

My prophylactic footbath to prevent foot disease. The active ingredient is zinc sulfate.



The Chute

Photos by Author

—Ulf Kintzel

“How do you treat/deworm/vaccinate your sheep when they are out in the pasture?” The answer is: I don’t do it in the pasture. While I catch the occasional individual sheep that might limp or has some other problem, I use my chute alongside the barn to do any major work on my flock. There are many prefabricated chute panels that you can purchase. They are made from metal and they are very expensive. If you run many hundred or even thousands of sheep, these high numbers may justify the purchase of such a chute. However, in this article I will introduce a much cheaper and equally effective version.

The principle of a chute is that sheep enter from one end and in the process are forced to go single file through a long and narrow aisle and, after treatment, come out at the other end. The way the sheep enter the chute must be carefully orchestrated to avoid injury. They need to be funneled properly into the chute. Because of this the Germans call it exactly that way: a funnel (Trichter). It was in southern Germany in the early 1990s that I first got introduced to a chute. They were all made from wooden panels and were portable, a necessity in the prevailing transhumance system in that area.

Before I will discuss how to build a chute, I want to first address what thoughts must go into setting up one. If your chute is going to be your major means of handling sheep, you will need to make sure the flock does not mind entering it and going through it. If you have to fight them each and every time you use it, both your sheep and you will dread the chute.

On rare occasions I take some animals to the local livestock auction. When I do, I am always amazed by the amount of hooting and hollering to force animals to go where they don’t want to. Yelling does not motivate those animals to go better in the desired direction. They will almost always balk. However, at the auction these animals will go only once down the path they are forced to walk. It is entirely possible that during her lifetime a ewe will go through the chute dozens of times. If you make her feel uncomfortable, you will fight her every time she has to go through. Then multiply your “stubborn” ewe by the number of ewes you have.

“Sheep are stupid!” Whenever I hear that statement—and I hear it often—I wonder how smart the person who said it wants a sheep to be when he or she already got outsmarted by a sheep the very moment they uttered the phrase. It is unlikely that it was the sheep that was the stupid one. Remember, in a ewe’s mind, everything she does makes sense to her. It would be much better to learn how a sheep thinks and utilize that knowledge rather than depending on human intelligence.

What does it mean in real terms to think like a sheep? First, novelties are often avoided by sheep. Familiarity is what makes a sheep feel comfortable. When I have lambing season and the sheep and their young lambs are in the barn, I will at some point start letting them out during the day to graze. After a few times, when the lambs have started to learn to follow their mothers, I make one path—and one path only—available when I let them out—and that is through the chute. The back door opens up to a small pen, which opens up to the chute. The ewes are eager to go through because they want to go graze. Fresh grass happens to be better than hay. The lambs will follow them. The last few that won't go are pushed through the chute and will learn that going out the other end will be the way to rejoin their mothers. After doing this numerous times, the young lambs and the future breeding ewes among them will learn that there is absolutely nothing wrong with entering the chute and no harm will happen when going through the chute.

That is just one point in time to condition the flock. It can be done at other times of the year as well. For instance, one can let them go through the chute at a pasture shift when grazing season is in full swing without doing anything to them and letting them out the other end into a new grazing cell. It is important that there is something desirable, such as pasture, hay, or feed, available to them after they have gone through the chute.

Conditioning them needs to be done well before you actually need the chute for the first time. If you introduce the chute for the first time when you need it, i.e. when you want to vaccinate or deworm your sheep, you may make future uses harder because the sheep may be more reluctant to go in and through the chute. And that particular day of introduction will be very dreadful, especially for you.

The location and the orientation of the chute are

important as well. I was once asked to evaluate the location for a chute a customer of mine planned to build. It was in a location off the paths the sheep usually take and nowhere near a barn or structure they might seek in bad weather or where they were in during lambing season. I considered the location a bad idea because every time he was going to use the chute, the sheep would know something was up. The sheep farmer would have to break the routine to get the sheep to the chute. There was also no way to connect the end of the chute with a place for the sheep to graze or where they could be fed. Furthermore, awkward angles in the setup of the holding pen, chute, and outlet suggested to me that the sheep would be unwilling to go smoothly through this anticipated system. Instead, I suggested putting the chute where sheep go through frequently or seek shelter, or putting it where it can easily be arranged that the sheep will enter a fresh grazing cell after having gone through the chute. So, keep all of that in mind when you are setting up the chute and don't make it permanent just yet. You may want to make modifications over time, or you may end up putting the chute in a different location altogether. Keep weather in mind also. Muddy conditions in a location where water cannot drain away easily are undesirable. So is a location in full sun exposure, since this will limit the times you can work at the chute when it is hot.

When my barn was built, I built it to accommodate the chute I planned to build. I had the barn builder extend the barn pad just a little on the side where I would end up setting up my chute. The location is elevated, and water drains away from it quickly and easily. On occasion, I may add some gravel in places to level the ground or to fill a small puddle or wet spot. One side of the chute is the barn wall. The other side is made from panels that I built. The panels are made from rough-cut hemlock.



The sheep are well confirmed in the chute when I deworm them.



The sheep entering the chute from the holding pen.

One of my boys holding the counter many years ago to count the sheep as they leave the chute.



The boards are three inches wide and one inch thick. The panels are 42 inches high. There are six horizontal boards, with narrower spacing at the bottom and a little wider spacing at the top. Three vertical pieces function as “legs.” Two diagonal pieces in between these legs give the panel stability. When setting up the panels one can opt for having a straight line with the ends of the panels butting against each other. That will require extra posts compared to letting panels overlap at the end. If one chooses to let the panels overlap, the overlapping end of the panel must be away from the direction the sheep are coming up the chute. The same holds true for the “funneling” panels before the sheep enter the chute. If the sheep are faced to go against overlapping panels, they will keep bumping into them with their shoulders, which is painful and can even cause harm. In any event, it would be one more reason for the sheep to dislike the chute. Also, the smooth side of each panel should be on the inside of the chute and the legs and diagonals on the outside for the same reason, to have the flock be able to walk through it smoothly without getting caught. I use

six-foot T-posts to hold the panels in place. I use baler twine to tie the panels top and bottom to the posts. Remember, a farm without baler twine is chaos! At each end I have a gate to close behind the sheep after they entered and to keep them from walking out in front.

I also had a door put on the side of the barn towards one end of it when the barn was built, which I had planned on using to sort sheep or lambs into the barn. It opens accordingly, facing the way the sheep come up the chute. A small panel on the panel-side of the chute allows me to temporarily close the chute just before the sheep reach the door in the event I need a bit more

time to separate them. Closing it at times also allows me to regulate the speed with which the sheep come up the chute in case they are too fast. Inside the barn I have pens set up throughout the year for various groups to be able to keep groups separate, i.e. for the purpose of selling breeding stock. I also have a pen where some sheep can be kept and fed for several days. Furthermore, the setup inside the barn needs to accommodate easy loading onto livestock trailers, be it my own when I ship lambs to the slaughterhouse or be it for customers, who pick up breeding stock. Of course, you may not have such a great need for different pens, but you do want to think about the size and purpose of any pen where you can sort sheep into and do with that group whatever you find necessary.

The length of my chute is the same as the length of the long side of the barn, which is 99 feet. Personally, I consider a longer chute better since I don't have to fill it as often when I vaccinate or deworm sheep. However, I have several hundred sheep in the flock. If you have fewer sheep, you certainly won't need a chute of such



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The door to the left allows me to sort sheep right into the barn. The small panel to the right (with the red baler twine) allows me to close the chute for a moment when I need time to decide.



Using the chute to vaccinate against overeating disease. Note that the panels are all aligned that no sheep bumps its shoulder.



length. Just keep in mind that a longer chute is likely to serve you better than a short one. The ideal width of a chute is when the sheep can easily go through without being able to turn around. A one-size-fits-all solution does not exist since there is a big size difference between pregnant and meaty ewes and little lambs. I compromised by choosing a width of 21 to 22 inches, just a little bit wider than my footbaths, which fit in snug in that chute. My ewes cannot turn around in the chute. That is the important part. Lambs can do that but that is less of a problem, if a problem at all.

When I vaccinate my ewes or lambs, i.e. against overeating disease and tetanus, I first fill the chute. They enter from one end, where the holding pen is. At times, I may have to move the first sheep or two in myself before the rest are willing to follow. I close the chute up behind the sheep at the end when the chute is full. Then I go in the chute from front to end and vaccinate as I work my way through. Deworming sheep follows the same pattern. Once I am done with the animals in the chute, I let them out in front into a holding pen or let them go out to pasture and close the front back up.

Then I open the rear and let the next group in to fill the chute and repeat this routine until all the sheep in the flock have been treated.

There are even more applications for my chute. So, what is the list of things I use my chute for? Vaccinating, deworming, prophylactic footbath, counting sheep, marking ewes before or after breeding season, sorting out groups to sell, groups to slaughter, to weigh, to cut hooves, treating sheep that limp, getting rams out, having the vet inspect sheep to issue health certificates, and separating ewes into groups for breeding. Am I perhaps forgetting some applications? I am sure I did, but the already crowded list illustrates well how important and how much of a work saver my chute is.



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.whitecloversbeepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversbeepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.



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