

Choosing a breed for a pasture based sheep farm

By Ulf Kintzel

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. This turned out to be a great learning experience. I bred all ewes with Texel rams. In the following paragraphs I will describe my experience with a few of these breeds.

The Hampshire Sheep came from a commercial flock. They performed well on pasture. They were fairly docile sheep while some with a percentage of Suffolk blood in them were livelier. The 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 in favor of bone and the fat cover was not at the desired level. Secondly, the ewes were bigger than a medium sized ewe. I always feel an over medium size ewe has a too high input when it come to maintenance.

The Polypays performed well on pasture as well. Their biggest disadvantage was a lack of uniformity. Some of the Polypays were huge but produced just one lamb year after year. Some of the Polypays clearly came 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 came after Dorset sheep. The lambing percentage was high at about 2 lambs per ewe and the lambs finished nicely on pasture at the weight I desired. A short while I produced female lambs for re-production using a Dorset ram from a commercial farm. These sheep performed well yet I parted with them when I received a good offer to sell them.

The Texel sheep is not a sheep with outstanding mothering ability and high fertility. However, this can be helped by strongly selecting for both. I achieved a 200 percent lambing percentage with good mothering and milking abilities after selecting for it for several years. Texels have a number of things going for them. They produce very meaty lambs. Especially the prime cuts such as the loin chops and the leg of lamb are outstanding. 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. Texels are heat sensitive, suffer particularly when it is humid, and must be offered shade when some breeds don't need any shade yet. The second undesirable trait is the difficulty during lambing. Due to the broad head and the broad shoulders it is not uncommon that a ewe needs help

delivering her lambs. Last but not least, if you need 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 so far the best compromise for my pasture based farm and for the market lambs I wanted to produce. In 2005 I purchased two White Dorper (WD) rams. My first half blood ewes lambd this year and I retained my first three quarter ewe lambs this year.



A Texel ram (left) and a White Dorper ram. Both breeds are suitable for a pasture based sheep operation.

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. It is due to the traits of White Dorpers. This breed has an excellent capability to thrive on pasture. Dorpers also utilize shrubs and bushes better than other breeds. In fact, at times they act like goats when you see them lined up along a hedgerow eating leaves etc. 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 getting them too fat when they weigh less than 100 pounds. As of this writing I have market lambs that well exceed 100 pounds. If these lambs will be too fat remains to be seen.

Generally speaking, there is no perfect breed. Choosing a breed means making compromises. However, you get to choose the breed and therefore you get to choose the compromises you are willing to accept. If these compromises affect the bottom line one might want to search for a different breed or can try to compensate them with a terminal sire. Other undesirable traits such as too lively, heat sensitivity or lambing problems depend more on the sheep farmers nature and whether or not he or she tolerates them. They can also be dealt with by using certain operating systems, i.e. frequent checking during lambing season helps avoiding lamb losses, or offering shade in every paddock limits the influence of hot weather. These traits typical for certain breeds do not necessarily affect the bottom line. Last but not least, what is true and desirable for one farm does not need to be true and desirable for the next. There are very few universal truths. You will need to evaluate what works for you. That is the beauty of entrepreneurship.