



Raising Sheep Without Grain – “It Can Be Done!”

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

It is quite common that I hear from butchers and producers alike that raising sheep and finishing lambs without grain cannot be done. At first it annoyed me but over the years I have learned to just shrug my shoulders. I figure every time a producer says it can't be done I have one fewer competitor. After all, I am in the business of selling grazing genetics. Equally frequently I am questioned with ample suspicion about the condition of my sheep. I am being asked if I don't feed a little grain or at least some during lambing season...or perhaps secretly?

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.

The 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 or at 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 weaning to be finished on grain. In addition, processors in big slaughterhouses in the West charge a per-head fee (as

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 (Bauernregel) 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 seen 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 forage diet. That is the key difference. Put any of these sheep on pasture and stop the grain feeding and you can watch many if not all of them lose body condition to an unproductive level.

The pasture. In order to understand what raising and finishing lambs on pasture means, one needs to understand the true meaning of rotational grazing. Rotational grazing includes that the flock is being rotated anywhere between one and a few days. It also means that during the growing season your pasture should usually be well above four inches high before grazing but still in a vegetative state. It furthermore means that you switch to the next grazing cell no later than when the residual is still four inches high. In addition, rotational grazing means that you have a variety of desirable species in your pasture, including legumes. Lastly, it means that you must have enough grazing cells to ensure a rest period of about five weeks during the growing season for each of your grazing cells. While exceptions may apply, i.e. somewhat shorter rest periods in early spring when grass grows rapidly, these rules of thumb

hold true. On the other hand, if you have your flock a week or longer in one pasture cell, if you don't have enough grazing cells to leave any of them with a resting period of *at least* three weeks, if you graze your pasture lower than four inches on average, perhaps even down to the ground, if you have few desirable species but lots of undesirable grass, or if you graze only old and mature pasture plants instead of vegetative plants – then you are not practicing rotational grazing the way I understand it and the way it needs to be done in order to finish lambs on grass. So a precondition to finishing lambs on pasture is indeed a good understanding and a good practice of rotational grazing. You may also have heard the term “Management-intensive grazing”, minted by grazer Jim Gerrish, meaning that the management is intensive in the system, not the grazing (as in grazing the grass intensively down to the ground). I mean the same when I say “rotational grazing.” I just don't use Jim's term – despite agreeing with Jim most of the time – since growing up in Communism has forever made me resistant to any “isms” and made me unsuitable as a follower of any sort.

Aside from the practice of rotational grazing, I also make sure that my lambs have filled themselves to the top each and every day. I make many compromises in farming and in life. Letting my sheep go hungry for a single day isn't one of them. 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 there ever had been. 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 *can* be done.”

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