

Upgrading a Flock of Hair Sheep

—Ulf Kintzel

I have been toying with the thought of writing this article for quite some time but had always shied away from it at the last moment because of fear of being viewed as pushing sales talk. However, with increasing frequency I get calls and emails from people who are looking to buy White



Any of these March-born White Dorper ram lambs will be able to service two or three dozen ewes by fall.

Dorper sheep suitable for grazing and going grass-fed. A combination of wanting to get away from high grain feeding, a lack of shearers, low wool prices, and the need for easy-care sheep has increased the demand for White Dorper sheep manyfold. The problem is, I am notoriously sold out on female breeding stock, usually a year in advance. Good for me, right? Well, not so fast. I have people literally getting angry with me. “How can you be sold out already? The lambs aren’t even born yet?” That is true, but they are under contract. The follow-up question then often is where to get White Dorper ewes. There are large flocks of them in the West and in the Southwest of the country, but the options are few and far between here in the Northeast, in New England, and in the Midwest. Sure, there are smaller numbers of registered White Dorper sheep to be had. They are seemingly fed unlimited amounts of grain and come with a hefty price tag. If you intend to show sheep, they may be a good match. However, if you are looking for commercial sheep thriving on grass, that heavy grain feeding may have masked an inability to do just that. Some have found out the hard way that a good-looking sheep that was fattened on grain fell apart when put on pasture.

So, what are the options when you want hair sheep that shed, are suitable for grass-fed, and White Dorper or Dorper ewes are not available to you?

I have quite a few customers who have a flock of different breeds of hair sheep, mostly Katahdin sheep.

Katahdin sheep are an American breed, named after Mount Katahdin in Maine, where the breed was developed. The sheep of this breed shed their hair just like White Dorper sheep. There are other less widely known hair sheep breeds that are not as common, such as St. Croix hair sheep, Royal White, Wiltshire Horn, and American Blackbelly

(Barbados Blackbelly). Some are more suitable for upgrading than others. However, Katahdin sheep are the most common and widely available hair sheep breed among all the above.

Sheep farmers with Katahdin sheep are a large part of my customer base. They have bought ram lambs from me to upgrade their flock and have come back every two to three years to get new ram lambs that are unrelated to the previously bought ram lambs to breed the offspring of such previously purchased White Dorper ram. My business model is set up to maintain several different bloodlines so I can serve these customers year after year with unrelated ram lambs.

A healthy White Dorper ram lamb that was born in March, when I have lambing season, is capable of servicing up to 30 to 40 or on occasion even more ewes when fall arrives. Once the ram can no longer be used at any given sheep farm because of the risk of inbreeding, many customers told me that they have no problem selling that adult ram to another sheep farmer, often at the same price as purchased. To me, that sounds like a win-win for everybody.

I outlined a business model that can be easily pursued. It takes a while longer to get to the end point and some patience is needed. That is perhaps a tall order in this country where everything seemingly must happen instantly and where patience does not appear to be a virtue anymore. However, that is how I achieved my goal

of a purebred White Dorper flock. In 2005 I purchased my first White Dorper rams to upgrade my flock of Texel sheep to a flock of White Dorper sheep. The first rams I purchased were inferior to the ones I have purchased in recent years from Lewis White Dorpers in Oregon. However, they still brought me the desirable shedding ability to my flock. The Lewis White Dorper rams offered everything that one desires in a White Dorper ram.

How long does it take to get to an upgraded flock? If you apply a year for each generation, I will say three to four years. The first generation of 50 percent White Dorper ewe lambs will be notably meatier but will not yet meet expectations. The next generation of 75 percent White Dorper ewe lambs will come closer to the goal. The third generation of 7/8th White Dorper ewe lambs will be almost impossible to distinguish from purebreds. In fact, when White Dorper were introduced to the U.S., a 7/8th White Dorper sheep was considered purebred. The fourth generation makes the percentage 15/16th, which is considered purebred.

How long are three to four years? If you are young, it seems like an endlessly long time. If you are older, that time passes in a blink of an eye. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm.

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