

## SBRT, 2011

### DEBATE: “RAMS CANNOT BE SOLD OFF GRASS ALONE”

The sheep is a ruminant and has been bred to convert herbage into flesh in an efficient way; BUT we know that in Biblical times (Song of Solomon) twinning and fertility were highly prized. In this country since the enclosures, farmers have kept sheep folded on arable land and fed them on turnips, hay and cereals. Feeding cereals, pulses and by-products from oil crushing industries is therefore a well-established practice in sheep keeping. The downland breeds we have today are descended from sheep kept in this way.

Feeding rams can be considered in two stages:-

1. Creep feeding – this practice is widely used to accelerate growth, and at a time when lambs convert feed in the most efficient manner. The decision to use this method is an economic one, determined by the value of “early” lambs and the cost of the feed. I sometimes think that creep feeding is akin to masturbation--- something that is widely practised, but people seem reluctant to acknowledge that they actually indulge in it themselves!

I do think there is room for discussion though, about pushing ram lambs well past the weight at which commercial lambs go to slaughter – say 45 kg. Some of the ram lambs offered for sale at Lanark were in excess of 80 kg. by the end of August. This could lead to an “arms race” where breeders strive for ever larger and heavier ram lambs and this could be detrimental to their production of sperm. Unlike some, we don’t “put corn up their arse” to quote one fellow breeder!

2. The preparation of shearling rams, and here you have to work with the resources you have available. Our farm lies at 800 feet in a disadvantaged area and is all permanent grass. No roots or brassicas are grown or fed. The rams are trough fed proprietary pellets and moist sugar beet shreds on a slowly rising plane of nutrition so that by August, they are getting 2lbs. per day + sugar beet, split into 2 feeds. Rams are fed in the yard so that they get exercise running across a couple of fields to get their feed, and I don’t get knocked flying putting feed in troughs for 30 hungry tups! I have no intention of feeding any more, or any “fancy” ration, or course ration. After all, they will get little or no supplementary feeding where they are going. I do know that tups with good scan weight EBV’s on this regime can achieve quite acceptable weights at the sales in September. It is well known that rams can lose from 15-20% of their body weight during tugging, so it’s essential to ensure that they’re in good enough condition to complete the job.

Anne and I sent out a questionnaire to customers past and present to enquire about such things as fertility, health and longevity. The responses were encouraging. One regular reported “we buy shearlings, keep them for 4 or 5 seasons

until broken mouthed, they go with 50 ewes & never had one miss yet”. “Very satisfied” with growth rate, carcass conformation and weights. (N. Lancs., LFA farm) Another customer from a Notts. Arable farm still had a ram we sold him 7 years ago! I would contend that the level of feeding practised at Carr Head Farm does not impair fertility or longevity and there is a very good level of customer satisfaction. The customers that send lambs dead weight can see on the sheets their lambs’ gradings are very satisfactory.

To end, I’m going to show you a few slides that illustrate there is an association between scan weight and price obtained at the English National Sale at Worcester. This relates to ram lambs sold from recorded flocks (118 in all). You can see that the bigger the lamb, the bigger the price obtained, although there is some tail off @ 75kg., but numbers are small. The second slide shows that the best price obtained in each weight band goes onward and upward as did the averages. The following table illustrates that there is a better clearance – i.e. nos. sold against nos. offered for sale – as the weight band goes up.

I would argue that vendors should consider if they can afford not to allow their valuable stock to express their full genetic potential.

Have we messed it up? I don’t think so. Could we do better? Certainly, but we’re determined to improve our grassland and livestock husbandry in order to breed rams that will thrive on a mainly grass-based diet.

Bob Payne.  
2<sup>nd</sup>. Nov., ’11.