

# LAMBING SEASON

—Ulf Kintzel

**T**here are several economic figures that influence the profitability of a sheep farm. How many lambs are raised per ewe is *the* most important one. In addition, the work load during lambing season can be quite heavy. Thus, special attention should be given to the planning and execution of the lambing season.

## LAMBING IN THE BARN

Some sheep farmers have a need for lambs at different times of the year in order to satisfy steady customers throughout the year or they may have a need for lambs early in the season. That may require a lambing season during the winter months when the weather is unfavorable for the survival of the lambs outside. I too need to let some of my ewes lamb in January and in March in order to have heavy lambs in May, June, and July for my steady customers. These pregnant ewes are run through the chute and are separated from the flock just before lambing and are put in the barn.

At first, this flock is housed in one big pen. Along the wall I have a number of jugs where the ewes with multiple lambs can bond for a day after they have lambed. As these sheep leave these jugs I subdivide the pen the sheep occupy in two and have the group that has already lambed on one side and the ewes that still will lamb on the other side. Sheep with single lambs go directly into the pen with lambs since they don't need the bonding time in the jug. The pen for the sheep that have lambed



starts very small and gets enlarged step by step as more and more ewes lamb.

After about a week to ten days the pen with the ewes with the lambs gets subdivided again. This third pen is to separate the newborn lambs from the lambs that are already several days old. Older lambs already show different

time. I supply anywhere between one and two pounds per ewe per day that way.

I set up a creep feeder for the lambs with a smaller feeder made from a livestock panel without the added holes. In this feeder I put some fancy second- or third-cutting hay.

A lot of minerals are leaving the ewe through her milk. I always offer free choice sheep minerals but I add one third salt to these minerals to reduce intake.

I do not feed any grain to either the ewes or the lambs.

### LAMBING ON PASTURE

Lambing on pasture in the spring when the weather is favorable, in late April and early May, is the easiest, most pleasurable, and least costly way of lambing with the least amount of losses or lambs that lost their mother. If it wouldn't be for the need of early lambs I would lamb all my sheep in the spring.

I offer the flock plenty of space when lambing on pasture. Experienced ewes



*A ewe in the headlock raising an orphan lamb.*

behaviors, such as forming groups to play. The very young newborn lambs will join, but may then have problems finding their mothers. When they too are a week old and have no problems finding their mothers, they can join the older lambs.

I feed mainly large round bales of good quality first-cutting hay in large round bale feeders that I made from 16 feet long and 4 feet high livestock panels. I just connected the end with hooks and cut staggered holes in the panel with a disk grinder and smoothed out the cutting edges with the same disk grinder as well. I keep these feeders stacked with hay at all times since there is not enough feeding space for all the sheep to eat at the same time. If I wouldn't, I would run the risk of injury since hungry sheep don't take turns feeding. They would want to eat all at once. Sometimes the quality of first-cutting hay does not quite meet the nutritional needs of the ewes. If that happens, once a day I add second- or third-cutting hay that I buy in small bales. I simply distribute the layers of a small bale evenly in the barn so all ewes can feed at the same



will separate themselves from the flock when it is time for them to lamb. The lambs of a ewe that stands a distance away from the flock are less likely to get mixed up with another ewe that wants to lamb or has just lambed. Thus, fewer lambs are being rejected when lambing on pasture.

I collect the ewes with their newborn lambs with my trailer. Once one or more ewes have given birth I drive out with my trailer and collect those that have lambed. I pick up the lamb(s) by the front leg, walk slowly backwards and have the ewe follow right into the trailer. I always take all the lambs of a ewe at the same time. You can't just take one and leave the other and expect the ewe to follow.

I mark the ewe and her lambs in the same spot, i.e. left ear or right ear or the top of the head when I load several ewes and their lambs in the trailer to avoid any mix-up. Then I bring them to the same jugs that I described in my setup in the barn.

Once the bonding with the mother is complete both the ewe and her lambs go back outside on pasture. Until the age of about 14 days I don't move them around much simply because that is very difficult at that age. Since the grass grows quickly in May there is not much need for rotating frequently.

When I have a group of older lambs (10 days or so old), I create a new paddock for the ewes with the youngest lambs, age one day through about seven days, in which these sheep spend a few days before they are added to the group with the older lambs. There should always be a paddock reserved for the youngest group before they will join the rest of the flock, for the same reason I described in the third paragraph of lambing in the barn.

#### ASSISTANCE

I am often asked when I help the ewe to deliver the lamb. If I see the tip of both front legs of the lamb and a nose emerging, I usually don't help. Helping too early can cause more problems than it does good. I always let nature take its course first before I consider any assistance. If the lamb is not delivered in a couple of hours by an experienced ewe or after several hours by a ewe lambing for the first time, it is likely that something isn't the way it is supposed to be. The usual case for not being able to deliver the lamb is an abnormal position or a breech position. It often becomes necessary to push the lamb back from the birth canal into the uterus in order to straighten out its position. Straightening the lamb out takes experience that can only be gained over time. There is a lot of literature available that describes the possible positions. Going into much detail describing every incorrect position and what to do about it would go beyond the scope of this article. Once I position the lamb correctly I also pull it out right away. The reason why I help in the first place is that the lamb doesn't come out on time. Now time may be crucial since the lamb may run out of oxygen. If the lamb comes out normally but the tongue starts swelling I may help in spite of the correct position. This may be necessary when the lamb is too big, takes too much time to come out, and now runs out of oxygen. A breech position is considered normal, but it appears to me that it doesn't trigger enough contractions when the lamb is in the birth canal and only the tail appears. Pushing the lamb back in and getting a hold of the back legs

and then pulling the lamb out will do the job.

I select for easy lambing so I don't have to assist lambing often. In fact, when switching from Texels to White Dorpers I noticed a significant decline in having to help. However, an incorrect position is a matter of chance and not a genetic problem and thus no reason to cull a ewe.

#### "PROCESSING" IN THE JUGS

During lambing in the barn and on pasture alike, I "process" each ewe with her lamb(s) in a jug. All the utensils I need are in a flat-back bucket so I can hang on the barn wall near the jugs that it is out of reach for the ewes but readily available for me when needed. In this bucket I have the following: spray paint (stock marker), foot trimmers, de-wormer, ring expander with "o" rings for castration and docking tails, ear tags with applicator, and syringe with needle to vaccinate against overeating disease.

I spray paint the tag number of the ewe on the left-hand side of her body and have the same number on the body of each of her lambs. If it is a single lamb I spray the number 1 on the opposite (right) side; if it is a triplet I spray the number 3 on the opposite side. Lambs without a number on the opposite side are assumed to be twins. Since this is the great majority of my lambs I chose those lambs to be unmarked to save spray. This way I can keep track of the lambs of a ewe if the ewe is sick or can identify the mother of lambs that seem to have problems without checking the ear tag. Eventually, the spray paint will wash off but will have served its purpose.

I castrate the lambs I believe to be market lambs but leave the tails on them. I tag ram lambs that potentially may be eventually sold as ram lambs for the purpose of breeding and dock their tails. I also tag and dock the tails of the ewe lambs on day one. I leave the tail long enough that it still serves its purpose. I use rubber "o" rings for both castration and docking tails. For tagging I currently use MiniTags from Premier. They also serve as my mandatory Scrapie tags. I tag the ewe lambs in the right ear and the intact males in the left ear. The first number of the tag indicates the year they were born, i.e. tag number 9023 indicates the animal was born in 2009. The color indicates what percentage White Dorper the animal is, i.e. a blue tag indicates that the animal is  $\frac{3}{4}$  White Dorper. I also may de-worm the ewe and vaccinate against Enterotoxaemia as well as cut the hoofs of the ewe if I haven't gotten around to doing this just before lambing. I choose to do all that in the jug because it is convenient. I already have the lambs in my hands. Secondly, I believe that the pain of castration and docking tails is the least on day one. Thirdly, early castration and tail docking helps avoid complications such as infections, fly strike, and tetanus. Last but not least, the ewe wants to stick around because of her lambs and is less flighty and thus easier to handle.

I find de-worming the ewes just before or at lambing critical because their immune system is the weakest then, and thus they are most susceptible to worm pressure at that time.

## MATERNAL BONDING

After I processed the ewe and her lamb(s), the ewe with twins or triplets spends, depending on the ewe's experience, another day or two in that jug for maternal bonding. I want the ewe to know for sure how many lambs she has and I want the lambs to know their mother. Ewes with single lambs are immediately put in a group with other ewes and their newborn lambs. Ewes with triplets go for another few days in a group with other ewes having triplets when they are taken out of the jug before they are released in a larger group. It takes a ewe a little while longer to count to three than it does counting to two.

The jug is 5 feet by 5 feet big and about 32 inches tall. While all other panels are between 36 and 40 inches high I choose the jug panels to be that low so I can easily step over to the next jug which I may have to do several times a day for several weeks. My legs tend to get a little tired when I have to climb over, thus the lower height.

I feed second-cutting hay in small bales in the jugs. I just walk along the row of jugs with half a bale and throw a layer of hay in each jug. That is a fast and convenient way of feeding. Each jug has a flat-back bucket hanging in it that is raised off the ground. This way a lamb doesn't risk ending up in the bucket of water and drowning or dying of hypothermia or pneumonia.

When it comes to orphan lambs I "go English", meaning the method I use I learned on a trip to England. Any orphan lamb or lamb that cannot be raised by a ewe is given a new mother, usually a sheep that has a single lamb that can easily raise two. I made myself headlocks from plywood that I use to graft the lamb to the new mother. I avoid using a ewe that has lambed before I have a lamb to be grafted, since that ewe already knows how many lambs she has and will be a more difficult candidate for adopting a lamb. Ideal is a sheep that lambs the day I need her. However, it doesn't always work out that way.

The ewe will spend three days in the headlock and will then be released. If she hasn't adopted the lamb yet, she goes back into the headlock. This method has worked for me almost 100 percent. Using a headlock saves money since there is no need for milk replacer or any sort of bottle feeding.

Compared to bottle feeding or holding the ewe to let the lamb nurse it requires the least amount of patience, something I have in short supply during busy lambing season.


## RECORD KEEPING

During lambing season I get a chance to experience every ewe's disposition, her maternal instincts, and how much she milks. I write down how many lambs a ewe has and how many lambs die and of what causes. This way I keep track which ewes are productive and which aren't.

I also write down anything noteworthy such as a ewe rejecting a lamb, not having enough milk, getting mastitis, and so forth. I mark any ewe for culling that exhibits any behavior or disease that is a reason for culling. A behavior that you think makes your lambing season more difficult can

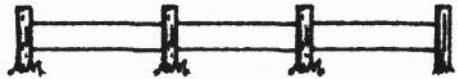
be a reason to cull a ewe. There is one exception. When a lamb is not positioned correctly when the ewe gives birth and the lambing difficulties are due to this position such as front legs are back, head is twisted back, breech position, etc. I would not cull this ewe since this is not a genetic defect and just plain bad luck.

Lambing is the most labor intensive


time of the year for a sheep farmer. A lot of money can be made or lost during that time. I want easy lambing sheep with good maternal instincts and I want any animal to spend as little time in the barn as possible. In addition, I try to eliminate any unnecessary labor. After doing so, there is still plenty labor left, and yet, it is also one of the most enjoyable times of the year for a shepherd. 



*Despite of all the work, after more than 25 years I still find lambing season still very enjoyable.*



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