



COMMERCIAL MERINO FLOCK BREEDING

Presentation by Gary Simpson

INTRODUCTION

“Sheep breeding must minimize chance. It requires an objective scientific method, but also relies upon the breeder’s expertise and knowledge. Art accompanies Science.”

This quote comes from the recently released book, “The Merryville Type.” Interestingly the quote comes from the early days of Australia’s sheep industry, 200 years ago.

The Merryville Bloodline is famous around the world for a specific type which produces the highest quality and most valuable wool in the world. Merryville sheep breed ‘true to type’ and have been used by the majority of Merino Studs in Australia. The stud has survived through 3 generations and is arguably the most prominent stud today.

For me the story of Merryville is about a Vision and making it happen. About seeing beyond short term fads, yet adopting change for future growth. A story of a family and their sheep that have not only stood the test of time, but continue to be industry leaders. Visit www.merryvillestud.com to contact Wally or George Merriman regarding their book.

THE VISION

Often I am asked by customers, what do I think they should be breeding? My response is “What DO YOU wish to breed? Where do you want to be in 10 years time?” As basic as it is, success follows on when all parties are clear as to where we are headed. My job as a flock classer is to help you achieve your goals, not mine. The goals must be specific and attainable.

(Let me clarify attainable as being beyond what those around you think, many successful people have done things differently, despite the doom and gloom of the next door neighbor or grand father who has done it another way for 100 years).

As a common sense comment, you must believe that your product will be commercially viable in the future. Further on the common sense track, we all know that the best laid plans seldom come to pass, I guess The Vision is a Big Picture thing, there has to be room to move in response to unforeseen happenings and technologies.

A comment to consider: My observation of the Alpaca Industry today is that success is judged in the show ring and monetary gain comes from selling stud animals to stud producers. How long can this last with-out a commercial industry underneath? Sheep Breeders, such as Merryville use the Shows to market their product, and whilst being enormously successful in the show ring the real gain is related to their many client’s success over a long period of time, who keep coming back and paying for their genetics.

Common Sense and Patience are important factors. With sheep breeding, we set out to make change. After 2 years the 1st progeny are ready to be assessed, often this may represent 20% of the total drop and these are only half bred. Year 3, 40% of that years drop is half bred and the 1st progeny from the year 2 half bred are on the ground. These ¾ bred will still be less than 20% of the years drop and 4% of the entire flock. By assessing those in year 5 we have some indications of the flock in year 10. Obviously there are many ways to speed up the

process of change, often financial considerations are the limiting factor.

My point here is that animal breeding is a slow process and fads will come and go over the period. Your resolve needs to be strong. Personally I feel that if customer’s “stay on track” for the first 5 years things go well from then on.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Now the Vision is clear, -you have a good idea as to what you wish to produce- your next step is to identify a genetic source.

Personally I aim to identify studs which can offer: 1) Genetic Type you are looking. A good indicator for this is to observe other commercial flocks using these bloodlines. But be wary of how well these flocks are run, (plenty of breeding is in the feeding and vice versa. 2) Purity and Predictability. 3) Progressive Studs. 4) Compatibility of relationships. I believe that ideally involving the stud master with your program is important. Stud breeders have more knowledge of their flock than any-one. Their advice is important, they also have vested interests in your success, not only may you be a long term client, but others may see your success and follow your path to the stud.

Environmental Considerations: A small point on a vital consideration. The ability of the progeny to survive, thrive and reproduce in your environment is fundamental to success.

KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE

You feed ‘em, I’ll breed ‘em. A standard line I use with my customers. Basically I challenge

growers to be expert at feeding their stock effectively and keeping them healthy against worms, lice and any thing else that can effect the ability of the animal to express its full genetic potential.

Today's challenges are to increase productivity per hectare, obviously to maximize net profits. For many livestock operations this is achieved from improved genetics, it is also achieved from improved pasture production, enabling more stock to be run healthily.

THE FEMALE FACTOR

Females are the backbone of the flock; they are also the limiting factor. Each progeny is essentially half the female and half the male influence. Individually in a commercial flock a single ewe has limited influence, how ever collectively they are of major importance.

- Important to identify/clarify type and production performance. This allows mating with best suited sires.
- Assessing the ability to reproduce and breed on is fundamental to development of the flock. (Referring to my introduction "Art accompanies Science.")

Assessing the female's performance is an area which creates debate and division with-in the industry. Referring back to John Crawford's discussion (two years ago) he talks about a Balanced Approach. You must look at the animal, assessing the physical structure and wool type, as he has learnt from his father. The ewe has to be able to feed and reproduce as well as grow a terrific fleece. Finally the ewe must perform using scientific measurements.

'How much hands on? how much science?' - I believe is a personal decision. Too much of one and not enough of the other seldom works. I'm yet to out breed a scientist on the kitchen table. If I can get them into the paddock the odds even up a little.

Focus on the things that count when selecting breeding females, remember your Vision. Assess honestly where the group is in relation to this and then join to the sires which will hopefully take you forward the next step of the journey.

THE MALE ROLE

Fuel for thought; a flock of 100 pure bred Superfine ewes. From next door 1 Black Face Suffolk Ram and Ewe get through the fence. How much damage to that years drop will the ewe contribute compared to the Black Face Ram? For the ewe there will be one or two lambs to remove, from the ram may be 70% of the drop is culled. Imagine trying to breed that 70% of half bred lambs back to the original type. A simple scenario designed to highlight the influence of each individual male toward achieving your goals.

- Sires individually are a huge influence on the flock.
- Observation and Planning is crucial. Be clear on the traits you require to counter balance or enhance the female flock. This may require joining type with type or corrective mating.
- High Quality sires are proven performers, again observation of progeny helps make these decisions," the proof of the pudding is in the tasting." My parting comment - In the rural

communities where I have worked I have observed successful and unsuccessful farmers. I cannot categorically identify that one way of farming is more successful than another. The successful operators range from breeding Corriedales against the trends, to sowing wheat where it has never been done before. The common factor is that all these people are passionate about their work and are experts at what they do.

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