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So for the record, I don’t feed any grain of any sort to my sheep ever – not during lambing season, not to finish lambs, and not on Mondays or after dark either. However, I do concede the point that some people are skeptical about it. In my opinion, they are skeptical for one of two reasons: 1. They are only familiar with some of the most common sheep breeds in the U.S. that often indeed cannot be finished without grain and 2. They don’t really have a concept of rotational grazing and perhaps have more a pasture in mind that is chewed down to the ground, as you unfortunately can see all over. Let’s examine both points.

Sheep. In my experience, the U.S. is unique in how it raises and finishes many of its lambs. For many years grain, especially corn, was ample and cheap. Many producers raised at or least finished their lambs on a heavy grain diet. As the saying goes, “Don’t use it and you will lose it,” the ability to excel on pasture diminished over time. Even the range lamb from the Western mountain range, which is still suitable for grazing, was and still is often put in a feedlot after wearing to be finished on grain. In addition, processors in big slaughterhouses in the West charge a per-head fee (opposed to a per-pound fee) when killing lambs. That means the bigger the lamb, the less processing cost per pound. This also led to very large lambs being butchered and excess fat being trimmed. That too is unusual throughout most of the industrialized world where lambs are harvested at a much lighter weight and where the fat cover has to be just right since trimming the fat from carcasses is frowned upon. Large-framed lambs require large-framed parents. However, the larger the sheep, the harder it is to maintain itself on pasture, let alone its lambs being finished on forage. This is of paramount importance, so let me repeat this that it really sinks in: the larger the sheep, the harder it is to maintain it on pasture alone. The larger-framed the lamb, the harder it is to finish it on pasture without grain.

The second reason for rather large sheep is the show ring, driven at least in part by 4H projects. Here too you will see the mantra “bigger is better” prevail. Again, the bigger the sheep the higher the maintenance requirements. Yet a bigger sheep doesn’t produce more lambs than a medium-sized sheep either. What is worse, any feedstuff that is used for maintenance is not used for production. So what does it mean when the needed nutrients required for production cannot be sufficiently utilized from forage? You need to feed grain. And indeed some of the largest, yet most popular sheep breeds, which are sometimes so big that their heads can reach up to a grown man’s chest, cannot manage without heavy grain feeding. Go to your local fair, look up the pictures of sheep shows in any of the sheep farming magazines, or google “club lambs,” and you will know the kind of sheep that I do not recommend for a pasture-based sheep operation, let alone entirely grass-fed. I know, I don’t make new friends with statements like that, but I have always been an opponent of 4H projects with sheep since they did so much to ruin perfectly good sheep breeds in this country like Suffolk sheep and Polled Dorset sheep, sheep breeds that still excel in other countries as commercial sheep. To be clear, I am not opposed to children learning how to care for animals. I do oppose creating a parallel universe by doing so and in the process altering the description of a perfectly good sheep breed.

A German farmers’ saying (Blasenregel) says: “The more daylight can pass underneath a sheep, the less meaty it is.” And indeed, tall, long-legged sheep with a tubular stomach as in the show ring do not have the capacity to fatten on grass and depend on grain. Instead, you want the body to have depth, you want the belly to be shaped like a barrel. That will provide the rumen capacity needed to fatten on pasture. Remember, forage is not nearly as concentrated in nutrients as grain. That means sheep need to eat lots of it. In order to be able to eat a lot, it needs the rumen capacity. Legs have to be sufficiently long that the sheep can walk the distance they need to walk. However, breeding for longer legs for the purpose of having the sheep look even taller serves no commercial purpose. In fact, the last time I checked there was still no premium price to be paid for extra-long leg bones.

You may argue that the pictures of these show sheep and large sheep I referenced show almost exclusively heavy and meaty sheep. Indeed they do, but the body condition is not reached with a diet of grazing. That is a key difference. Put any of these sheep on pasture and stop the grain feeding and you can watch many times did I hear a sentence “Oh, they can fill themselves tomorrow.” Or something like that. This is not the right attitude when finishing lambs on pasture.

On few occasions, very few, I might add, I have had customers being disappointed in the quality of breeding stock purchased from me. A look at their pasture told the whole tale: it was shorter than short. It wasn’t pasture, it was the shortest lawn I had ever seen. How do you tell someone it isn’t the sheep, it is the pasture, without sounding like you are looking for an excuse? So you need both the right sheep genetics as well as good grazing practices to raise and finish lambs on pasture that you yourself and your butcher can say, “It out done.”

[Image 32x503 to 562x701]

—Ulf Kintzel

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[Image 1065x178 to 1089x188]