

White Dorper Sheep and Grass Farming – the Dos and Don'ts

Photos by Author

—Ulf Kintzel

I was 19 years old and about to learn one of my many lasting life lessons. I had just finished my apprenticeship and had started working at a sheep farm. The supervisor there was very knowledgeable, skilled, and successful, even famous. That is why I had sought this place for employment. I wanted to learn more skills and gain more knowledge. The supervisor was the right man to teach me many sheep farming and herding skills. He lacked some people skills, though. I still see him where he stood, with his index finger raised, telling me early on, “The hardest skill in life is dealing with people.” I am now in my 33rd year of sheep farming and my 22nd year of running my own business. I can unequivocally say: He was right.

I am selling White Dorper breeding stock for about ten years now, and the spectrum of customers ranges from very satisfied customers who call me almost weekly and rave about the sheep (yes, Daniel in Michigan, I mean you) to

people telling me I am unethical because a ram lamb I sold died months after purchase and I didn't accept responsibility. How do you deal with folks who think you are at fault when things go wrong? Aren't customers the people who are supposed to be always right? Where do you appease, where do you try to educate, and where do you draw the line? When I speak with some of these customers on the phone, I realize how many incorrect expectations people have. So the thought occurred to me, “Why not write an article about reasonable and unreasonable expectations about both the breed of sheep I raise and sell, as well as raising them on pasture without any grain feeding?”

Recently, a customer came to pick up a ram lamb and asked me if I am having luck with White Dorper sheep. My answer was that it isn't luck. I obtained certain skills and experience over the years, I gained knowledge, I observe, I am uncompromising in doing my daily chores, I observe (I know, I already said that, but I want to emphasize it), I stay curious. All of that is not a matter of luck. But when you



do all that, luck in the form of success is likely to come to you. I have never found a breed of sheep—and I know and have worked with many—that combines so many good and productive traits. So, here are a few dos and don'ts if you want to be successful with “my” breed of sheep.

Sometimes you will hear a discussion about what is more important in grass-farming, knowledge about the animals you raise or knowledge of how to grow grass and how to pasture it. In my view, it's a needless question. When raising grass-fed sheep, you will need to obtain knowledge both about sheep and growing and grazing pasture.

Here is a simplified version of how customers describe their idea of raising sheep on pasture: You fence in a piece of pasture, put the sheep in, and that's that. I remember a case of sheep being put in a pasture behind a building and they kept dying, one by one. Eventually they were resold by the owner with the comment that he doesn't think too highly of White Dorper sheep. I happen to agree to an extent with that comment. In a setting like this, many White Dorper sheep will fail. Here is what happens if you “manage” sheep that way: At the beginning, your pasture will have good grass and possibly legumes in it. In the first few days the sheep will graze it. They will be full and fine and will gain weight. Then day number seven and eight and ten come around. The good stuff is grazed but will restart growing during these days. In the meantime, will the sheep give it time and let it regrow and eat the less desirable plants instead? No, of course not. They will continuously graze the plants they like.

They will eat it close to the ground and eventually destroy most of them. Orchard grass is usually the first to go and is rarely found in continuously grazed pasture. The lowest of lowest bluegrass will survive. Now you are no longer meeting the nutritional needs of the sheep. Intake is down and therefore weight gain is down also. Other productivity (fertility, number of lambs born) will be the next to suffer.

When something goes wrong with a customer's sheep, the most common call I get is that an animal they bought has died “all of a sudden.” Likely, it was the barber pole worm that killed them in many if not most of these cases. How does that happen? Going back to the aforementioned pasture that was grazed short: 80 percent of all of this worm's larvae sit on the first four inches of the grass blades. Only 20 percent attempt to crawl higher. That means that at my farm, where I leave enough residual, the intake of worm larvae is moderate, which is enough to challenge the sheep's immune system and allows the sheep to develop some resistance to the worms without killing them right away. Those that are affected, i.e. young animals who have not have developed any resistance yet, will give me time to treat them. When I sell young animals to places where pasture is grazed short, the intake of worm larvae is much higher. That can overwhelm the animal. The worms sit in the fourth stomach, the actual stomach, and suck the lamb's blood out. They also literally make holes in that stomach. The signs of a barber pole worm are subtle to the inexperienced eye: anemia, weakness, and on occasion swelling under the



Pasture shift is a great time to watch for sick or limping or otherwise affected animals. They will likely come at the end of the flock.

lower jaw, which is called a bottle jaw. Diarrhea, the sign expected by some when sheep have worms, is absent. So it is possible to miss these signs despite me pointing out the importance of watching for it. It is impossible to catch them if you are not watching and observing. When is a good time to take note of any sick animal, including those that are affected by the barber pole worm?



Residual is essential when grazing. I submit it cannot be done successfully or profitably without it.

During pasture shift. I have one daily, so I get to see daily what sheep might come last when entering the new grazing cell, which ones are reluctant to eat, or which appear “sad.” I can then investigate and if necessary treat such animals. If you don’t do a daily pasture shift or if your definition of pasture shift is “rotating” once a week (or after two or three or four weeks), how do you check on your sheep daily to see if everything is okay?

When I am asked, and sometimes even when I am not asked, I tell people that rotational grazing, also called management-intensive grazing (note that the word intensive refers to the management, not to the grazing) is a necessity to succeed in raising and fattening sheep on grass without the input of grain. I am convinced it can’t be done successfully without it. Period. Some come right out and say they won’t do it. Fair enough. Just please don’t expect my sheep to excel at your farm. In fact, I prefer not selling any animals to a place like that. However, some are convinced rotational grazing is exactly what they are doing. When you dig a little deeper, I am told that their pasture rotation is more than a week. It then comes as news to people when I state that any rotation beyond a week is not rotational grazing. A weekly rotation is the absolute maximum to still qualify as rotational grazing. I still don’t recommend it. It is too long. When it comes to a rotation beyond a week, almost all descriptions of continuously grazed pastures basically apply: too close grazing of desirable plants, re-grazing of re-growing plants, and high intake of worm larvae.

People make mistakes. I do all the time. My wife is my witness. She tells me right away when I do. Yet, there is no shame in making mistakes. In fact, you cannot go through life without making mistakes. They are a necessary part of learning. However, you will not learn from them if you don’t face up to them. I am often consulted when things go wrong, sometimes by people whom I have never heard of. When it comes to customers, I get two kinds: those who immediately think I sold them something faulty or flawed and those who want to figure out what they are doing wrong. I cannot help the former but often I can help the latter. Yet,

sometimes I am not the person to consult because I am not there and don’t know the circumstances. A local vet or experienced sheep farmer who can look at the issue in question is often a better qualified to offer help.

Sometimes it will lead to the loss of animals due to the

lack of experience and experienced help. I remember a case when a couple of sheep couldn’t deliver their lambs and by the time the problem was somewhat diagnosed it was too late for these sheep. In fact, there may not even have been a solution once it got to that point. That is very unfortunate, but I am afraid that this cannot always be avoided. You will pay a price for some mistakes. Life is that way, cruel and swift. But hopefully, you will recognize the mistake and then learn from it and then not do it again. That is all part of the learning curve that no one is spared who is successful. In the case of the lost ewes, the owner feels he identified what led to the problem and has taken steps to avoid a repetition.

I wasn’t spared that learning curve either. Sheep in my care, often belonging to other sheep farmers, died also. Many. I made mistakes that I would never do again. However, the reason I am not making them again is because the consequences were so severe that I never forgot what happened in each of these cases. In some of these cases, I have a visual picture still in my head that tells me when and where it happened. For instance, I will never ever go with a flock of 1,600 hungry sheep into a pasture consisting entirely of young white clover. I still see some of them bloating and dropping dead. Had I been told to not do these things, would I have listened? My life records show that in many cases I wouldn’t have when I was that young.

After many years of propagating labor and capital-intensive management systems, government and university-linked entities have in recent years recommended a “hands-off approach.” This is another extreme on the other end of the spectrum of possible management systems which I don’t quite agree with. It has led to strange expectations. “Hands-off” seems to mean “offer no help whatsoever” to some. They think that one should cull any animal that would cause them to lay hands on it and help. It is correct that selection of off-spring for breeding purposes should be guided by avoiding or eliminating unnecessary labor-intensive problems that are based on genetics. For instance, I

am selecting for ease of lambing. Sheep that have a genetic-based problem with lambing are culled. It does not mean that you don't have to help a ewe that is giving birth when the lamb is positioned in a way that the ewe can't deliver it, i.e. when the head is turned back. The positioning of a lamb is not a genetic factor. Here is another example: Mothering is a very important trait. At my farm, no adult ewe with bad mothering instincts will get another chance to lamb again and will be culled instead. In fact, I have been so successful with that selection that I simply haven't had any ewe with bad mothering instinct for many years. That does not mean that a ewe needs to be culled that lambs for her first time at an age of 12 or 13 months and walks briefly away from the lamb right after birth because she is in a lot of pain. If you see her taking good care of her lamb half an hour later when they are in a jug, it is likely that there is no genetic factor but your observation and need to put them together is needed. It also doesn't mean that young sheep that didn't have the nutrition they needed throughout the winter and in the spring walk away from their lambs are to blame for lack of mothering. This describes a scenario I encountered where management issues and not genetic shortcomings were the cause of problems.

My third and last example is hoof care. Sheep with white hooves (like White Dorper sheep) have more hoof growth than sheep with dark hooves. Farms with deep soils and no rocks don't lend themselves to have the hooves being worn down. Yes, a breeder should select for correct hoof growth and I do. Animals that grow uneven hooves should eventually be culled. (I say "eventually" because there are many other reasons that warrant culling that come well before that.) However, selecting for good hoof growth does not mean that you will never have to cut hooves when they are not worn. Worse, if a foreign object like a rock or thorn works itself into the hoof and causes the sheep to limp you definitely need to cut the hoof and remove the cause.

Hands-off should also not mean that sheep are deprived of shade in the summer and shelter in the winter, fresh and clean water as well as free-choice minerals, or that worm resistance is expected when one shouldn't expect it because of the breed or the age of the sheep. Providing the necessities for the sheep to thrive does not amount to a labor-intensive approach.

So, if you want to memorize some general rules that you keep in mind when you have just started with grass-fed sheep, here they are:

- Practice rotational grazing. Don't have a rotational grazing plan that exceeds a week in any given grazing cell. A three to five days grazing schedule is okay. A one to three-day grazing schedule is much, much better. Aim for a daily rotation if you can.
- Leave residual of about four inches. Not only will your pasture be thankful, your sheep will be too.

Your pasture will grow back quicker, will catch rain better, and won't heat up and dry out as easily. Your sheep will not take in most of the larvae of barber pole worms.

- Observe daily. Most problems can be detected. Most problems can also be treated. Those who claim that a sick sheep is a dead sheep failed to observe their sheep and catch a problem on time.
- Do your daily chores DAILY.
- Stay curious while you observe. You may notice a few things that have seemingly no importance at that time but the day may come when you find they do fit into a bigger picture.
- Don't mind labor. A hands-off approach means raising sheep that have genetic skills that keep you from needing to pamper them. It does not mean you should not do some hard work when it matters.
- If you lack knowledge, turn to those who have it. While I have an article on almost any sheep-related subject (offered for free on my website), seek out local grazing or sheep groups and join them at their meetings and pasture walks.
- Expect and accept that you will fail at times. You will lose some animals. It is the unfortunate but necessary part of a learning curve. Admit your mistakes. Ask yourself first what your mistake might have been and what to do when this occurs again (or how you can avoid having it happen again) instead of trying to lay blame on others or other circumstances.

Do all that and I would say you have good reasons to be successful. I say this because I have sold sheep to many start-up sheep farmers in New York State, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan who are successful. That tells me it is possible to succeed even if you are a complete beginner. But if you don't want to do all that, consider investing your money into something other than sheep. (I hear the stock market does really well.) Otherwise, you might end up calling me and telling me about the lack of thriftiness or about the death of animals in a management system that isn't management at all in my book. Just like my first supervisor at my first job, who never mastered his people skills even though he mastered so many other skills, I haven't fully mastered those people skills either. Friends and neighbors of mine are likely to tell you exactly that. So, I might be blunt with my assessment when you call. 🐑

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