

NON-DAIRY LIVESTOCK

Choosing A Breed for a Pasture Based Sheep Farm

What's best for one farm is not necessarily best for another

by Ulf Kintzell

In 1995 I settled in New Jersey and started White Clover Sheep Farm. In New Jersey there is a shortage of large flocks and of commercial sheep. Thus, I bought any small number of sheep of many different breeds in the area that was available for a reasonable price and bred all ewes to Texel rams. This turned out to be a great learning experience.

of uniformity. Some of the Polypays were huge but produced just one lamb year after year. Some of the Polypays clearly took after Finnsheep. They produced triplets and quadruplets and then lacked milk and body substance to raise these lambs.

The Polypays that produced the best were those that took after Dorset sheep. The lambing percentage was high, at about 2 lambs per ewe, and the lambs finished nicely on



Finishing on grass and legumes is the single most important trait for a breed of sheep in a pasture based farming system. All Photos by Ulf Kintzell

HAMPSHIRE

My Hampshire Sheep came from a commercial flock. They performed well on pasture and were fairly docile sheep, though some with a percentage of Suffolk blood in them were livelier. Their lambing percentage was well above average, reaching about 1.8 lambs per ewe. The lambs managed to get their nutrition from pasture.

The biggest disadvantage was that these lambs didn't finish at a weight between 80 and 90 pounds, the weight that I desired. The bone to meat ratio was too high and the fat cover was not at the desired level. Secondly, the ewes were bigger than a medium sized ewe, which I feel is too high-input when it comes to maintenance.

POLYPAYS

The Polypays also performed well on pasture. Their biggest disadvantage was a lack

pasture at the weight I desired. For a short while I produced female lambs for reproduction using a Dorset ram from a commercial farm. These sheep performed well, yet I parted with them when I received a good offer.

TEXELS

The Texel sheep is not a sheep with outstanding mothering ability, nor high fertility. However, this can be helped by strongly selecting for both. I achieved a lambing percentage of 2 lambs per ewe with good mothering and milking ability after selecting for it for several years.

Texels have a number of things going for them. They produce very meaty lambs, with outstanding prime cuts such as the loin chops and the leg of lamb. Furthermore, Texels are very docile. Both ewes and lambs perform well on pasture. They do need a lot to eat but the pasture does not have to be

first class. The lambs can be sold at a lighter weight (the so-called hot house lambs) as well as high weights.

Texels are known for producing lean carcasses: Getting a Texel too fat is rarely a concern. However, there are downsides to raising Texels. Texels are heat sensitive, suffer particularly when it is humid, and must be offered shade. Another undesirable trait is the difficulty during lambing. Due to their broad head and shoulders it is not uncommon for a ewe to need help delivering her lambs.

Last but not least, if you need sheep with strong flocking behavior don't go with Texels. Some of them do not care whether or not the flock moves on. They just stand still.

In the past years I raised mainly Texel and Texel percentage ewes. These sheep seemed to be the best compromise for my pasture-based farm and the market lambs I wanted to produce. In 2005 I purchased two White Dorper rams. My first half-blood ewes lambed this year and I retained my first three-quarter White Dorper ewe lambs this year.

WHITE DORPERS

My White Dorper percentage ewes have outperformed my Texel and Texel percentage ewes in most areas. This is, in my opinion, not due to a crossing effect, but rather it is due to the breed traits of White Dorper sheep. White Dorpers thrive on pasture and also utilize shrubs and bushes better than other breeds. In fact, at times they seem like goats when you see them lined up along a hedgerow eating leaves.

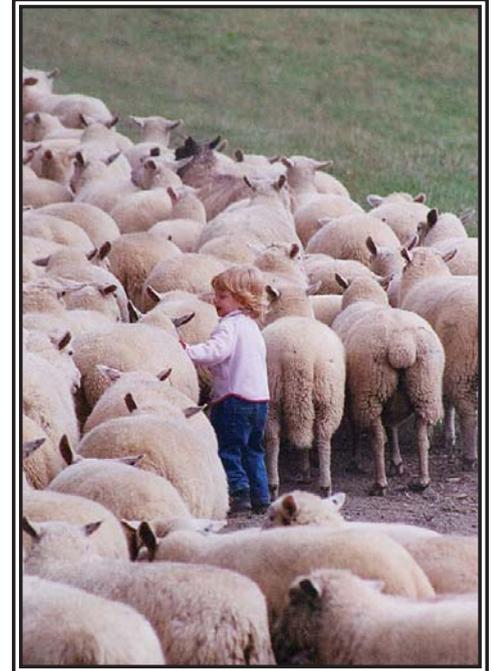
Dorpers are also quite heat tolerant. But be aware, White Dorpers are lively when handled, a fact I found out quickly when I de-wormed them for the first time in my chute. Another down side can be the fact that this breed tends to get too fat quickly when heavily grain fed, a problem I don't have since they are all finished on pasture. There is no problem with them getting too fat when they weigh less than 100 pounds. As of this writing I have market lambs that well exceed 100 pounds. Whether these lambs will be too fat remains to be seen.

NO BREED IS PERFECT

Generally speaking, there is no perfect breed. Choosing a breed means making compromises. However, you get to choose the breed and therefore the compromises you are willing to accept. If these compromises affect the bottom line, you might want to search for a different breed or try to compensate with a terminal sire.

Other undesirable traits such as too lively, heat sensitivity or lambing problems depend more on the sheep farmer's nature and whether or not he or she can tolerate the trait. Undesirable traits can also be dealt with by using certain operating systems, such as frequently checking the ewes during lambing season helps avoiding lamb losses, or offering shade in every paddock limits the influence of hot weather.

These undesirable traits do not necessarily affect the bottom line. What is true and desirable for one farm does not need to be true and desirable for the next. There are



Texel sheep are very docile and often allow humans to approach

very few universal truths. You will need to evaluate what works for you. That is the beauty of entrepreneurship.

Ulf Kintzell owns and manages White Clover Sheep Farm in Hushville, NY. Info at: www.whitecloversheepfarm.com

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Both Texel (left) and White Dorper (right) are breeds that are very suitable to be raised on pasture.