



# SCHSIA NEWES

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John Hamstreet - Editor

shepherd0229@g.mail.com

## THE PRES SAYZ

### BREEDING

Let's talk a little bit about breeding. Breeding is something we all do every year, or twice a year, or for some three times every two years. All of us have a breeding plan for our herd regardless of what it is and it may or may not be the same as the guy next to you. When we buy a ram we try and get one that is somewhat not related to the one we have now. However, since most, but not all, of our sheep came from the ones brought in by Utah State University there is a limited amount of genetic divergence.

So let us begin with some definitions;

Out breeding –breeding ewes every year to rams unrelated to them.

Inbreeding – breeding ewes and rams that are related; brother x sister, father x daughter, or son x mother.

Line breeding – breeding all ewes to one ram of outstanding characteristics

Crossbreeding – breeding ewes to rams of a different breed or a widely separated lines.

None of these are inherently good or bad. In our case crossbreeding is usually not an option since we are raising pure bred sheep. If, however, we were raising market lambs and our goal was a big, meaty, fast growing lamb then crossbreeding might be the solution. (Last year our crossbred St. Croix Katahdin lambs outweighed the pure bred SC by 20 pounds). For most

producers the normal system is some type of out breeding or line breeding. Some of us, like myself, close our herds to outside animals for various reasons and therefore are using an inbreeding system. This, in spite of its popular unfavorableness is not necessarily a bad thing.

In an article in The Furrow magazine (January 2016) by Martha Mintz, she reported on a Hereford research herd in Miles City, Montana. They started with two half- brother bulls and 50 cows purchased from a neighbor. The herd has been closed for 86 years and large improvements have been made through selection and careful inbreeding. They selected for post weaning gain to one year and found that it was highly heritable and correlated to weaning weight. But, they collected massive amounts of data. So you see, it is not closing the herd or line breeding that is the key but the collection of data.

Actually, most of us as small breeders use a form of line breeding. Not so much to use a ram of really outstanding quality but because we only have one ram. We buy a ram and use him for three or four years then get another ram and do the same thing. There is nothing wrong with this and if you get an outstanding ram it can really improve your herd in a hurry. But you have to be careful because if he has problems he can set you back just as fast. The dairy people found this out about 20-30 years ago. They got a Holstein bull that really improved the milk production of his daughters and as I recall they used that bull to the point that about half the Holstein cows in the country were related to him. But then they found out that his offspring also had bad feet and didn't hold up well in confinement, so although they were good milkers they only stayed in the herd about three years.

If all you are interested in is how pretty the animal is then it doesn't make any difference what breeding system you practice. When you talk to a customer who is looking at your animals then all you need to do is point out how nice they look. The same holds true when you go out to buy a ram – you just get the nicest looking one you can find. Basically, you are raising show animals and there is nothing being judged in the show ring that will ever make you a dollar unless you are selling to someone who is excited about getting the blue ribbon ram from the fair.

The biggest problem we have is lack of data on our animals. The last time I checked there were no St. Croix sheep in the NSIP program. Other breeds have hundreds on the program. Therefore, when they go to buy a ram they know whether it will improve their production and by how much and they can pick a ram that will help them where they need it the most. Unfortunately, we cannot do that. Except for a few individual breeders who keep records on their sheep, when we go out to purchase a ram we have no idea whether it is going to make a positive difference or a negative difference in our breeding programs.

But, you say, all we need to do is buy the biggest ram available and he will make our lambs bigger and grow faster. Not necessarily so. Just because he is the biggest doesn't mean he is the most muscular, the fastest growing, or had the best weaning weight. The ram standing beside him that is fifteen pounds smaller may be six weeks younger and have a .1 pound per day advantage in growth rate. So the smaller ram would be the better buy. But without data you can never know. You face the same problem when you pick replacement animals to keep in your own herd. Without birth weights, weaning weights, and growth rate how do you know which ones to choose.

Maybe this is a good place to put in a cautionary statement. Don't try and improve your herd for more than one or two characteristics at a time. If you need to improve on rate of gain, feet, milking ability, mothering, and size, pick the one that is most important and work on that one first. You can improve on another characteristic by culling while increasing the other by breeding. And don't be sentimental. It doesn't make any difference how nice old Fluffy is if she is not meeting your standard, get rid of her. When the King ranch was developing the Santa Gertrudis breed one of their requirements was that every cow weaned a calf every year. It didn't make any difference if it was born dead, if the coyotes ate it, or if it died in a blizzard the cow was culled.

I am fortunate enough to have scales. I take a lamb's weight when they are born, at 30 days, at 60 days when they are weaned, and the first of every month from April to August. The first three weights I feel are a direct result of the mothering ability of the ewe. If the lambs grow fast then she is a good milker and mother. But you have to consider the birth weight because if the lambs double their weight every 30 days then a lamb with a two pound advantage at birth will have an eight pound advantage at weaning just because of the difference in birth weight. All these things are taken into account when I choose replacement ewes.

The weights from April to August I feel reflect the effect of the ram. A lamb that grows fast after weaning is one that I want to consider keeping or selling as a herd ram to another breeder. I can tell them with confidence that this ram should help their herd. But again I have to take into account the age of the ram and its weaning weight.

I realize that both of the above assumptions are not 100% valid but they work on a comparative basis.

This is why I have closed my herd and all my breeding animals come from those I have raised. I know the history and data of every animal in my herd and can select to continue increasing my growth rate and milking ability.

One last thing. Always buy replacement animals from a breeder who raises their sheep the same way you do. If you buy an animal from someone who has a lot of irrigated improved pasture don't expect it to work for you if you have dry native grass and weeds. There is a saying in Texas that you can move cows east to west or north to south but not the other way around because of the grass. For us it also applies to sheep.

## SCALES

In my opinion the most important piece of equipment on your farm is a set of scales. Or maybe two scales, one to weigh new borns and one to weigh everything else. The first set you can buy at any feed store for not much outlay. Any kind of hanging scale that reads from 0 to 20 pounds. Actually, you can use a set of bathroom scales to weigh lambs up to weaning weight.

The second set of scales is a different story. Here you can spend as much money as you want or as little as you can afford. Any kind of a scale that you can get a sheep on will work. The one I am using is a platform scale that my grandad bought 110 years ago. Some of them I have to wrestle a little bit to get on there but it gets them weighed. The scales don't even have to be terribly accurate as long as they are consistent since all you are really interested in is being able to compare your sheep against each other. You can go to farm auctions and try and find a set that will work for you or you can go to any of the farm catalogues and spend anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars for a set. What you get, or look for, will depend on your farm set up. If you have a nice set of chutes that you can install the scales in, then look for one that will weigh them as they go through. Or maybe you will have to move the scales to where you need them, as I have to do. If you have unlimited amounts of money, you can put ID tags on all your lambs and get a set of electronic scales, that you can put in a gate, and read the weight of each lamb as it walks across.

The important thing is that you are able to weigh your sheep. If you don't know how much your sheep weigh then how can you compare them. There is no way you can look at a group of lambs and know which ones are fastest growers or had the best milking mamas.

One of the unfortunate things about sheep is that they do not have compensatory growth so that once they fall behind they will never catch up.

## CHURCHILL- OUR FAVORITE FARM ANIMAL



In 2006, when we decided to add sheep to our “retirement farm” we had several important choices to make. Once we decided on St. Croix Hair Sheep, one of the most important was what type of guard animal. We consulted with many breeders and decided on a Sicilian donkey. Besides the effectiveness, one of the most important reasons was that a donkey would be able to eat the same food (grass and hay) as our sheep.

It just so happened that a local petting zoo was in the process of downsizing and had one of their two donkeys for sale. Joyce went to meet Churchill and it was love at first sight. Of course, we were worried, never having need of a guard animal before, what his reaction would be to our sheep (which he had never seen before) and how an animal from a petting zoo would react to this new environment, not to mention his new role in life.

On delivery day, we placed Churchill in a 2 acre pasture with our sheep, which at that time consisted of our initial 6 Ewes. He immediately herded them into a corner, and began trotting around the fence line with his ears pricked high. After two trips around, sensing no danger, he came back to the sheep, announced all was well, and they returned to grazing. We were awestruck with his innate sense of what his new role in life was to be as well as his gentle manner with both the sheep and us.

As time went on we added farm tours, as well as an annual “lamb party” for kids, near the end of our April lambing season. Not only has Churchill been an amazing protector of our sheep but he is always the hit of the party, especially with the kids. His favorite treats besides a carrot are animal crackers and donut holes.

Yes, Churchill is a little spoiled but he has earned every bit of extra attention and remains our favorite animal on Hemmer Hill Farm.

Joyce and Gary Keibler, Crestwood, KY

Experience is often a hard teacher because you get the test first and lesson afterward.

## BIRTH

In the past 65 years I have seen hundreds of lambs, pigs, and calves born and it never ceases to amaze me. One minute the little animal is inside nice and warm in a fluid filled sac having all of his wants and needs taken care of. Then all of a sudden he is being squeezed through this tube and drops into an environment that is anywhere from 40 to 80 degrees colder and he is having to breathe on his own. Not only that but he has to figure out where to get something to eat. But first he has to learn how to stand up which a totally new experience. Some do it on their own, some do it with a lot of help from mom, and some never make it. What is it that makes them know where the food is? What makes them know that they have to start getting up with their back legs first? What is it that makes them know that they can't just lay there?

And what about their mamas. What makes that first time mama know that she has to lick that lamb off and get it dry and get it on its feet? What makes, at least some of them, eat the afterbirth, if they can beat the dogs to it? What makes them know to leave the first one alone and take care of the second one, or the third, and then go from lamb to lamb making sure that they are all up and ready for life? How do they know that there is something the matter with the one and there is no point in wasting time on it? Why do some of them like one of their lambs but not the other one?

There is a difference among animals but basically the process is the same –get born, get moving, and find something to eat. As I say, it never ceases to amaze me and I am awed by the whole process every time I see it.

## APRIL BREEDER

Dominion Farms – Barbara Salisbury – Quicksburg, Virginia

Barbara has nine acres with eight breeding ewes and two unrelated rams. She also has two cows (Belle 15 years old and her three year old daughter) and Lily, the guard llama.

Previously she had a Polypay and a Tunis just as pets.

Barbara got her first St. Croix in 2014. Unlike the rest of us she bought her animals backwards. She already had the llama and got the sheep so it would have something for her to protect. She chose the St. Croix for their temperament, easy birthing, and parasite resistance. She loves the

sheep and does her best to promote the breed. So far, she has sold all her babies as breeding stock to people who want to cross them.

She bought her property in 2008 and started building her house and the farm. Started a small business in 2012 (Dominion Farm Pet B&B) and boards dogs in a small bed and breakfast for dogs. The business has grown and keeps her pretty busy since she does almost all the work herself. Having a farm has always been her dream and after leaving a job in the corporate world she now has her dream and it is a work in progress. She also has chickens and works with the local Humane Society and owns 10 dogs and lots of rescue cats.

