

RECORDING IN MERINO SHEEP

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Studs have always kept records - probably since the first grazier, Able. A century ago you would no doubt have found that more records were kept than today, particularly when labour was available to singly mate ewes, etc.

Today stud breeding is not a prosperous game, due mainly to increased wages and the Australian Tariff policy, and costs must be kept to a minimum. Record keeping can be very time-consuming and costly so only essential records should be kept.

WHAT RECORDS TO KEEP

The records we keep are:

1. Lambing Percentages

Naturally I would like to identify my twin lambs but on a 87,000 acre property in the 15" rainfall zone this is just not possible. However, the old bush adage still holds true that 10% of lambs is worth an extra pound of wool per head.

I have records going back nearly 70 years showing the overall lambing percentage and the percentage in each paddock. These records have been studied to see what parts of the property give the best lambings, what is the result of various methods of predator control, what joining percentages are most suitable, what is the best time to join rams, what effect rounding up the ewes at joining from time to time, should we go round the ewes regularly at lambing or stay well clear of them, how various weather patterns effect lambing, etc.

Nearly everyone keeps lambing percentages but very few people make full use of them. "I've had three bad lambings in a row - I think I'll change my stud" would be a common comment!

2. Classing Records

We carry out an extensive AI program and over half our lambs are by known sires. Our classing has therefore two objectives - to ensure we keep the best sheep for breeding and to identify the super sire for next year's AI program.

EWES

About 3,000 maiden ewes are brought before the classer each year, who classes about 1,200 into the stud, 1,000 into the flock and 800 into the culls. The visual fault of every cull from a known sire is recorded. At the subsequent shearing all fleeces are weighed and the 200 lowest cutters from the flock and stud dropped down a grade. We would promote any heavy cutter from the flock provided her wool went into a suitable bin and she had no obvious faults; but to do the classer justice, this rarely happens. Most

heavy cutting flock sheep have minor faults we are trying to eliminate from the stud.

I assume everyone knows the common method of fleece weighing, using alligator clips and cards. In our case the card is marked with the clip's number, the ewes breeding - first stud, double stud, known sire, etc. - weight of fleece and the bin into which that fleece was classed. The top 100 ewes from the studs (representing about 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ % of the whole mob) are promoted to the first stud and, as previously mentioned, the low cutters down-graded.

The cards are then taken back to the office and sorted out. After the wool is sold the following data is available: Average weight of the three mobs, i.e. stud, flock and cull; the average weight of each line of wool (in these days of OCP, only 3 lines); the value per sheep in each mob and the value per fleece in each line of wool. The cards are then sorted into sire groups and the same figures calculated. It is then possible to say what an average 100 ewes from each sire would return. We can then judge each sire against his peers and against the mob average on a purely commercial basis.

RAMS

The classer classes the rams at about 13 months of age, carrying about 8 months wool. He culls some 30% on visual faults such as low quality wool, muffled faces, bad backs, etc. He also indicates about 300 (10%) which he thinks suitable as sires. The rams are tagged and shorn. A mid side sample of each fleece, with it's weight and sire (if known) is sent to Professor Roberts at the University of New South Wales. Once again, it is necessary to get the culls tested to get a complete progeny test on the sires.

In due course the University sends us a computer print-out book containing the following information: Tab number; Grade (reserve, selected, grades 1, 2 or 3, culled for low weight or wild micron); Sire if known; Greasy Fleece Weight; Yield, Clean Fleece Weight; Clean Fleece Weight Production Percentage; Micron and Micron Deviation. They also give us a Clean Fleece Weight Order for selecting our sires but as this tends to muddle ram buyers we keep it out of the main book and sell on CFW production percentage.

The rams are split three ways on fibre diameter measurement, the strongest 25% called A+, the 25% either side of average called AVERAGE and the finest 25% called A-. This is indicated on the rams ear tag by notches put in with a pair of pliers. I am sure you will all appreciate the difficulty of persuading sheep breeders that fibre diameter varies from year to year.

The rams are then split into their various grades. The numbers required in each grade were worked out from past experience and sent to Professor Roberts. We put more rams in the top grades. The buyers of these grades are always the first to arrive and we actively encourage this. We can then drop the surplus down a grade. But you cannot have a man wanting 15 x \$120 rams and offer him 20 rams to select them from.

Our own sires are selected from the 300 indicated by the classer. If a very heavy cutter turned up outside these 300, we would certainly be prepared to give him a go. After all, if a big fleece from, say, ram 1420 suddenly appeared on the weighing table, my overseer, who does the sampling, would put it to one side and we would later inspect the fleece and the ram to see if we could find why he was not among the chosen or if a mistake had been made.

We use about 20 rams in our AI program of which 10 are two toothed and are given some 150 ewes. The other 10 are sires whose value to the stud is well documented. The two most successful sires are given the first stud ewes as well as all the double stud ewes they can handle. Naturally, we hope that the progeny test in some 2 years time will show that one of the young rams has come well out in front when compared on similar ewes (i.e. double stud).

In regard to using Clean Fleece Weight, rather than Greasy Fleece Weight, I am under some pressure to change this when sending particulars of rams for inclusion in sale catalogues. I have asked Professor Roberts if he can draw up some figures which will show just what difference the use of GFW instead of CFW might have had on our breeding program.

When I first started using OM for selecting my sheep the experts said "You will just get stronger and stronger". I don't think this would have happened anyway, but the introduction of fibre diameter measurement in 1962 made it simple to control. My grandfather, who among other things, founded Haddon Rig and owned it for 38 years, spent his life fighting Sir Samuel McCaughey, the great advocate of the Vermont Merinos. These sheep, as is well known, cut large weights of very low yielding wool. I was brought up to be very suspicious of low yielding wool and was more worried that I might gain weight at the expense of yield rather than thick fibres.

HAVE RESULTS JUSTIFIED THE EFFORT?

It is hard in these fluctuating seasons to put a figure on the added cut per head of our sheep. Using five-yearly averages it would seem that we have gained 1 kg per sheep over the last 20 years. A more accurate guide will be when we use frozen semen from our top 5 rams, put down in 1973, against our top 5 rams of 1983.

As far as ram sales are concerned, I was prepared to lose a few clients when I started selling on figures with only about 1" of wool. This has not been the case, and in fact, my ram sales have increased some 25%. Mind you, we have held a Field Day every year at which a session has been devoted to the advantages of selecting sheep by Objective Measurement. I doubt if we would have succeeded without these days.

At a guess I would say that some 10% of my clients study the figures pretty carefully. Another 10% check the ear tags to ensure they are in the right fibre diameter range. But the majority just assume we are doing the right thing and concentrate on their own particular fancies. We are already getting letters saying "Please send me 10 rams, grade 1, A+, with not too much wool on the nose".

TO SUM UP

Many people keep records just for the hell of keeping them - as witnessed by the fantastic sales of the Guinness Book of Records. We are keeping records to improve our product and thus make more money.

Records must be easily understandable, readily available and written up immediately after the operation in question. Apart from the Computer Print-out Book - known as the Mogila Bible - all our records are typed and pasted into the old leather bound ledgers. These are easily carried to the ram shed or the classing yards etc. For instance, when we are doing AI in the wool-

shed and have a steady stream of visitors, they can be shown why we are spending so much time and money on it and what we have gained from it over the years. There is no doubt in my mind that my records themselves have sold me a lot of rams.

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