

# What Sheep Breed Is the Best of All?

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

One of the first steps that everyone takes in order to start a sheep operation is getting information on where to get sheep. Far too often the decision on the breed is made before breeders are scouted out, a business plan is developed, and the market in the immediate neighborhood has been explored. However, some sheep breeds fit certain managing systems better than others. In addition, not all sheep breeds produce the same products.

Quite often people seek my advice with an already set mind and tell me: “I heard Suffolk sheep are the best breed,” or “Dorper sheep are the best sheep.” My standard response is always the same: “Best breed for what purpose?” In this article I will try to convince you that you should think first about the sheep farm you envision, how you want to raise sheep, market the products, and then choose a sheep breed accordingly.

One of the criteria when choosing a sheep breed is what market you wish to have or you can serve. The traditional market in the U.S. has been in the western and midwestern parts of the country. Slaughterhouses charge by the animal when killing lambs and, unlike other domestic animals, not by the pound. Hence, large lambs reduce the cost per pound of lamb in comparison to smaller lambs. Also, unlike Europe, U.S. butchers are accustomed to trimming fat off the carcasses, of which you get quite a bit when raising a lamb to 140 pounds live weight. That means the bigger the

lamb the better it is. Suffolk and Hampshire sheep produce such large carcasses either when used as purebred flocks or, more commonly, when they are used as terminal sires for cross breeding with “white-faced” wool sheep out West.

There is also an ethnic market. It is an ever-increasing market for smaller and lighter lambs. Depending on ethnicity, season, or religious holiday, people of Mediterranean, African, or mid-Eastern origin or background look for a lamb anywhere between 40 and 100 pounds live weight. While the New Zealand producers have penetrated that market for lighter lambs quite substantially, it still asks for many live lambs that must be raised domestically. Large breeds are often most unsuitable to produce these light lambs because the meat to fat to bone ratio is most unfavorable in light lambs

from many larger breeds. In addition, lambs from these large breeds often don't have a meaty appearance to entice buyers at auctions who may be looking for a lamb for Easter or Greek Easter. Smaller or medium sized breeds with heavy muscling produce such lambs. In this group fall breeds like Texel sheep and Cheviots. Lambs of these breeds look meaty the day they are born and never lose that appearance whether they weigh 40, 60, or 80 lbs.

Another developing market that seems to be becoming more and more important is the local market. It looks like mainstream America is more and more willing to support local farmers. They do so for many different reasons. Whatever the personal reasons, it is a market well worth serving. That can be done either with “freezer lambs,” meaning selling whole and half lambs, or selling individual cuts. The desired weight will be higher than for the Easter market but



*A Texel ram, useful in siring market lambs of a variety of weight goals*

can stay well below the traditional heavy lamb market. A ball park figure would be a weight anywhere from 70 to 100 lbs. live weight. While some customers prefer the traditional taste of grain-fed lamb, more and more people are asking for grass-fed lamb. In order to raise sheep on grass and finish lambs on pasture, one must select a breed that can thrive on grass without any grain like many hairsheep breeds do. If, on the other hand, the lambs will be grain-fed and grain-finished, it is of utmost importance to choose a breed that does not put on too much fat and doesn't do so too early. Larger breeds are more likely to be suitable. So are Texel, who are known for their lean carcass. Dorper sheep on the other hand, would be hopelessly fat due to their low maintenance requirements when heavily grainfed and raised to 100 lbs. live weight.

The managing system is also of utmost importance when choosing a sheep breed. When it comes to sheep breeds and their suitability for grazing, the situation in the U.S. is rather unique. In no other country that I am aware of has the ability of sheep to thrive on grass been lost in so many sheep breeds than in America. The two culprits for it are feedlots and sheep shows. While there are certainly other countries in the world where sheep are also receiving grain rations, raising sheep at least partially on pasture is still the norm. In contrast, huge amounts of cheap corn and low fuel prices led to feedlots in which lambs were finished for the U.S. market. While both corn and fuel prices have risen dramatically in the past few years, decades of breeding large sheep suitable for the feedlots cannot be undone overnight.

The show ring has also led to breeding of sheep that are rather large, in accordance to the motto "bigger is better," and also sheep with a tight little belly to make them look taller. The more daylight there is underneath the belly, the bigger the sheep looks. The large sheep of both feedlot and show ring have such high maintenance requirements that forage alone no longer is sufficient to let them thrive. In addition, a small belly leaves too little room for forage. In fact, this development has led to a completely different appearance in some breeds when compared to the same breed in other parts of the world. The American Suffolk and the American Polled Dorset, for instance, are almost a different breed when compared to a British Suffolk or an Australian Dorset sheep. I made that experience rather painfully in my early years in the U.S. when I based my decisions about sheep breeds on the experience I gained in Germany and Europe and introduced Suffolk and

Dorset sheep that were unable to fatten on just grass. On the other hand, if you intend to feed grain, have a convenient source of grain nearby (say distiller grain from an ethanol plant), and you need large lambs, these breeds may suit you well. The larger the sheep, the later it will put on fat.

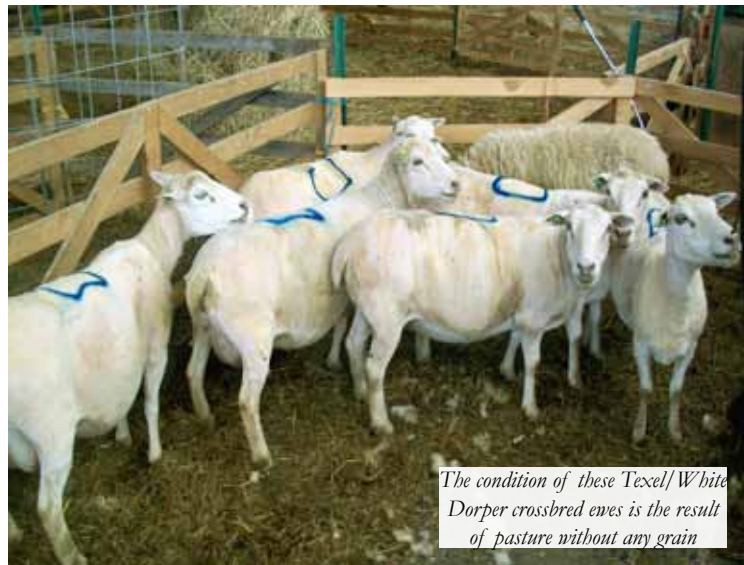
Aside from purchasing a purebred flock, there are two other ways to go as well. When I started White Clover Sheep Farm in the United States I searched for sheep not too far from me that were suitable for grazing and were healthy. I ended up with half a dozen different breeds from several different farms. While I don't suggest buying sheep from many different places because of the risk of disease, I had little choice since all I had at the time were two suitcases, three herding dogs, which I brought from Germany with me, and a head full of ideas, ambition, and hope, but little money. Then I looked for a ram of a truly desirable breed. I ended up buying a Texel ram from a farm in Connecticut, managed by Frank from northern England with an almost Scottish accent. Because I hardly understood what he was saying, I needed his wife, who spoke the finest Oxford English, to translate. Why does it matter? Well, it doesn't, but it is an anecdote that I will never forget. I purchased my first Texel ram from him and used that ram on my entire flock.

Looking at just one subsequent generation, this practice amounted to cross breeding. This is a practice widely common throughout the world when raising sheep, far more common

than in raising cattle or dairy cows. It results in the so-called hybrid vigor or heterosis effect, especially if the sheep breeds used are very dissimilar. This works great to produce market lambs. In short, a terminal sire is used. All offspring are butchered. Maternal traits of the sire breed being used do not matter.

Another practice widely used is upgrading a flock with rams of the

breed that one desires. This is what I did with the Texel rams I purchased over the years. I continued to use them on all my ewes in order to create a purebred flock. This can be done with sheep in as little as four years since it takes only four generations to get purebred sheep of the new breed. The significance of this process is that it is extremely economical to go this route if you already have sheep on your farm. All you need is patience. Buying a brand-new flock of ewes is far more expensive.



Here is the irony: I never was a fan of Texel sheep when I was in Germany. I can name in an instance a dozen other breeds I liked more. However, in order to raise sheep on grass, I needed a sheep breed within a reasonable distance for a reasonable price, and make a profit with these sheep. My choices were limited at the time and this was my best choice.

A hip term that is often used nowadays is “low-input” sheep. What that is supposed to mean is that sheep of these breeds need low input in both labor and monies as for a barn, feeders, or any other equipment. Unfortunately, for some it means far too often doing nothing and leaving the sheep all

to themselves. I don’t subscribe to that. It is true, however, that there are breeds with better mothering abilities and that lamb easier than other breeds and are hardier when it comes to unfavorable weather. Many hairsheep breeds are definitely easy lambers. I can testify that assistance needed during lambing has

d e c r e a s e d manyfold since I switched from Texel to Dorper sheep. Since no grain is needed for this breed either, it reduces the need for equipment and thus the cost tremendously. Add to it spring lambing and your need for labor, barn, and equipment is reduced to the bare minimum.

Another consideration is the production of wool. There are two wool markets that are worth exploring and the sheep breeds suitable for these markets need to be selected accordingly. The traditional wool market that still fetches some money is the one for fine white wool. Breeds like Merinos and Rambouillets produce that kind of wool. Sheep with fine wool need arid climates. In places with high humidity and rainfall this wool just rots on the body of the sheep. Hence, these sheep are mostly raised in large bands out West in states like Arizona, Colorado, Utah, or Idaho—to name a few. In these areas it is also easier to get shearers. The other wool market is a niche market for hand-spinners. Although a much smaller market than the commercial market for fine white wool, this market has become quite strong and often operates on a bigger profit margin which justifies smaller, hobby-like flocks. This wool is often coarser and it is also longer in order to be able to spin a yarn. On top of it, natural colors in addition to white wool are very popular. Some breeds suitable that come

to mind are Romney, Cotswold, and Leicester sheep, to name a few.

While the general wool price has temporarily recovered from a low that already lasted decades, in most years the money earned from the wool often doesn’t even cover shearing costs in many parts of the country, especially if the wool is not a fine white wool or a wool that can be used for hand-spinning. Shearers are becoming less available as well. After all, it is a tough job. As wool prices declined and shearers became less available I picked up shearing myself, shearing my own sheep and in addition some sheep in my immediate neighborhood.



*White Dorper rams, the breed that has worked best for me raising sheep on pasture*

But I had long put an eye on hairsheep. The definition of a hairsheep is that it sheds and doesn’t need shearing. The fact that modern hairsheep breeds often have wool instead of hair matters not in order to be considered a hairsheep as long as it still sheds. Hairsheep breeds in the U.S. are breeds like Katahdin and Dorper.

Dorper and White

Dorper sheep (both are considered the same breed, just slightly differently colored) were developed in South Africa, using Horned Dorset sheep and the Blackhead Persian. The resulting new breed combines the meatiness of the Dorset sheep and the shedding ability of the Persian sheep. At the time, Dorper sheep were still a novelty and hence out of my price range. I figured what goes up must come down. When prices eventually came down enough I purchased my first White Dorper rams and upgraded my flock once more. My White Dorpers thrive just as good on grass as Texel sheep and produce the same meaty carcass but have a few additional favorable traits, most notably shedding, easy lambing, and milder taste of the meat, especially in older sheep. It also turned out to be a breed that is highly desired (and hence a good market for breeding stock) by people who want to raise a small flock and don’t wish to be bothered with shearing and hiring a shearer.

Geographical distance of a suitable breeder to your home farm matters for two reasons. First, transportation isn’t cheap and is likely to get more expensive in the days ahead. You might be surprised how expensive transportation has already become. Secondly and even more importantly, sheep that are raised in a similar climate are likely to adjust easier to your



conditions at home than sheep raised in a different climate. This is especially true when you live in a very humid area and intend to buy sheep that were raised in a drier, cooler, or semi-arid climate. Sheep raised for generations in warm and humid climates are likely to be more parasite resistant than sheep raised in drier and cooler climates. If you transplant sheep not used to heavy parasite pressure to an area where that pressure will surely be high you may lose quite a few sheep before your sheep have developed resistance and immunity to internal parasites. In other words, if you live in the humid state of Arkansas don't go looking for sheep in New Mexico. Your search for sheep raised in a similar climate may help them to get an easier start.

While seemingly off topic, I would want to point out that the health status of a flock matters. While there are common diseases that can be ignored because they won't have an impact on your bottom line, there is one I never get tired of pointing out that one should avoid: hoof rot. Don't bother buying from a flock that has that disease, or you will regret it. Those among you who have dairy cows or cattle and think you can deal with it, consider yourself warned. It's not the same in sheep. It is hard to get rid of. It will affect your bottom line.

In summary, there is no one-size-fits-all sheep breed and there is no "best" sheep breed either. In the search for suitable sheep for your farm don't start with the breed you wish to choose. Instead, let your market, your planned management system, and your geographical proximity to sheep breeders lead you to the sheep breed that best suits you. In addition, any chosen breed will be a compromise, since the genes for meat, wool, and milk production are considered antagonistic genes. That means there is no breed that excels in all three categories equally. On top of it there are other criteria to consider: ease of lambing, mothering ability, size, low input versus high input, ability to thrive on pasture versus suitability for grain feeding, and so forth. When all traits are considered, a compromise needs to be struck. In the end, ask yourself if your compromise will make you money. Whether or not these sheep will be profitable under your special circumstances is in the end what should trump any other consideration. If the breed you end up with is not what you had wished for, don't worry about it. You'll get used to it. Take it from me, I managed to get used to Texel sheep and raised them for about ten years. Only an even higher profit margin made me switch to White Dorper sheep. 🐑

**Disclaimer:** The sheep breeds mentioned in this article are used as examples to illustrate the points I am making. I did not intend to endorse any breed. The list is also incomplete. There are more breeds that fit the business models and markets I have described.

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