



What to Look for When Buying a Ram

Photos by Author

“The ram is half the flock”
~ German proverb

—Ulf Kintzel

I remember it like it was yesterday. In the fall of 1995, right after I had immigrated to the U.S., I needed a ram. Fast. I was unfamiliar with breeders, but from my two previous visits to America I was familiar enough with the American Sheep Industry to know that sheep shows had done a lot of harm to many sheep breeds that were once known for their profitability and still are profitable in other countries. So I had to find a breed of sheep that was not yet influenced by shows, needed a breeder “nearby” (put in quotes because I realized nothing is really nearby in the U.S., compared to much smaller countries in Europe), and it had to be a breed suitable for grazing. I found a breeder of Texel sheep in Connecticut, an easy day’s drive from northern New Jersey where I lived at that time. I scheduled a visit and drove up. The breeder was a man named Frank Brocklehurst from northern England. His accent was so thick and unfamiliar, I couldn’t understand a word the man said. Luckily, his wife spoke the finest Oxford English, the kind of English I had learned in school. So she “translated” whatever Frank said to me. We quickly agreed on a ram and on a price and off I drove with a purebred Texel ram. I paid \$1,000. One thousand bucks? I soon heard that people talked behind my back how crazy it is to buy a ram for that much money. Was it? Let’s talk about that in this article.

If you search for a number that tells you how many ewes can be bred by a ram during breeding season, you will find figures anywhere between 20 and 35. The occasional website may tell you 50. These low numbers may indeed be true for some breeds or bloodlines, but I expect more. I always considered that an adult ram can settle about 100 ewes. A ram just settling a few dozen ewes would not be around for a second season at my farm. If you now divide the purchase price by the number of ewes he will service each year and then again divide it by the number of years you think you will use him—that is your cost per ewe over the lifetime of this ram. In my case, a ram costing \$1,000 will amount to about a couple of bucks, give or take, per ewe per breeding. You tell me if the purchase price still sounds so crazy.

However, there are far bigger reasons why skimping on the ram is the wrong approach. The impact any ram has on your flock is far greater than any

ewe has. The best-case scenario in the case of a ewe is two to three lambs per year. A ram can sire you more than 100 lambs, even 200, in any given year. In fact, if he is your only ram, he will sire all of your lambs, hence the saying “the ram is half the flock.”

I have experienced that the ram is an afterthought for many small flock owners. How do I know? Because of the many requests I get for a ram just prior to breeding season of their flock. When you get a request on November 1 from someone who wants to start breeding season on November 7, you know not much research was done regarding the ram purchase. Furthermore, I have been amazed how much people are willing to spend on ewes but don't want to spend much on a ram. Even when a ram is purchased at the last moment, some flock owners tend to still complain about the price and wish to haggle. It always baffles me and makes me wonder what the plan moving forward is.

A ram from a reputable sheep farmer goes through a lot more of a selection process than a ewe. Aside from that, you can afford having or buying some imperfect ewes, but you do want your ram to be of superior quality. So my advice is this: If you don't have a ram yet, haven't thought about him thus far, and you need one for breeding season in the fall, start thinking today about what reputable breeders are out there where you can purchase a ram that suits your flock.

What do I suggest looking for in a ram? What traits are important in a ram? First, you have to define what qualities you wish to improve in your flock. If you have a flock of good ewes with good maternal instincts and milk production, you will not need to look for a maternal type of ram that improves those traits. You might be needing to look for a ram that produces good growth rate or more meat. Keep in mind, any traits a ram has to offer are not an absolute. The value of any trait depends on what you are seeking to improve. For example, when I purchased my last set of rams, the trait on top of the list was shedding. Sheep that shed well are not easy to produce. It isn't as simple as having a ewe that sheds and a ram that does too and the offspring sheds as well. It is more complicated. Shedding is the trait I seek the most improvement in. Why? Because I have most of anything else. My ewes are already excellent mothers, fertility is high, so is milk production, and my ewes are quite meaty. Yet, I still get the occasional sheep with dissatisfactory shedding ability. I have recently learned that a more correct hoof growth can be had with some of my new rams as well. Many Dorper breeders neglected this trait early on when the breed was introduced to the U.S. and there is a renewed focus on it since the breed is well established by now. That is a trait I will be looking for also. However, I don't want my statements to be seen as a single-trait selection. I prioritize, but I *always* look at the whole package. I never neglect looking at meatiness, ability to thrive on forage, conformation, soundness of structure, calm

temperament, and so forth, but I do prioritize, like shedding. For example, I never considered a breeder who does heavy grain feeding, no matter how well his or her sheep shed.

The largest group of people who purchase rams from me are folks who have Katahdin sheep or a different breed of



These are my rams. They are the complete package I want to have, but above all, they all shed entirely.

hair sheep who seek to “beef up” their sheep. They often have sheep with good shedding ability. So that is not what they are seeking. Growth rate and meatiness are important to them. It is also important to them that the selection of the ram does not lead to lambing problems due to a larger-framed ram. That too is one criteria for their selection.

The most common request or inquiry I receive is whether or not the ram lambs I sell are twin-born. It is so important to people that I have found it impossible to discuss why that should not be high on their list when purchasing a ram from me. So I gave that up and gave in and sell mostly twin-born ram lambs. But now I am writing an article about that subject and I am free to discuss the matter as lengthily as I wish. Here it comes: My flock consists mostly of ewes that were twin-born. There are a few exceptions, such as a first-time lamber, herself twin-born, and lambing at age one having a single lamb. The lamb is a keeper. A ewe lambing a second time in a year, again herself twin-born, had a set of twins earlier in the season and now has “just” one. It's a keeper. A ewe that is herself, you guessed it, twin-born and has often twinned, but now for once has a single lamb. It's a keeper. I have done this selection for twins over many generations and for almost twenty years. That means there is virtually no difference between a single-born ram or ewe lamb from my flock versus a twin-born lamb. Likewise, if a low rate of twin-born lambs is in your flock, purchasing a twin-born ram will not fix that problem. Your problem is of a different nature.

It goes further. The ability to twin has very low heritability. Making progress with this trait takes many generations. Yet the improvement will be only marginal. The nutritional and health status as well as flushing has a greater impact on twinning than the ewe being twin-born. I recently learned that a study about selecting only twin-born ewe lambs only brought marginal improvement in fertility, but the single-trait selection had a real downside when it came to other good traits, like growth rate.

This makes perfect sense to me, since selecting for a single trait in any animal always leads inevitably to diminishing other good traits.

My statements above relate to sheep breeds with “normal” fertility. There are breeds with higher fertility such as composite breeds that incorporated a breed like Finnsheep or crosses that include a breed like Romanov. Breeds like these can produce lamb crops well over 200 percent, meaning more than two lambs per ewe on average. However, that is not what I am after. These are often breeds that lack meatiness. I have chosen the traditional route of selecting for fertility within the existing breed and creating favorable conditions for good fertility not only during the breeding season but throughout the year, which will increase ovulation. I am trying to get as close as possible to a lambing percentage of 200 percent and some years I get quite close to it. However, I accomplish this by getting a higher twinning rate. I am not trying to get more triplets or quadruplets, which would be necessary to reach a lambing percentage above 200 percent. So, if you, the reader, wish to get above 200 percent, my suggestions for ram selections won't do you much good. In fact, I would advise against going that route with a flock raised on forage without grain. These kinds



There is quite a rigorous selection process before any ram lamb of mine is being offered to customers.

of lambing percentages above 200 percent require the use of grain. Whether or not the higher output (more lambs) justifies the higher input (grain and any equipment and labor that is needed to store and feed it) is not part of this article. Obviously, I decided against it, in great part for economic reasons.

Moving on to traits I think a ram buyer should be looking for, here are questions I would like to hear but almost never do, questions any ram buyer should ask wherever they purchase a ram. The order is random. It does not suggest a ranking at all:

1. Growth rate. In a commercial enterprise, the growth rate is very important. It is less important how much the ram itself weighs when you purchase it. The question you want to ask is how long did it take to get to that point. In other words, a ram lamb that weighs 80 pounds at age four months is worth more than a ram lamb weighing twenty pounds more, but is already six months old. The higher the growth rate, the quicker you get to the desired market

weight of your lamb, the shorter the time that you have to feed them, the more money you can put in your pocket.

2. Mothering and milk production of the ram's dam. When I started years ago with ewes purchased wherever I could get them cheaply, I also purchased some ewes with a lack of good mothering instinct. When they started lambing, a good number of them just walked away from their lambs. Granted, that can happen with a first-time lamber that is in a lot of pain after lambing but those should come to their senses once the pain simmers down. I am talking about ewes that just could not care less about having a lamb. Those ewes were culled. I no longer have that problem. In fact, I haven't had it for years. Each and every ewe I have in my flock has good mothering instinct. It makes lambing so much easier. The milking ability goes hand in hand with it. What good does it do you when a ewe has twins, is perfectly willing to raise them, but doesn't have enough milk? My ewes have to produce this milk while on a strict hay ration during lambing in late winter and early spring. Grain can mask a lack of milk production. (Grain can mask all kinds of problems, but that's another story for another day.) I have selected for the ability to produce milk when just fed hay and continue to do so. What does that have to do with the ram? He will pass on these genes, good or bad, when he is used for breeding and his female offspring is kept for replacement ewes or for sale as breeding stock.

3. Correctness of structure. A ram needs to have a correct structure more so than any ewe you purchase. A ewe may or may not pass on a deficiency in structure such as a dip in the back. Your worst-case scenario is a ewe lamb or two that have that trait *if* a flaw is strongly inherited. If you buy a ram with such a fault you risk having all your lambs end up having that flaw. To name a few individual parts to look at, one should look for things like a strong back versus a dip in the back or firm versus weak pasterns. The body should be deep, not tubular. Generally speaking, a buyer should look if the animal is a typical representative of its breed. The body should be sound. That means all parts should look like they belong together; no single body part should strike you as “odd,” seemingly not belonging to the animal. I would go as far to say the animal should have an aesthetic look.

4. Meatiness. This assumes you are in the meat business. Wool sheep are an entirely different scenario, one that I am not addressing. Where to look for meatiness? The hind quarters (legs) are the most obvious. Voluminous back legs are desirable and easily spotted even by the inexperienced eye. But pay attention to the back as well. The back should be broad and wide. Lamb chops fetch more money than leg of lamb. In addition, if you have a long animal you get more meat off the back than from an animal that is short. The overall meatiness should be apparent. However, shoulders (as well as the head) can and should be narrower. That allows for easy lambing. A sheep with a front shaped

like a bulldog is not desirable.

5. Temperament. I once had a Texel ram that came as close to being perfect as it possibly gets. He sired wonderful lambs. Until the day he stopped being perfect. He took aim at my then three-year-old daughter, ran with speed at her, and knocked her to the ground. I could do nothing about the first hit, but then came to her rescue, preventing the ram from attacking her further. I didn't keep the ram. Rams can do considerable damage. During my apprenticeship, I got hit often by rams during breeding season. It hurts! Cases in which a ram killed a person have happened. I prefer breeds that have a calmer disposition. My current Dorper sheep have that calm behavior, even during breeding season. Calm temperament in a breed or a flock of sheep also helps when you handle them, i.e. when deworming them or cutting their hooves. Aside from that, wilder sheep have a harder problem putting on weight. Gaining weight easily is a good thing. Well, in sheep it is anyway.
6. Ability to thrive on forage. If you intend to grain-feed anyway, you can skip this paragraph. However, if you want to do grass-fed or at least want to incorporate a good amount of grazing, know this: The ability (or lack thereof!) to thrive on forage is *highly* heritable. If the sheep does not have the deep and voluminous body to put in the necessary amount of forage, it just can't thrive on forage. Show sheep are often the best example. Sheep that were purposely bred with less rumen and a smaller belly to make them look taller will fall apart when put on pasture without the daily grain ration. In addition, some breeds are very selective foragers. A Dorper sheep does not eat selectively, thrives on all kinds of forage, is willing to eat older forage, and even browses some like a goat.
7. Feet. In some breeds, the conformation of feet has been neglected. White Dorper sheep are no exception. To be clear, I am not talking about hoof disease. After all, my flock is hoof rot free. I am addressing how the feet are shaped and how they grow. The importance of correct feet has recently been recognized by more breeders. I myself buy my rams from Lewis White Dorsers. Because of it, I now own rams with better feet than I used to have. While the feet in my flock still need improvement, they are already significantly better. I also started culling ewes with feet that grow too uneven. Why didn't I start that selecting earlier? Because more pressing issues needed to be selected for, particularly the ability to shed. Since I now have a flock that sheds pretty much entirely, I can select for additional criteria.
8. Take the whole farm into account, its management, the quality of the flock, the trustworthiness of its owner. Here is an example: I purchased four rams from a reputable breeder in Oregon, Paul Lewis of Lewis White Dorsers. I did so without a contract in my hand, sending a check for \$4,000 thousands of miles away. My rams arrived via

a ram sale and an exhibitor at that sale in Pennsylvania, where I picked them up. One of the four was quite a bit smaller a year later. I voiced my concern to the breeder. He looked up his pedigree and assured me that he has many ewes of his father, that they are good shedders, and that I should use him. I hadn't used him thus far but did so that fall. Forty some percentage ewes were exposed to him. He produced beautifully. He himself is my best shedder and has the best feet. His looks are a bit deceiving, which is not an uncommon "problem." A ram may not at all look like what he produces, for better or worse. That is when everything has to be taken into account: the breeder, the farm, the way the ram was raised, the ram's father and what he produced—the list goes on. If all that satisfies you, you can compromise on the actual looks of the individual ram.

Point number nine is what I don't look for: Circumference of scrotum, just as long the ram is normally developed. Credible people have assured me that more circumference means higher fertility in the *female* offspring, yet, none of them could point to a field trial that establishes this, even though they claimed it exists. I searched myself, found an outline on the Internet, and requested that study, which was offered for a fee. I never heard back. If you, the reader, are aware of such a study and can send it to me, please do. I would love to read it. I will say this: I have a pretty good grip on genetics. I trust science wholeheartedly, just not always the interpretation. I can't wrap my head around the causation argument. Granted, the development of a ram must be normal. If it is not, it can lead to infertility. However, that is not the issue at hand. So I don't explore the circumference at all when I buy rams for my flock and I certainly don't measure any of the rams I sell.

So how do you go about finding the ram you want and you need? Look for breeders who share your goals and have succeeded in doing so. Ask questions about the management system. Explore what these breeders select for. See if there are few pampered sheep that are loaded up with high grain rations, which can hide problems, or if this is truly a commercial enterprise where problem sheep that don't measure up to the management system are being culled. In short, don't just ask about the ram itself that you wish to purchase. If all the important information you were given is what you were looking for, chances are the ram will meet your expectations.

So now I have given you a number of traits to look for when purchasing a ram and what questions to ask. Perhaps you can ask me some of these questions one day. It would make me so happy to hear them other than the question for the price and the follow-up statement that you need a ram next week because you hadn't given him any thought all year. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. 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.