

Twinning

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

One of the most productive measures of a ewe is her ability to have twins instead of just having one lamb. A sheep that twins is more likely to make you a profit. A sheep that consistently has just one lamb may cause you to lose money.

So, you would want as many ewes as possible to have twins. (Note to dairy and cattle farmers: when having a female and a male twin in sheep, the female will be fertile.) How do you get to a flock of sheep with a high twinning rate? Conventional wisdom is to take a twin-born ewe lamb and she will have twins. Unfortunately, it isn't that simple. Not even close. I do get the occasional request to purchase only twin-born ewe lambs or a ram lamb that is twin or triplet-born with the expressed expectation that this will significantly increase the rate of twinning and will bring it close or all the way to one hundred percent. I even got a request from a person who culls all ewes the moment they don't twin. In these cases, I decline selling the buyer any animals and state that I don't have what they are seeking. Why? After all, almost all the ram lambs I sell are twin-born and so are most of the ewe lambs. So, why would I decline such a request? I decline because those people will inevitably be disappointed in my sheep because there is no such straight line to getting a one hundred percent twinning rate.

Let me discuss my situation here at home. My adult White Dorper sheep have a lambing percentage on average of about 180 percent. That means on average I have 1.8 lambs per ewe. In some years I do a little better and get close to 190 percent. Slightly less than ideal conditions during breeding season will lead to a slightly lower average but will stay at or above 170 percent. I also expose the ewe lambs the year they were born to a ram. Most of these lambs breed at the age of 7 to 9 months of age. However, their lambing percentage stays below 150 percent and is not included in my calculation of lambing percentage.

A lambing percentage of above 200 percent is not possible with the sheep I have. Ewes consistently have twins year after year are rare. I do have ewes that have triplets on occasion as well. Still, a lambing season of 200 percent and above is not feasible. For those who seek it I have no advice other than suggesting a breed

that naturally often produces triplets. There are breeds like these. Romanov sheep and Finnsheep are breeds like these and so are composite breeds or cross-bred sheep that include these fertile breeds. I have found such high lambing percentage for a grass-fed system like mine unsuitable. While I have a number of sheep which get triplets, raising all three of them is a struggle and the growth-rate is in my view not satisfactory. Of course, there is always the exception of a ewe that can do that but as a whole I find it undesirable. Therefore, I routinely find another mother for the third triplet and use my head gate to have a ewe with one lamb adopt a triplet and therefore have each ewe raise two lambs. In short, in a year when I have a 180 percent lambing percentage, I am where I want to be.

I don't want to discourage you from selecting twins. I don't attempt to advocate against it. Not at all. I do select mostly twins as well. Just don't expect wonders. The increase in the twinning rate will grow slowly and only marginally. Also, selecting just for twinning bears the risk of selecting against other traits like growth rate and body structure, as well as other economic factors. If you blindly select twin-born ewe lambs, you may not pay much attention to how well the mother's mothering and milking ability was or how fast the lambs grew or whether the lambs are correctly structured and have good feet. In other words, you may decide to keep a twin-born lamb that has other flaws just because she is a twin, and likewise, you may decide against selecting a perfectly good single-born lamb in the false belief it will bring down your lambing percentage. Keep that in mind.

There are other measures to increase the twinning rate. You can do a lot of good by creating a good environment for your ewes, especially just before and during breeding season. They are as underappreciated as genetic twinning is overrated. Here is how.

Well-known and proven field trials and studies have shown that higher nutrition two to three weeks prior to breeding, especially an increase in energy, will cause ewes to ovulate more eggs. This increase in feeding is being kept up throughout breeding season. It is called the flushing effect. This works particularly well if the ewes had less nutrition until two to three weeks prior to breeding, are a little thinner, and are now put on this better feed or pasture, followed by introducing the rams



two to three weeks later. The effect is less when the ewes are already in good shape. They already will ovulate well. Why does flushing work? Basically, mother nature tells the body of a sheep that times are good and are likely good to raise more lambs. As a result, more eggs are produced. As an aside, because I was asked that question: Shortly after breeding season the nutritional needs for the ewes are not higher. The embryos are too little to require additional input. You do not necessarily need to keep up the high input unless you wish to get your ewes in better condition for the winter.

Another very important management tool during breeding season is to cause NO STRESS. Don't train your herding dog during that time, and keep any necessary work with your trained herding dog to a minimum. Don't chase after a ewe to treat her, causing her and all the other sheep around her to get stressed. Have all management issues, i.e. deworming, done before breeding season starts. In addition, you want your ewes to be healthy and fit at breeding. Sheep with a lot of parasites as well as lame sheep, are stressed. If you have hoof rot that causes your sheep to limp, you have a big factor that reduces ovulation and conception.

Here is the reason for avoiding stress: When the eggs are fertilized, they travel to the uterus wall and attach themselves to it. Stress can cause them to be aborted. If it happens to both eggs, you are "lucky," because the

ewe will simply return to season three weeks later and breed again. All you might lose is time. However, it is entirely possible that one egg aborts and the other one stays attached to the uterus. This ewe will now have just one lamb.

It is also advisable to keep the rams away throughout the year until breeding. Ewes will come into season better and ovulate better when the rams are introduced at breeding time. In fact, switching rams out during breeding season also has a boosting effect as far as stimulation is concerned. Also keep in mind that rapidly decreasing day length, as we have in late September and early October, will stimulate the ewes to come into season in large numbers.

So, the ideal scenario that I try to create during breeding season is this: Lots and lots of good pasture prior and during breeding season, forcing no one to eat anything clean, always grazing to the fullest. No stress, just a daily pasture shift. All other management is either done before breeding season or is put on hold. The same applies to the time shortly after breeding season has ended, so no ewe aborts early. Create such an environment and abide by such a management system, and I am certain, your twinning rate will increase significantly, regardless of whether your ewes were single or twin-born. 🐑

How to Catch a Sheep



—Ulf Kintzel

Catching a sheep the correct way with the blue leg crook. The crook hooks in above the hock and is then held up.

While living in New Jersey, a friend of mine and I used to shear sheep for small flock owners. The new customers were always advised prior to our arrival how to go about penning up the sheep so we could catch them to shear them. In one instance, the owner had chased the sheep around the barn the morning of our arrival to get it into the barn, where the sheep had never been. The sheep then knew something was up and different and did not go in. Upon our arrival, the owner, out of breath and composure, called the sheep stupid. I asked how smart he wants the sheep to be. After all, this “stupid” sheep had already outsmarted him today.

The point of the story is that you need to get into a sheep’s head—you have to know how a sheep thinks to know what to do. While at times it may look stupid to you what a sheep does, in a sheep’s mind it all makes sense. The sheep is not the stupid one if you can’t catch it. Its survival instincts will cause it to act in ways that the owner should understand and anticipate. And oh yeah, I was not asked to come back to shear that sheep. I wonder why....

So let’s assume your sheep are in the pasture and you notice one that limps or has a string or wire wrapped around the leg or is sick or has worms or whatever else and you want to catch it. How do you catch it? It is relatively simple when you do grain feeding. You do it when you feed your grain. The task is quite a bit more difficult if you do grass-fed.

Let’s start by addressing what a sheep thinks and how it functions. Just like us, sheep are creatures of habit. If you have a daily routine, they will learn to follow

that routine and usually be quite cooperative. Change one thing and they will get suspicious and may stop cooperating. That means you don’t want to start thinking about how to catch a sheep when the moment arises. You want to start thinking about it today, right after you read this article. What you need to do is incorporating the place or facility where you want to catch a sheep into your routine. A place to catch a sheep could be a pen or stall in the barn. It can be a pen you set up in the pasture. This pen should be familiar to the sheep. Trying to get the sheep in any pen or stall or corner of a paddock will fail when you try to do it for the first time when you need to catch a sheep.

Larger flocks have the advantage of “absorbing” the sheep you want to catch rather than scattering all the sheep. However, it is not feasible to get them into a pen in the barn each time you want to catch a sheep. Instead, you can use an electric netting in a corner of your grazing cell to make an enclosure. Don’t make it just as big as you need it. You may have problems getting all the sheep in, especially the last ones. Make it a bit bigger at first and then, when all sheep are inside, make it smaller to your liking by moving individual fence posts closer.

Always move the sheep you wish to catch towards the other sheep. This way, the other sheep keep it from racing around. That is what I mean by a larger flock “absorbing” the sheep you want to catch. If you drive it away from the flock and try to catch it, it will outrun you.

A blue leg crook, sold by Premier One Supplies, is a very handy tool when catching sheep. The pictures show how to catch and how not to catch a sheep with that crook. Pay special attention to the spot where the crook



Catching a sheep the wrong way: When the crook is hooked in between foot and back and then pulled back, the sheep is left with a lot of strength and incentive to struggle and fight.

hooks in. When attempting to catch the sheep, make sure you have the crook ready and hold it low. Don't raise it up in the air when you approach the sheep or run after the one you want to catch. They soon figure out what the crook means and will stay clear of you. Here is another rule of thumb that puts you inside a sheep's head: You have one good try to catch a sheep. So, plan it thoroughly and then execute your plan decisively. After that one try, if it was an unsuccessful one, the sheep will know you are trying to catch it and will react far sooner and quicker to any of your additional attempts. Remember, sheep aren't as stupid as people think they are. There are just far too few people who are able to outsmart them.

Also, use your kids to get the sheep together or where you want them! I am often asked for some advice of a herding dog. A herding dog doesn't function like a drill or blender. You can't just use it and then put it aside. You have to train the dog, which takes time, knowledge, and

skill. You have to be able to assert leadership. You have to work the dog regularly. You have to be able to watch the dog while you are watching the sheep you wish to catch. These are no small tasks. If you have kids, they work great getting sheep together, provided they are the kind who love the outdoors and listen and aren't the ones that walk with their eyes glued to the screens of their cell phones. Have them form a line and steadily and gradually push the sheep where you want them. The more kids, the better.

I hope this article will be of help to some of you who have struggled to catch a sheep. I know Stephen A. will appreciate the article. His phone call after some unsuccessful attempts to catch a sheep triggered me into writing it. I surely hope he has been able to catch his sheep before this article went to print. If not, he can now give it another try....

On a personal note: In the last weeks and months I have received an increased number of calls from fellow sheep farmers in Ohio, seeking breeding stock. While I discontinued my delivery to Ohio a few years ago, I am reconsidering. While I am notoriously sold out early on any ewe lambs, I will have a sizable selection of ram lambs available, all sired by my new rams from Lewis White Dorpers in Oregon. So, if you live in the proximity of Holmes County, Ohio, or in western Pennsylvania, give me a call. I am usually sitting by the phone at 6 AM on most weekdays. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.

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