

# Twenty Years of Breeding White Dorper Sheep

## What Have I Learned?

—Ulf Kintzel

It is now almost 20 years ago that I started breeding White Dorper sheep. It has not been a straightforward journey like traveling on route 46 W in North Dakota. Instead, it has been more like traveling on a winding road, some detours included. This is a story about White Dorper sheep as I know and live:

First, allow me to travel back in time to tell you how my decision to breed hair sheep came about. When I raised sheep in New Jersey in the mid to late 1990s and into the early 2000s, I picked up sheep shearing as a side income. Having just come to the United States as an immigrant, money was tight, and more income was needed. The Clinton administration had just phased out the subsidies granted by the National Wool Act, enacted by the Eisenhower administration in 1954. Afterwards, wool prices, already on the decline, were at an all-time low. Some small-scale producers even found it difficult to sell their wool because some wool pools that purchased wool in the past in certain areas ceased to exist. Yet, wool sheep must be sheared every year anyway since they cannot shed the wool. Without shearing, the wool will get matted, will lose its insulating characteristics, and the health of a wool sheep is jeopardized. However, the cost of paying a shearer could no longer be offset with the sale of the wool. Thus, I started musing when shearing for customers who complained about wool prices. I imagined I could start breeding and selling hair sheep that shed, that these small-scale sheep farmers could forgo the shearing. I saw it as a business opportunity.

I started researching breeds of hair sheep. I had no preconceived opinion and was not set on any breed. I always prefer following the facts, making my decisions based on them rather than starting out with an opinion and then collecting facts that confirm my preconceived opinion. Looking for naturally polled (without horns) hair sheep, there were three breeds to choose from: St. Croix sheep, Katahdin sheep, and Dorper sheep. I dismissed St. Croix sheep early in my search because there were just not many commercial flocks to be found. Also, wanting to raise sheep for meat, this breed seemed to be lacking meatiness. I read a lot at that time about Katahdin sheep. Any sheep-related publication repeatedly featured articles about them. In fact, it felt at times a bit like hype. That was perhaps understandable. After all, the breed was developed by an American breeder in Maine who named the sheep after Maine's highest mountain, Mt. Katahdin. Katahdin sheep seemed to be readily available. One of their sales pitches was the breed's supposed resistance to the deadly Barber Pole worm, something I later learned was not true for all Katahdin flocks. I looked at many pictures of this breed on the internet. I was not convinced that the meat proportions were indeed to my liking. They did not look like true meat sheep to me.

Simultaneously, I looked into Dorper sheep. The breed splits into Dorper, the ones with the black head and white body, and White Dorper sheep, a mostly white breed as the name indicates. I had a flock of Texel sheep at that time, which I wanted to upgrade to a flock of hair sheep. However, since the Dorper breed had just barely and very recently been



*My ram Nelson: producing meat, and lots of it, is the single most important trait for White Dorper sheep.*

Photos by Author

established in the U.S. in the mid 1990s, ram costs were still high. In the late '90s and very early 2000s, rams cost \$3,000 each and more. That was too much for me. What goes up must come down, and by the mid-2000s rams were available for just over \$1,000 each. I purchased my first two rams from a breeder in the Midwest and started pursuing my upgrading plans.

A technical term for upgrading is displacement breeding. It means that you have an existing breed, in my case Texel sheep, and for several generations you use a different breed to eventually arrive at a flock of sheep consisting of the same breed as the rams that were used and thus displace the original breed of sheep. The first generation will be 50 percent of the new breed, the second generation will be 75 percent, the third generation will be 7/8<sup>th</sup> and will be for practical purposes almost like the new breed. However, to call your flock officially purebred, you will have to add a fourth generation. The 15/16<sup>th</sup> percentage (or 93.75 %) is considered by the American Dorper Association purebred when a flock of a different breed was upgraded. (As an aside, the term "fullblood" is used for animals resulting from embryo transfer from the country of origin, but in practical terms, there is no discernible difference between "purebred" and "fullblood.") If you are a cattle breeder, four generations sound like a long time, but with sheep it literally can be as short as four years. If you are not considered "young folks" anymore, you know that you just have to blink with your eyes and four years are gone. It goes fast.

Aside from the speed, upgrading has another big advantage: it is the cheapest way to get to a new breed. You only have to buy rams over the years, which can be used at a ratio of 1 (ram) to 50 (ewes) and more. You never have to buy a single ewe and can solely focus on buying superior rams.

Back to Dorper versus White Dorper sheep: I had to decide which of the two I wanted to introduce to my flock. It happened to be the case that a friend of mine in Germany, raising Merino Landrace sheep, had used Dorper rams to produce meatier lambs. The first-generation lambs were spotted with black and brown colored wool. That is because a Dorper sheep is, genetically speaking, not a white sheep with a black

head. Instead, it is a black sheep with a very large white spot. That genetic makeup shows for the first two or more generations when using Dorper sheep to upgrade an otherwise white wool breed. The offspring is mostly black or brown. Multi-colored lambs certainly taste

the same as white ones, but it gives the appearance of cross-breeding without a plan. Many customers, wanting breeding stock, don't like it. I didn't like it either. So, I went with White Dorper sheep. They can have the occasional brown or black spot as well, even a lamb born with tan-colored fur all over their body, but they mostly produce white lambs in a purebred flock or when bred to a white wool breed.

On paper in the breed description, the two (Dorper

and White Dorper sheep) are the same breed with the same origin. I learned later after years of using White Dorper rams, that there are some very distinctive differences. The breed was developed in South Africa in the 1940s and '50s. Ironically, shedding was not at all a reason to develop the breed. Instead, the goal was to produce heavily muscled lambs for the English market. The indigenous fat-tailed sheep were rejected in London. (Fat-tailed sheep are breeds of sheep in Africa and Asia that deposit excess fat in the tail and hindquarters, which gives them a rather unique look.) South African breeders started crossing Blackheaded Persian sheep (a fat-tailed hair sheep breed) with British Horned Dorset sheep, a very meaty breed of sheep with white wool. The carcass quality of the offspring was to the market's liking. Breeders continued breeding Dorper sheep, some focusing on the white color, back then called Dorsian sheep. I have learned since from renowned U.S. White Dorper breeder Paul Lewis, now retired, that the Van Roy sheep, a purely white South African hair sheep breed, was also used in the development of White Dorper sheep, mainly in Australia. The literature I researched confirmed this. The Van Roy sheep is, according to Paul, who raised some of them for a brief time, an extraordinarily calm breed of sheep. It is said that White Dorper sheep as a whole are a calmer breed of sheep, than Dorper sheep and the Van Roy influence may very well account for it. In any case, while I personally cannot speak to Dorper sheep, I can attest to it that White Dorper sheep are very calm.



*Shedding the fleece and thus eliminating the need to shear is a key feature of White Dorper sheep. A correct hoof, free of disease.*



When I first started looking at White Dorper rams in pictures, I was both impressed but also very skeptical, even distrusting their meatiness in the pictures. The huge hindquarters in the pictures struck me as either Photoshopped or the result of heavy grain feeding. When I purchased my first two White Dorper rams, I noticed that they were indeed not quite as meaty as the pictures suggested. However, in subsequent years I purchased far better rams from Lewis White Dorpers, and they were indeed unbelievably meaty in their hindquarters and had very broad backs. Remember my starting point, a flock of purebred Texel sheep, arguably one of the meatiest sheep breeds in the world. Naturally, I was concerned that I may lose some of the meatiness when switching to White Dorpers.

Here is a little anecdote that illustrates well my adjustment to the new breed: a good number of market lambs go to a vendor, who resells them after butchering and processing to high-end outlets like restaurants and stores in and around New York City. I must weigh these lambs frequently as they develop to keep track until they have reached their desired market weight to be butchered. The way I do it is by separating them out into a pen in the barn, using my chute along the barn wall, and then I weigh them. For several years, I had both market lambs that were Texel and Texel crosses of

various percentages of each breed—and in later years also purebred White Dorper lambs. I am quite capable of estimating the weight of a lamb by looking at it and touching it over the back. What I found out is that I regularly overestimated Texel percentage market lambs by two to three and up to five pounds because of the wool they had and underestimated my White Dorper high-percentage market lambs by the same number of pounds because they always looked like lambs that have just been shorn. Eventually, looking at market weights over time, I concluded that my White Dorper sheep are not any less meaty than my Texel sheep.

Shedding is perhaps one of the most important traits of White Dorper sheep. Initially, I thought when you breed a fully shedding ram to a fully shedding ewe, you get fully shedding offspring. It turns out this is not necessarily true. Shedding is, genetically speaking, a very complicated and not at all straightforward issue. I disappointed some of my early customers years ago in that department while I had been sure the rams I sold, all out of fully shedding parents, would all shed well. However, some of them only shed partially. It gets even more complicated. Shedding improves from age one to two. Shedding ability declines when sheep are in poor condition, sick, or old. I started years ago to mark ewes that didn't shed satisfactorily according to my standards



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by notching their ears and stopped selling ram lambs for breeding purposes out of these ewes. But in a subsequent year some of these ewes shed again entirely without me being able to discern any detectable difference why that was. I made that case simple for myself, acknowledging that I can't know everything: I just kept breeding fully shedding sheep, using fully shedding rams, and culling the occasional young ewe that just didn't want to shed much. Over time, the overall shedding improved remarkably. Yet, it never is 100 percent, and I don't think that is an achievable goal. I eventually shear off the remaining wool pieces that remain on the top lines of some sheep. In 2023 I had to do it to about ten percent of my flock, ending up with just a seed bag full of wool; that's all. It doesn't need to be sheared off for health purposes and many people don't. I do it, just for the looks of it. The German in me tells me I must do it. I get it done in under an hour; 35 minutes in 2023 to be exact.

The U.S. has long been known for its split of commercial sheep and show sheep within many breeds of sheep. It has led, in my opinion, to the loss of many good economical traits in show lines of many sheep breeds, now depending on heavy grain-feeding to be able to perform and unable to perform on forage alone. While this has also become true for a number of show lines in White Dorper sheep, the loss of one trait is equally concerning: the ability to shed the fleece in a satisfactory way. Anyone considering raising White Dorpers in an economical setting, wanting to be able to skip shearing sheep, will want to keep that in mind when looking for breeding stock.

When the White Dorper sheep were introduced to the U.S., feet structure was not high on the list of traits to be observed by many breeders. Meatiness and shedding were more important. That was true for me, too. In fact, among the first few White Dorper rams I purchased, some had horrible feet structure. I didn't think about it much at that time, only in hindsight did I make a mental note. When I sold the first few ram lambs for breeding, the most common negative feedback I received was about feet structure (not to be confused with hoof disease!), mostly the outer walls of the hooves separating a bit, allowing for cavities to develop, which in turn allowed foreign objects to enter, causing lameness. Reputable breeders have tried to correct that initial oversight. My last set of rams that I purchased had remarkably better

hooves; some of the rams had near perfect hooves with a very correct structure and very little growth. The need for hoof cutting in my flock has decreased remarkably since I have been using these rams.

Since hair sheep in the U.S. is a fairly new phenomenon and presented change, the idea of raising them found many detractors, especially in the well-established sheep industry. When many small sheep producers tried to get away from shearing and grain feeding, large sheep operations in the Midwest still did exactly that: large flocks on heavily mechanized farms, no or very little grazing, housed in barns, fed heavy grain rations, and breeds of sheep that need shearing. In addition, many farmers are often on the more conservative side, opposing change. One of the things that detractors said was that Dorper and White Dorper lambs get too fat at the higher weights the markets desire. They were not completely wrong albeit quite prejudiced. When you grow White Dorper lambs the "traditional" way on a heavy grain diet, possibly with creep feeders with unlimited and free-choice grains, you will surely make these lambs too fat. White Dorper sheep have much lower maintenance requirements than breeds of sheep from which the traditional feeder lambs derive. So if you indeed wish to raise and finish lambs on heavy grain rations,



*A group of market lambs raised strictly on pasture.*

I highly recommend NOT to get White Dorpers (or Dorper sheep). It is grazing with no or little or time-limited grain feeding when this breed of sheep shines. Not only are White Dorper sheep able to maintain body substance and gain weight on forage alone, they also are very non-selective grazers. That means they eat a lot of plants in the pasture that other sheep breeds would not even look at. I was even told by a Katahdin owner, who purchased some breeding stock from me, that my White Dorper sheep eat many plants her Katahdin sheep don't. I understand this is anecdotal. Nevertheless, I was delighted to hear it.

I have sold market lambs up to a hanging weight of 70 lbs. and have asked my vendor time and again if they are too fat. His standard reply is: "Never mind your lambs being too fat." Likewise, I have sold to private customers whole and half lambs for many years. The hanging weights of these lambs is 40+ lbs. They never have been too fat but had a desirable fat cover (see picture).

Another statement made by detractors is that hair

sheep fetch less money at auctions. Whenever I looked over the past few years at the sales reports at the New Holland and Middleburg auctions in Pennsylvania, I saw no difference between choice wool lambs versus choice hair breed lambs. The differences are in the lesser quality lambs, which tells me it is more a matter of quality in each category and less about wool versus hair sheep.

One of the original concerns when I considered introducing hair sheep was the fact that I didn't know what happens to the wool when the sheep are shedding. Would it litter the pasture with bits and pieces of wool? I was assured by experienced hair sheep breeders that this will not happen. They were right. While on occasion a rather large chunk of fleece may come off a sheep and lay visibly in the pasture or around shade places under trees, the great majority of the wool and hair comes off in small bits and pieces and disappears. It is like a goat or a horse shedding: you don't see their hair in the pasture either. So that concern was quickly dismissed.

As you upgrade and you don't want or need to increase your total number of sheep, what do you do with the 50 and 75 percent genetics, which are a steppingstone to get to a purebred flock of White Dorper sheep? I found it rather easy selling them as breeding stock to people who wanted good breeding stock and didn't care one way or another about the wool and the need for shearing or they sold to flock owners who themselves pursued the upgrading to get to a flock of White Dorper sheep.

I mentioned at the top of this article that I decided against Katahdin sheep even though they are the most numerous hair sheep in the U.S. They are good mothers, shed well, and have for the most part good feet structure. They are also quite heat tolerant, easy lambers, and some Katahdin flocks are quite parasite resistant. They do lack in one area, in the prime cut department, having small and narrow loin and rib chops and legs that are not quite meaty enough. Many Katahdin owners recognized that but didn't want to part with their ewe flock. Instead, they either upgraded their Katahdin ewe with White Dorper rams, at least to a certain percentage, or they use White Dorper rams as terminal sires. Being a terminal sire means that all offspring are being sold as market lambs while the replacement ewe lambs that are kept continue to be the same breed as the original flock by using a purebred ram in addition to a terminal sire. This seems to work so well that Katahdin flock owners have become my most numerous and most faithful customers for White Dorper rams by far.

In search of good quality commercial White Dorper rams, one breeder always stood out to me: Paul & Kathy Lewis of Lewis White Dorpers. I had wanted rams from him but 2,700 miles or a 40-hour drive was just not reasonable. Then I learned that a sheep farmer in my area had purchased 10 rams from him. I asked how this can be done and learned that rams could be transported to the Midwestern stud sale in Missouri and from there exhibitors on the eastern side of the U.S. could transport them with their stock and could be paid to take them along and then either picked up at their place or intercepted at the highway when they were en route home. So I purchased my first set of four White Dorper yearling rams from them in 2015 and again five rams in 2020. The improvement in quality of my White Dorper flock in all areas where it needed improvement was remarkable. I hit the jackpot. The cost? About \$1,500 per ram until they were home at my farm, but when you sell a lot of breeding stock as I do, it was well worth it.

In my 40 years of being a shepherd and sheep farmer, I have seen and experienced many breeds of sheep. Many of them are desirable. I still have a place in my heart for the German Blackheaded Mutton sheep. The same holds true for old-fashioned Polled Dorset and Hampshire sheep, two breeds I had used quite successfully in the past but were very hard to find in the U.S. outside the show sheep world. Some breeds were good in a very specific environment or were serving a very specific market. Scottish Blackface and Suffolk, respectively, come to mind. In short, I am not one of those who is praising one breed and talking down on any other. However, compared to White Dorper sheep, I say this: for every good trait they have, there is perhaps a breed that is better; that is meatier, calmer, produces more milk, has better hooves, lambs easier, and so on. It is the sum of all good traits that makes them most desirable to me. Personally, I have not found a breed that *combines* so many good traits when you add suitability for grazing and shedding ability into the mix. And since I am approaching 60 years of age in an apparently fast fashion, I don't think I will switch to another sheep breed in my lifetime. 🐑

*Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep 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.whitecloversbeepfarm.com](http://www.whitecloversbeepfarm.com). He can be reached by e-mail at [ulf@whitecloversbeepfarm.com](mailto:ulf@whitecloversbeepfarm.com) or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.*