

When to Start and When to Finish Grazing

—Ulf Kintzel

photos by Author

Every year in the spring, and then again in the fall, newsletters of extension specialists are circulated and articles are published in various grazing publications and sheep magazines about when to start grazing and when to stop. The advice given often seems to be in direct contradiction of what I have learned. My experience is with grazing sheep in states like New Jersey and New York as well as my native Germany. In this article I would like to talk about my personal experience.

My stocking rate is lower than the suggested stocking rate of four ewes per acre which the books will tell you my land can carry. The intent is to stay at or just below three ewes per acre or about 75 percent capacity. That is my choice for several reasons: In August and September I stockpile a considerable amount of my pasture for fall and early winter grazing. I have managed to reduce my hay feeding days to less than 100. I start feeding hay sometime in early January and am finished by late March or early April, depending on whether we get an early or late spring. That is about 50 to 90 fewer hay feeding days than usual in my area. Secondly, if a farm is at its highest possible stocking rate you will almost inevitably run out of grass during the summer months, let alone being able to stockpile. Feeding supplemental feed during the summer when lambs need dairy-quality feed to be finished is a very expensive undertaking. Destocking is not an option for me the way my business and my market is structured. Not being able to graze for as long as I do and having to feed hay instead also would result in higher cost. My calculation shows me that the higher income I would earn by having four ewes per acre would be eaten up by the higher cost of feeding hay to my sheep or perhaps having to bring in commercial fertilizer. In times of ever increasing prices for any input, this holds true more so than ever. Lastly, by being slightly under-stocked you are not likely to run into danger of overgrazing and you are able to give the pasture a rest period of four to five weeks. There is nothing more stressful for a shepherd like me than running out of grass.

With my lower stocking rate I

make sure that doesn't happen.

With the exception of the ewes that lamb in January in the barn, my sheep winter outside. They have access to a run-in shed and hedgerows when storms hit or the cold wind is blowing. The first-cutting hay I feed from January through March is being fed in round bales in feeders made from livestock panels. These feeders are cheap and easily moved. That allows me to strategically feed the hay where I want the pasture to be fertilized. I can also completely avoid manure pileups this way. The brief period in March when it is muddy is a bit of a hassle. While sheep generally don't pug the pasture when it is mud season, they do so around the feeder. Sometimes I run out of dry places and some spots are sacrificed by allowing them to get pugged. *C'est la vie.*

Grass starts growing around here during the last week of March in a good year and during the first week of April when spring is late. When I can detect a green sheen when looking over the pasture and when I see the orchard grass pushing its blades out an inch or so I have all the grass it takes to feed a flock of sheep. Well, allow me to back up a bit. At the onset of the growing season my flock has access to the entire farm. I used my electric nettings as a perimeter fence where I don't have permanent fencing. That means about 113 acres of pasture are available to them and indeed during these first few days of spring my flock of approximately 500 sheep is spread out at any one point in time over 30 or more acres throughout the day. There is still a hay feeder with a clean first-cutting grass-hay of good quality sitting out there. However, when a round bale lasts about three to four days for such a flock it can be easily stated that the sheep find enough grass to graze. While such little hay eaten is almost irrelevant when it comes to my annual hay feeding costs, it is still essential in a nutritional sense. The first grass that grows is high in protein and too low in fiber. The hay helps to keep the nutrients balanced and provides the fiber and energy that is needed. In addition, the remaining residue from the previous year that the sheep eat with the new grass has the same effect as the hay.

While sheep are capable of



Spring 05/06/2011-Early grazing does not harm total yield if followed by long rest periods.

eating very selectively with their pointy mouths, it is impossible to avoid all residue when grazing the new grass. The free choice hay is the indicator for me when I can stop feeding hay entirely. How do I know when to stop feeding hay? Well, the sheep will just stop eating it, that's how. Another indicator is that the flock stops moving around throughout the day and stays far longer in one spot. While they are still immensely spread out, the standstill for several hours tells me there is enough grass for them. Lastly, the growth of the grass becomes at some point very obvious to the observing eye, especially after a warm rain. I expect that to be by mid-April.

The argument has been made on occasion that during these first few days of spring the sheep encounter a "hungry gap," meaning they are no longer interested in the hay that is being provided and the little grass that grows is not enough to feed them. The ewes are getting skinnier that way. Thus, this is a good time to pen the sheep up and have them eat hay without access to pasture. Obviously, that will increase your hay feeding days by at least an additional two to three weeks. More importantly, that has not been my experience. In fact, my experience is quite the contrary. A German saying tells you, "Where a cow would starve to death, ten sheep can feed themselves." My sheep, especially the lambs, respond very well to this early grass. They easily hold their condition that first week of grazing and when a ewe is overwhelmed by raising a lamb while still being young and growing herself, such a ewe can gain condition easily two weeks later. The sheep are also not rejecting the hay as long as they still need it. However, there are a few factors that have shaped my experience. First and foremost, the sheep I raise are suitable for grazing. Many breeds of sheep and many show sheep have lost the ability to thrive on grass due to many generations of grain-feeding without the need to select for grazing ability. I too had to cull sheep in earlier years that had some show sheep influence like Dorset and Suffolk sheep that just wouldn't make it. The same holds true for overly large sheep with a very high maintenance. Secondly, the access to such a wide area where they can eat selectively all day long is essential as well.

How does that fit into a strict rotational grazing program? Very simple. The day will come, usually by the last third of April, that there is plentiful grass. That is early enough to start a rigid rotational schedule and that is indeed what I start doing at that time all the way during the growing season. Once the

pasture rotation has started, each cell has between three to five weeks of resting time.

The second argument I have encountered on numerous occasions is that early grazing stunts the growth of the grass from which it will not recover all season long. The recommendations vary from at least six up to eight inches (orchard grass) of growth before starting grazing. In this area it would be early May before the grass is this high. Given a rotational schedule of at least three weeks, it would be late May or even early June before the last piece of pasture is being grazed for the first time of the season. By then you have lost a good amount of palatability. When grazing starts that late you just can't keep up anymore. The grass is so far ahead in growth and developing seed stems that it will go at the expense of quality. Orchard grass will have headed out and will be rejected by your sheep. Of course, you can always decide to make hay at this point, which I don't. I buy all my hay. Grazing early, on the other hand, will reduce the amount of seed stems, will reduce the amount of more competitive weeds which are most readily eaten early in the season, and grasses will be stimulated to develop more tillers under early grazing pressure. *I have found absolutely no negative effect of early grazing.* A recent field trial in Wisconsin conducted by Geoff Brink at the US Dairy Forage Research Center with grazing heifers showed no significant reduction in total yield when grazing pastures early as long as the pasture receives enough rest time later and is allowed to grow high enough. That confirms my experience with early grazing of sheep.

As we approach fall, the conventional wisdom is to let pasture rest so that it can store reserves in its roots and to leave residue, thus not graze it too short. The residue will be needed to secure the pasture's survival over the winter and it will help green it up earlier in the spring. The former premise to allow grass enough rest time that it can store energy in its roots is undoubtedly true. I always leave enough residue, but in the fall it is primarily for the purpose of allowing the grass to store reserves, which the stockpiled grass does anyway. However, I come back to each part of the pasture when it has gone truly dormant in late November and December and into January. This time around I take it down as far as the sheep can or want to take it down. Once dormant, close grazing does not affect pasture negatively in any way as long as the pasture is not abused and the sheep starved and forced to eat everything. I



Winter grazing 2010. Pasture can be grazed close after it has gone dormant in the fall.

start offering free choice first-cutting hay when my experience tells me they might start needing some. Most times, I offer it earlier than needed. At the onset of hay, feeding my flock will only nibble a little on the hay as long as the grass is tastier. That changes during the month of January when snow cover gets too high to make it worth their while to dig through. My pasture's predominant grass species is orchard grass. When I let my sheep graze it down in the winter as much as they can and want, it still does not look like a trimmed and manicured lawn or golf course. There is always some residue after the orchard grass has been grazed. That holds true too for my little two-acre test plot with tall fescue. The same does not hold true for the few acres I have with bluegrass, rye grass, timothy, and meadow fescue. They are grazed short and no residue is left by Christmas. I am in the process of interseeding orchard grass in these latter fields as well. Orchard grass just works best for my sheep grazing operation.

When spring comes around and the grass starts growing, my pastures that are grazed short after it went dormant green up just as fast as any pasture with lots of residue. In my opinion, the residue is not the key factor of early green-up. The fact that the pasture was allowed to rest and that the close

grazing took place *after dormancy* is the decisive factor. In that sense, pasture with residue does not grow two to three weeks earlier versus pasture without residue as is often suggested in various publications.

I want you, the reader, to keep in mind that my article is based on my very own personal experience, which despite 27 years of grazing experience is by nature very limited, especially in a geographical sense. I am sure that you can relate this article to your farm if you live in a state like Pennsylvania or Wisconsin but perhaps not so much if you are from New Mexico or Idaho. At the same time I want you to take a closer look when, for instance, you are being told that grazing before the grass is eight inches tall is a blunder or if you are being told that sheep cannot feed themselves on the first grass that grows. Just because it has been repeated over and over again doesn't make it any truer. In that sense, happy grazing. 

Ulf Kintzel is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. In 2006 he moved from New Jersey to Rusville in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm. He breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.

Obituary

Maurice Bernard Telleen, 83, of Waverly, Iowa, died August 21, 2011. He was born on May 8, 1928 in Gowrie, Iowa, the son of Edwin and Maude (Carlson) Telleen. He was raised on a farm near Gowrie and graduated from Gowrie High School in 1946.

Maury was in the United States Army, serving 18 months in Korea. He then attended Iowa State University, Northwestern University, and the University of Iowa on the G. I. Bill. He graduated from the University of Iowa in 1948. On August 14, 1954 he married Jeannine Rae Sarchett. She preceded him in death. He leaves four surviving children and seven grandchildren. One daughter, Natasha Gayle, died of childhood leukemia.

Maury always had a strong affinity for Oxford Down sheep, Brown Swiss and Guernsey cattle, Border Collie dogs, and draft horses. His interest in the heavy horse industry led him and Jeannine to launch *The Draft Horse Journal* in 1964. Started as a hobby, the *Journal* soon developed into something

much bigger, much to the chagrin of the naysayers of that time.

In 1974, Maury resigned his job as secretary-manager of the National Dairy Cattle Congress in Waterloo, Iowa, to work full time on the magazine. Under Maury and Jeannine's (and now by their son, Lynn) guidance, expertise, and enthusiasm, the *Journal* not only flourished, but because of their efforts, the heavy horse industry revived and is thriving today.

Those of us in small-scale agriculture owe a tremendous debt to the Telleens for their life's work. This magazine would never have left the dock if we wouldn't have had the wisdom and support from Maury. When discussing a name for the publication, he suggested "Farming Magazine," because after all, he said, that's what we all do. Let's not paint ourselves into a niche corner with a clever title, he advised. I will always treasure Maury's frequent letters, as do all of his friends. They were gems.

We will miss Maury. Steve Jones from Indiana says it well:

Where do you start in describing a friend like Maury? He was one of those types of people you don't have the opportunity of meeting everyday, much less having as a friend. Like many of you, I got to know him through the draft horse industry. His involvement in the promotion of drafts would occasionally find him out in the lead developing new avenues, sometimes as swingman steadying the course, and whenever needed on the wheel helping to pull the load. More importantly, he was never above putting on the work harness and doing some needed, but unnoticed field work. Our industry is indebted to him in more ways than any of us can put into words.

Maury was blessed with his own special personality, character, and wit, and that occasional naughtiness that would cause even the most conservative of us to *smile out loud*. I already miss him. May he rest in peace.

—Steve Jones

