

Pointers from Award-Winning Shepherds 2000 WSBC Master Shepherd - Commercial

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Introduction

I am humbled to be named a “master” shepherd. I have been raising sheep for only 21 years, and the income from the sheep only supplements my teaching salary. I was recently reminded of how much I have learned in those 20 years while reading a national sheep magazine. There were all sorts of tips from the experts that would put me out of business. 20 years ago I would have followed all the expert’s advice in order to become a “master” shepherd. The fact that I have listened to other sheep producers and refined the expert’s advice to fit my circumstances has been the reason for whatever success I have had in this industry. I welcome phone calls, emails, and visits from serious shepherds. There is nothing I enjoy more than talking about sheep and grass. I usually gain more from the interaction than I give.

Our Production System

We have a 78 acre farm with 60 agriculturally useful acres. Thirty of those acres have very sandy soil and become unproductive in July and August during dry summers. The land is divided into approximately 7.5-acre paddocks with high-tensile electric fence. Paddocks are further subdivided with removable electric fencing. A 100+-year-old barn is situated in the lowest hollow on the place. We have a handling system in the barn that is used during shearing, vaccinating, worming, and weaning. The haymow can be used for storing large round or square bales.

Our flock of 200 ewes is raised with low inputs of labor and capital. We lamb in May on pasture and keep the ewes and lambs together until pasture conditions dictate weaning, usually mid-September. Based on feed resources and prices, we sell the lambs as feeders sometime in September through late October. If feeder lamb prices are not competitive, we are prepared to raise the lambs to slaughter weight. The ewes are kept outside all winter on stockpiled pasture and large bale feeding stations. We keep back 30 to 40 lambs each year that are bred to lamb their first year. Ewes are pregnancy-scanned, and open ewes and lambs are sold to slaughter. We average 1.6 lambs weaned per ewe exposed with a lamb mortality of 7 to 9%. Ewe mortality averages less than 2%. The labor requirements are about 300 hours per year plus some hired help during shearing and weaning. We can net over \$10,000 per year on a good year and haven’t lost money in the last 15 years.

Ten tips learned from 20 years of shepherding

1. Raising sheep commercially isn’t a dog and pony show

Choose breeds of sheep that can easily be marketed through the industry infrastructure. Ask the experts who will be selling your sheep to explain the market needs, then find breeds that can meet them and thrive in your production system. Don’t ask your marketing agent to do the impossible. I am disgusted with shepherds who whine about the low prices they receive for their small lot of improperly prepared lambs that don’t fit the market requirements. Exotic breeds with specialized market niches are difficult to profit from commercially. Similarly, sheep raised for the fair circuit and show ring are useless to the commercial producer.

2. Make the sheep care for themselves

Sheep can provide their own housing, harvest their own feed, and spread their own manure. Design a system to take advantage of these remarkable abilities. Wool may not be worth much shorn, but it provides perfect housing except for those few days when it has just been removed. Sheep that are outside are healthier, cleaner, and kinder to the back. Sheep walking on ground wear off their own hooves. We have stopped flock hoof trimming except in rare individual cases. Snow and lush on pasture can provide for all of the flock's water needs during times of the year when the temperature is below 60 degrees. Sheep can graze through 12" of snow on stockpiled forage.

3. Graze, graze, graze,...

The wisest decision we have made was to change to an intensive grazing system 18 years ago. Putting the sheep on grass has put green in my wallet. Growing pasture is different from growing hay. If you intend to make the switch to grazing, get involved with a grazing network. Managing productive pasture is knowledge intensive. Learning grazing management is the most cost effective practice you can implement. When properly managed, land grazing sheep can net more per acre than corn ground.

4. Buy hay, don't make it

We have found that it is much cheaper to buy all of our hay than to make our own. Haying equipment is expensive to own, conditions are rarely suitable for proper drying, and hay of the right quality is seldom available on the farm. I can buy whatever quality hay I need in whatever package I desire, delivered, for a reasonable price. Dairy farms are rapidly going out of business in our area and there is a hay surplus most years. Best of all, we can spend summer vacations snorkeling in the Bahamas or hiking in a Costa Rican rain forest instead of fretting about the weather.

5. Self-feed hay during the winter

We set-up round bale self-feeding stations in selected paddocks for winter feeding. These require little maintenance and tractors don't have to be started or pulled out of snowdrifts. Self-feeding saves a lot of time and energy in the teeth of winter. It is not unusual for 3 to 4 days to go by in the darkness of winter between visits to the out-wintered flock.

6. "A sick sheep is a dead sheep"

But, a sheep that doesn't get sick can live a long and productive life. Eliminate costly diseases and prevent their reintroduction. Keep a closed flock as much as possible and be very careful when bringing in rams. Resist the temptation to buy that good ewe or two that your neighbor has such a deal on. The introduction of foot rot could put us out of business. All thin ewes should be culled to prevent possible spreading of CL and Johne's. We have eliminated OPP and periodically test for it. Our sheep don't cough, or have runny noses, or breathe hard after a long run to the next paddock. We vaccinate ewes annually with CDT and have almost no losses due to infectious diseases. Most of our deaths result from tipped-over ewes. Parasites can cause major problems in a grazing system. Become familiar with parasite life cycles and discuss strategic deworming strategies with your veterinarian to save money and prevent creating parasite resistance.

7. It's the sheep's fault

Whenever a problem occurs, always blame the sheep. If the problem affects most of the flock, then a management change may be needed, but if only some individuals or breeds are affected, then it is probably the sheep's fault. There is a genetic component to disease susceptibility and unthriftiness. Cull rigorously and you will prevent many problems and improve flock performance on your terms. Put evolution to work. Make the sheep adapt to your system.

8. Heterosis is heavenly

Crossbred ewes are healthier, hardier, more productive and profitable than purebreds. Choose breeds that are well adapted to your particular production system. To make the best use of hybrid vigor, choose breeds that are genetically different from each other and use purebred rams.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to find purebred rams of many breeds. We keep production records and adjust the breeds used to improve performance. The top 20% of the flock over 2 yrs old is bred to maternal rams. The rest of the ewes are exposed to blackface terminal sires.

9. Feed the ewes what they need, not what they want

Become familiar with the nutritional requirements of the sheep and feed them accordingly. If the ewes are listened to, they will be over-fed. Mature ewes don't need high quality dairy hay during gestation. Feed them well only when they are working for you, while lactating. We feed grain only to replacement ewe lambs. We have ignored the standard practice of feeding grain during the last 6 weeks of gestation with no ill effects. Sheep that are grain predators are loud and obnoxious, and damage themselves, their lambs, and the soft-headed shepherd that gets in the way. We use a nutritionist to balance rations and design vitamin and mineral mixes tailored to the stage of production and class of sheep.

10. Ewe want it, ewe buy it

Make the sheep pay for capital purchases. If you don't have the money for a paddock watering system, make do with what you have until your sheep profits justify the expense. Weigh each purchase against other ways you could spend the money. (A week on the beach with your spouse or a new scale?) The surest way to make more money is to buy more sheep. But if you can't make money with your current flock, you will probably lose even more by expanding.

When done properly, raising sheep can provide pleasure as well as profit. Some days the predictability of the sheep calms my psyche after a tense day at school. Ruth Ann and I have met some great people raising sheep. Without their unselfish advice, it would never have been possible to be shepherds for long enough to become "masters". Thanks to all of you.

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