks to get market share the ewe lambs have not been killed this year. The low inventories in Australia and New Zealand because of their drought condition has lowered imports and caused the U. S. Kill plants to increase production to keep up with demand. The weekly U.S. kill has moved up 10-12,000 head per week, putting more pressure on the feeder inventory. There are simply no feeders anywhere. Fall market lambs are going to be worth some big money this spring.

The third, indication that the sheep industry has more than a glimmer of hope is the attitude of the federal government, utility companies and large corporate land owners that are hiring the use of sheep to control overgrowth, weeds and fires on their lands. Yes, I said they are hiring you to graze your sheep, What a novel idea. There are producers all across this country and Canada that are grazing for cash! It's the new bonanza of the sheep industry. I knew the pendulum would swing, but I didn't know it would swing so quickly. Producers from the Rockies to New England are being paid for grazing their sheep. Some companies will even move the fences and keep water supplied.

Folks, the opportunity is swinging our way. Let's not blow it. Let's take the ram by the horns and be a part of this revolution, making this industry one we can all be proud of. Oh, by the way how many of you had one of those Heavenly Hams ...I mean, Lamb for one of your special family meals this last holiday season? If not, it's a great way to start your promotion toward larger consumption. You know the ol' saying, "It's not what I say but, what I do that counts", and it must start with us.

Bruce Ankeny
Nampa, Idaho
Commercial Producer

RANCHING - A GREAT WAY OF LIFE

By Kit Pharo

Ranching is a great way of life, but is it sustainable? Can it produce enough income to support a growing family? Can it be passed on from one generation to the next? Will the next generation want to come back to the ranch?

In recent years there has been much talk about a concept called "sustainable agriculture" but most of the so-called experts fail to mention the two most important ingredients-profit and enjoyment. Agriculture that is not profitable or enjoyable will never be sustainable.

I'm very troubled by the large number of ranches that are struggling to make a profit. I'm troubled by the number of ranchers who are tired and burned out. I'm troubled by the fact that the average age of ranchers continues to increase because the next generation is not interested in coming back to the family ranch-but can you blame them? They spent all of their lives watching their

parents work relentlessly just to break even and hold the ranch together. If ranching isn't going to be profitable or enjoyable, why ranch?

This is a subject I am very passionate about, but since space is limited I'm just going to hit the high points.

- 1) Profit and enjoyment are attainable. I know several ranchers who have both. While some have inherited a family ranch, others have done it on their own. Age, sex and experience don't seem to be major factors.
- 2) Success seems to be more a matter of attitude than of anything else. Those who are open to change and not afraid to think outside and not afraid to think outside the box are most likely to succeed. On the other hand, those who try to blame everything on everyone else will seldom be successful.
- 3) Successful ranchers work smarter, not harder. Although they enjoy riding a horse and driving a tractor, they always set aside time to "drive the desk". While many hard-working ranchers are embarrassed to be caught inside the house after 7:00 in the morning, several smart-working ranchers haven't even pulled on their boots by 9:00 in the morning.
- 4) Profitable ranchers make efficient use of the ranch's available resources. Instead of investing in the latest gadget, they invest in education courses that teach them how to get the most from what they already have. Money invested in education has a much higher return than money invested in gadgets.
- 5) Successful ranchers observe and imitate nature. Going against nature requires hard work and lots of money. For example, calving in sync with nature can probably do more for ranch profit and enjoyment than anything else I know of.
- 6) Production and profit are not the same thing. In fact, they are often antagonistic toward one another. Successful ranchers realize that some increases in production will actually reduce profit. It's ironic, but many ranches that were put together and paid for with 350 pound calves are now struggling and going broke with 600 pound calves.
- 7) Successful ranchers know who to listen to. We've been taught, by the so-called experts, how to maximize production, but few are teaching us how to maximize profit and enjoyment. Who do you think pays for all the "free" magazines you receive? Who provides most of our grant money our universities receive? Unfortunately many ranchers have developed a "herd mentality" way of thinking. They may be doing everything right, but they're not doing the right things.
- 8) Profitable ranchers have a much lower cost of production than most ranchers. Their break even price is so low they have a distinct competitive advantage over their neighbors who are still trying to increase profits by weaning bigger and bigger calves.
- 9) The most profitable ranchers are selling a product instead of a commodity. They control their marketing and pricing. Time spent on marketing can pay dividends ten times greater than time spent on production. By definition, the commodity business is a break even business. A break even business is not sustainable. However, selling a product, like grass fed beef, requires much more work and effort than just hauling your calves to the nearest sale barn.

10) The easiest way to adapt to change is to create it. Successful ranchers chart their own course. Don't wait for the government or anyone else to step in and help you. You may be the only one who is capable of making your ranch more profitable, enjoyable and sustainable.

Kit Pharo is a no-nonsense seed-stock producer in eastern Colorado. He shares his philosophies and opinions in a bi-monthly newsletter that is mailed out to over 11,000 ranchers. To receive this free newsletter call 1-800-311-0995 or send an e-mail to: kit@pharocattle.com