



Judging Sheep

The aim of a profitable sheep industry is:

1. To efficiently produce the type and quality of carcass desired by the consumer.
2. To produce the quality of wool desired by the consumer.

This is not easy. To accomplish this as a producer of sheep, you must be knowledgeable about the type and quality of the sheep you purchase and know how to feed and manage them so you can achieve the desired results.

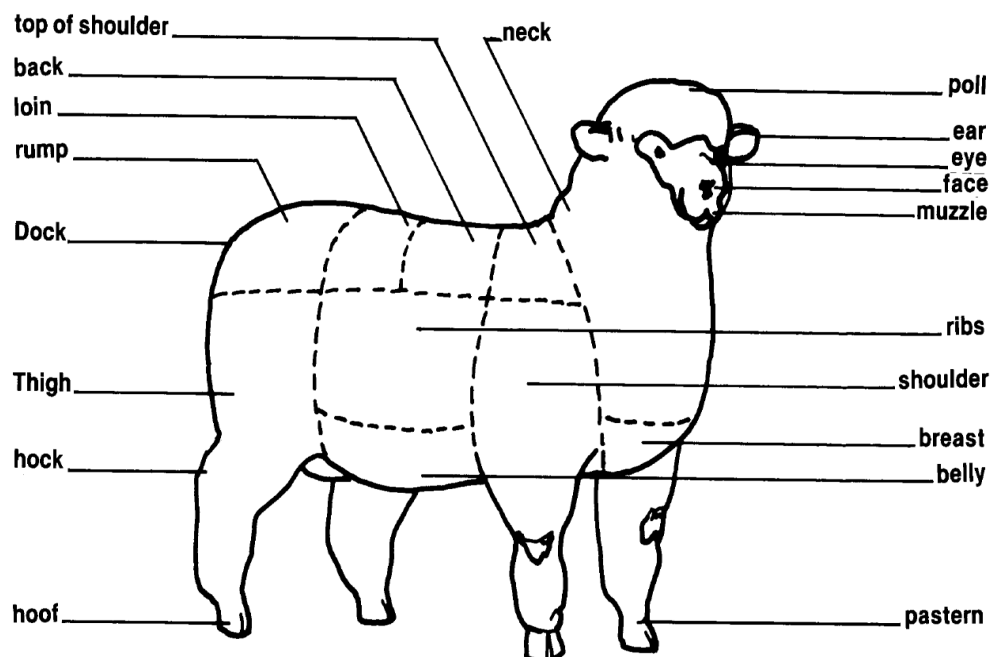
The following information will make the task of selecting quality sheep easier for you.

The objective of this unit is to:

1. Give you the background knowledge about the structure and the function of the sheep, so you know the important points to consider when judging sheep.
2. Show you how to determine if a particular animal possesses these important traits.

First, we need to learn about the parts of the sheep. Other than the names of the parts of the body, judging sheep and judging beef are very similar - sheep just come in a smaller package.

Parts of a Sheep



Second, you need to know how to judge and prepare your reasons. For detailed information, consult the Let's Judge (2015) leaflet.

Third, you must know the specific terminology to use when judging sheep. The information provided in this unit is designed as an introduction only. There is always more to know. Talk to local sheep breeders, judges and breed associations to gather more information on judging sheep.

Now - take these three things and put them to use. Good judging!

Judging the Market Lamb

When judging market lambs, there are two main areas you must analyze. These are:

- muscling
- finish

Once you have determined the quality of muscling and finish, analyze the general appearance and the size and frame of the lambs.

Follow the steps below when judging market lambs. Judging will become easier if you follow the same system each time you judge.

View from a Distance

You must always compare. First, look at the animals from a distance of 6 to 8 meters away. View them from three angles - rear, front and side. Compare these things as you view the sheep from a distance.

From the rear:

- Full and level over the dock. The dock must be long enough to cover the anus in ram lambs and the vulva in ewe lambs.
- Long from hooks to pins
- Muscle expression in the rear quarter
- Deep, wide and thick leg
- Thick across rump, loin, back
- Trim through the middle
- Rear legs that have good angle at the hocks
- Quality of fleece



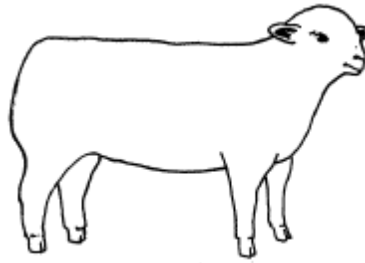
From the front:

- Muscular forearm
- Deep and wide through chest
- Refined head
- Evidence of breed character
- Straight forelegs
- Slim, clean neck
- Smooth shoulders
- Wide over the shoulders



From the side:

- Balance
- Deep and full through leg
- Size and scale
- Trim middle
- Cleanness in fore, rear flanks
- Well placed feet and legs
- Long body
- Style
- Long and strong on top
- Strong bone
- Long and level rump
- Proportion of weight in the leg, loin and rack
- Straight feet and legs



Handling the Market Lamb

After you have viewed the lambs from a distance, you are ready to move in close and examine each lamb individually.

To accurately determine the muscling and finish on a market lamb, you must handle it. Only a very experienced judge can estimate the muscle and finish on a lamb without handling it. Even the most experienced judge will be more accurate if he or she can handle the animal.

The way the sheep stands when you handle it will affect your results. Make sure the sheep is standing squarely on all four legs. Handle the lambs gently but firmly. Always keep your fingers together as you feel the lamb, pressing firmly with fingers flat and with the ball of your hand. Handle every lamb exactly the same so you can make accurate comparisons between the lambs.

Determining the fat cover on a market lamb

Determine the fat cover over the top (backbone):

Start at the rump and work your hand towards the front of lamb, running the flat of your hand over the back bone to determine the amount of fat covering.



Determine the fat cover over the ribs:

Move down to the sides of lamb and check the finish over the ribs.



A lamb which is too thin will have less than 0.25 cm of finish. The backbone will be very prominent and sharp. Each rib will be sharp and easy to feel. There will be a slight hollow between each rib.

A correctly finished lamb will have 0.25 to 0.65 cm of finish. The backbone and the ribs will be easily felt but not sharp. There will be no hollow feeling between the ribs.

A lamb that is too fat will have over 0.65 cm of finish. It will be very smooth over the top and you will have difficulty finding the back bone. You will be able to feel the ribs, but not distinguish one from the next.

Body condition scoring (BCS) is a basic production skill all shepherds must have to effectively assess body condition of their sheep to determine if the feeding program is working, if the animals are gaining or losing weight, if the animal is ready for breeding/lambing or for market or show. For more information on body condition scoring (BCS), refer to the Western Canadian Production Manual or the Canadian Code of Practice for Sheep Production.

Determining the muscle on your market lamb:

When you are handling the lamb to determine the amount of muscle, give the most attention to the hindsaddle - that's the loin, rump and leg. This area of the lamb produces the most valuable cuts of meat. Stand behind the lambs. They should be structurally correct, wide and well muscled but not over-fat.

Indications of muscling are:

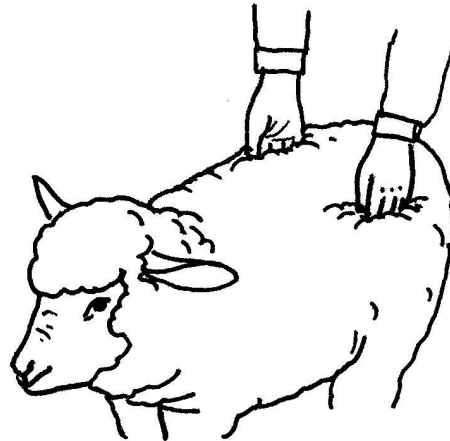
- thickness and firmness through the leg
- natural thickness over the top
- thickness in the forearm and over the stifle

Determining the muscling of a market lamb

Check the length from the last rib to the base of the dock.



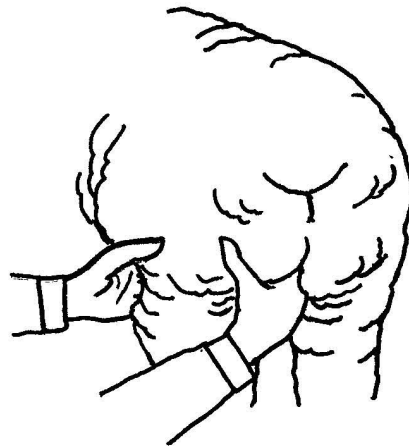
Check the length, width and depth of the loin. Look for a thick, deep, firm, well-muscled loin.



Check the length, width and depth of the rump.



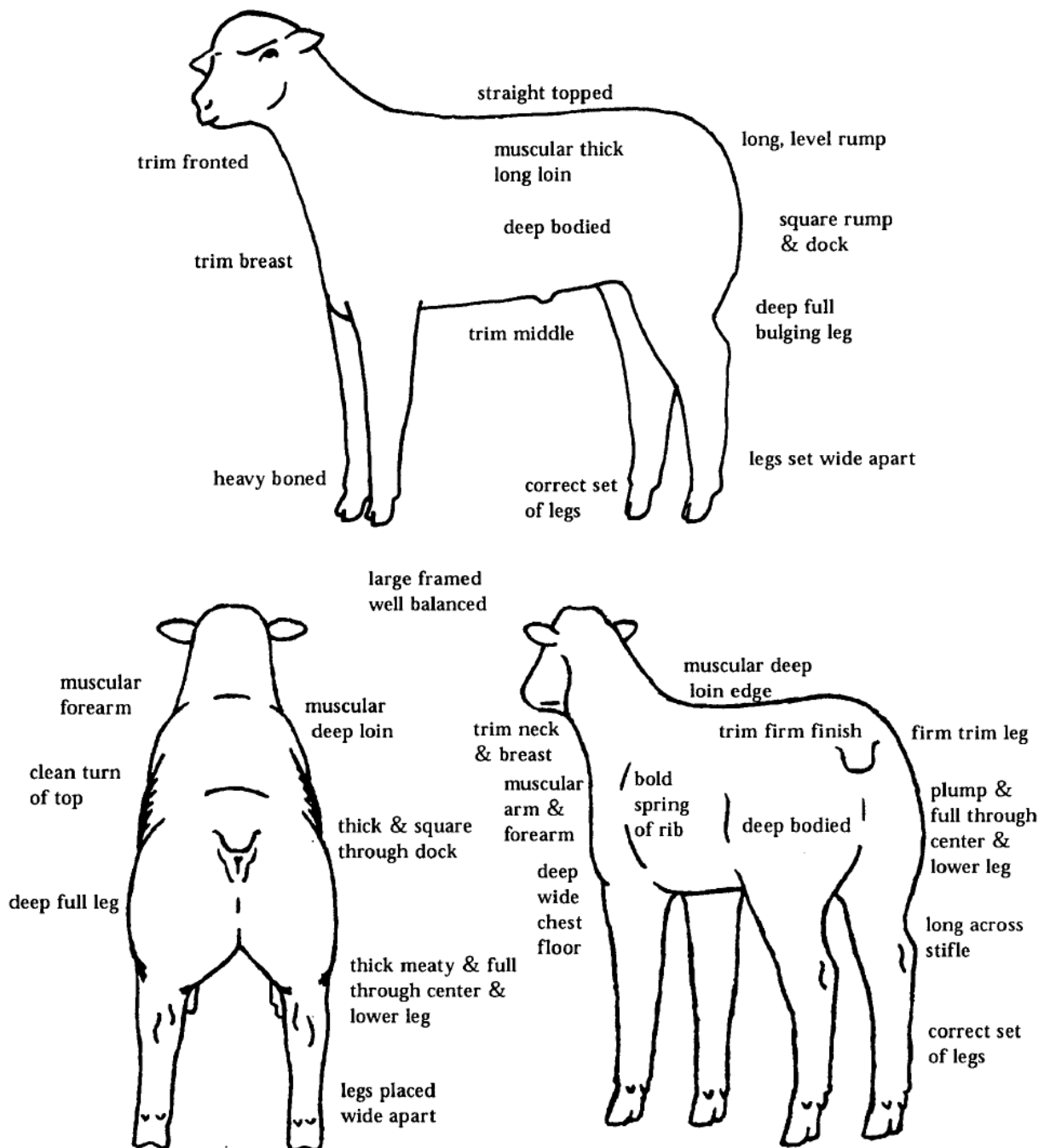
Determine the depth and volume of muscle in the leg.



The Ideal Market Lamb

When judging market lambs, the main areas of emphasis are muscle and finish. Structural correctness is of lesser importance. Think of your market lamb as a profitable package of meat ready for market.

Consumers want to buy high quality, lean and tender meat.



General Appearance

Your ideal market lamb will have these characteristics:

Liveweight 40 to 55 kg

Size not necessarily tall (leg bones are not a saleable cut)
adequate frame and body capacity showing depth and spring of rib

Back long and straight
greatest length from last rib to base of the dock

Loin long, wide, deep and muscular
large loin eye area

Rump long, level and broad

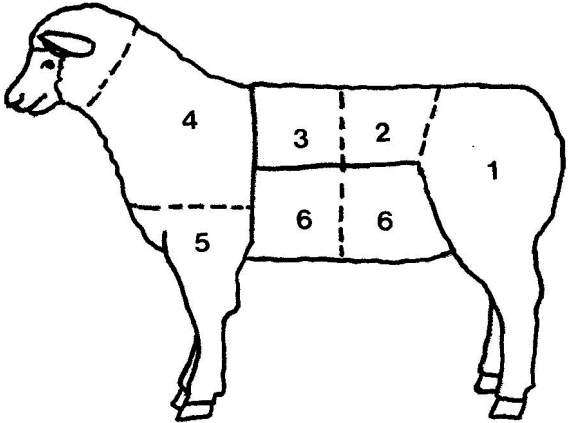
Legs straight and well placed under corners of the body
rear legs filled with muscle - deep, wide and thick
muscle extends down to the hocks

Conformation

Conformation is the general shape and structure of the lamb. The ideal lamb is wedge shaped as you look from above. Viewing from the rear, the ideal lamb will be widest through the stifle area.

Balance

Balance is the proportion of the body parts to one another and how well they blend together. The ideal lamb is smooth and well balanced. The greatest proportion of weight is in the area of those high priced cuts.

Wholesale Cuts of a Sheep Carcass		
	High Priced	Low Priced
	1. Leg 2. Loin 3. Rack	4. Shoulder 5. Breast 6. Flank

Muscle

You can best determine the amount of muscle on the live lamb by examining the:

- forearm
- leg over the stifle joint
- loin.

There are three dimensions to muscle - length, width and depth. You must consider all of these when you determine the amount of muscle on your lamb. The ideal lamb has long, wide and deep or thick muscle.

Over 60% of the value of the lamb comes from the leg and loin. The leg and loin are only 25% of the live weight. Therefore, your ideal market lamb is correctly finished and heavily muscled with good conformation, balance and quality.

Finish

Finish is the amount of external fat the lamb is carrying. Enough fat cover to be healthy is essential; it also makes your lamb look good. Too much fat is not only discounted in the market price you get for your lamb, it has to be trimmed from consumer cuts. It costs you money to produce and costs the market money to remove it. Handle those areas where there should be no fat - the point of the shoulder and the rear flanks. Fat cover on the live lamb can be determined by looking at the:

- finish over the back bone
- fat around the dock
- finish over the rib
- fill in the flank
- fill behind the shoulder
- fat in the twist and the brisket.

Feel these areas to determine the amount of finish. A hard, bare touch indicates a lack of finish. A soft, mellow touch indicates too much finish. On the ideal market lamb, you will be able to feel the outline of the backbone and the ribs on the lamb. It takes practice and experience to differentiate between fat and muscle.

Dressing Percentage

This is the carcass yield from a live animal. It depends on a number of factors such as genetics, age, feeding program, fleece length and cleanliness. The dressing percentage will be higher if the lamb is heavily muscled. The dressing percentage will be lower if the lamb is over fat, gutty or heavy fleeced.

Performance Information

If it is available, look at the performance information on the lamb (birth type/birth date/weight; weaning date/weight; market or show date/weight). Young, fast gaining lambs are preferable to older, slower growing lambs. You can see the difference in the length and type of fleece – a young, growthy lamb has a short, tight and lustrous fleece.

Remember that the goal of the sheep producer is to efficiently and profitably produce a quality carcass. Our industry needs to compete effectively in the years to come, so we need to produce growthy, well muscled lambs to meet the demands of consumers.

Market Lamb Terminology

One of the most confusing things about judging sheep is the terminology the judge uses when explaining how he judged the sheep. Following are some of the terms the market lamb judge uses. These terms are samples of the terms you should be using in your reasons.

Muscling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Longer in the rump, with more total dimension to the leg• Thickest, heaviest muscled lamb in the class• Showed more total volume of leg• Showed more muscle expression in the lower leg• Longest hindsaddled lamb in the class, with more length in the loin• Wider topped lamb with more thickness over the loin edge• Stood wider on the rear legs• Thicker, more squared rump• Showed more muscling in the forearm• Carried out longer and squarer to the dock• Fuller behind the shoulder• Widest through the stifle• Showed more evidence of muscling through the stifle region
Finish	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A firmer finished lamb• Firmer handling lamb• More uniformly covered, with a more desirable degree of finish• Cleaner designed, trimmer lamb• Lamb that is trimmer up front and cleaner through his underline• More correctly and uniformly finished lamb
General Appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Larger, growthier lamb• Taller, more upstanding wether• Shows more size and scale• More length of hindsaddle• More depth of body• Largest framed, longest bodied, heaviest muscled lamb in the class• Showed more balance overall• Straighter in his lines and more correct on his feet and legs• Stronger topped limbs• Cleaner fronted and smoother shouldered• Longer bodied, cleaner fronted, and trimmer through the middle

Sample Reasons - Market Lambs

I placed this class of market lambs 1 2 3 4.

I placed 1 at the top of the class and over 2 because 1 was a meatier, more heavily muscled, thicker lamb than 2. 1 showed more width, depth and length of loin, a squarer rump and a heavier muscled leg of lamb than 2. 1 was also deeper in the heart girth and more uniform in width and depth of body than 2. I grant that 2 was trimmer through the middle than 1.

I placed 2 over 3 because 2 was a cleaner cut, trimmer, longer bodied lamb than 3. 2 showed a more correct degree of finish over the back, loin and down the rib than 3. 2 had more length in the rump and a larger, meatier leg of lamb than 3.

I placed 3 over 4 because 3 had more thickness, muscling and quality than 4. 3 was heavier muscled over the topline, more uniform and firmer in muscling and more uniformly thick throughout than 4. 3 was also fuller behind the shoulder than 4. I grant that 4 was straighter over the topline and trimmer through the middle than 3.

I placed 4 at the bottom of the class because 4 lacked the finish, muscling and overall quality of the other lambs in the class.

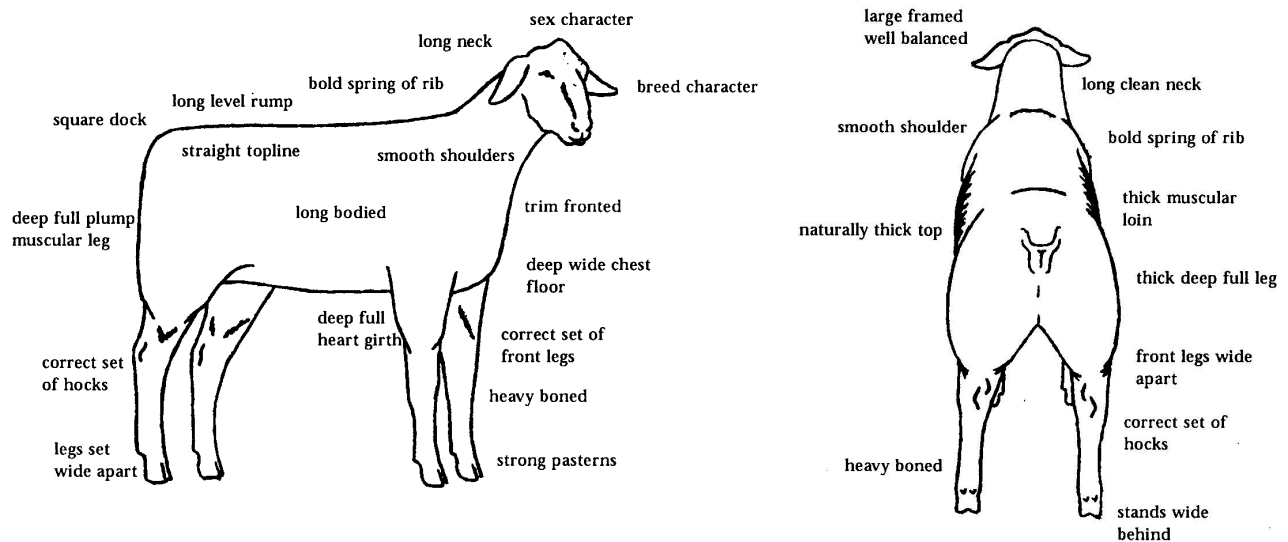
These are my reasons for placing this class of market lambs 1 2 3 4.

Judging Breeding Sheep

It is very difficult to visually assess an animal on one day of its life and determine its value to a flock owner. Selecting animals that follow breed type and have correct physical conformation is one step in a flock selection program.

Judge breeding sheep very similarly to the market lamb. Determine the amounts of muscle and finish, but place more emphasis on the structural correctness and the breed characteristics.

There is a difference between judging wool breeds and meat breeds. There are also dairy and hair breeds of sheep which are not being considered here. In the wool breeds, 25% of the score is based on the wool. In the meat breeds, only 10% is based on the wool.



Quality

Good quality is desirable whether you are selecting breeding or market sheep. Signs of quality in sheep are:

- clean cut, well shaped head
- bone of ample size and clean joints
- minimum amount of smooth and evenly distributed finish
- bright, dense fleece
- pink skin
- symmetrically balanced body.

Size and Capacity

Larger animals are more desirable provided they are sound and have quality, balance and smoothness. There is an economic balance between body size and feed requirements that must be considered in profitable sheep production. Size varies with the breed. Be familiar with the characteristics of the breed you are judging.

Capacity is the size of the animal in relation to its ability to take in food and reproduce. To determine this, look at the depth through the heart and the width through the chest. A ewe must have the capacity to reproduce effectively.

Head and Neck

The neck should be trim, well set and of moderate length. The style of the head varies with the breed, but the head should always have a broad forehead, be open or free of wool down the nose and have plenty of width between the eyes and ears. The eyes should be bright, healthy and alert. The teeth should be fully functional.



Normal Mouth

- True, even bite
- Teeth meet evenly with edge of upper pad

Undershot Jaw

- "Parrot mouth"
- Upper jaw too long

Overshot Jaw

- Lower jaw too long, teeth extend beyond the pad

Shoulders

The shoulders should be joined neatly at the top with a minimum of flesh covering and blend smoothly with the neck. The chest should be wide and full to indicate capacity. The chest should be neat and trim and fit cleanly and tightly into the neck, shoulders and chest regions.

Condition

Condition is the amount of fat cover. In breeding classes, use the term condition rather than finish. When judging breeding animals, put more emphasis on muscling than on condition as you are not judging the animals as ready for market.

Breed and Sex Character

Sex character refers to those distinguishing features which differentiate males and females.

Rams should be masculine. They should be powerful with strong bones, and strong, bold heads and necks.

Ewes should be feminine. The bone of a ewe is smaller and more refined than that of a ram. The ewe must still be large and substantial enough to be a strong mother.

Each breed has specific breed characteristics. Again, know the specific characteristics of the breed you are judging.

Balance

Balance is extremely important in livestock selection. Balance refers to the parts of the body in proportion to one another and how well those parts blend together as the animal moves. A well balanced animal moves freely, has a desirable style and general appearance where all parts fit together well.

Fleece

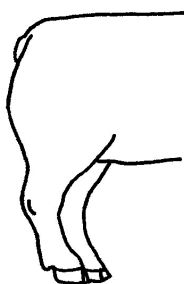
Inspect the fleece and mention it in your reasons if it is a factor in your placing. Remember that the finest quality wool is found at the side of the shoulder and the coarsest quality wool is found at the breech (hind leg).

Visual grading of wool is a specialized skill requiring training and experience. However, generally look at these things when evaluating the fleece: fineness, length, density, uniformity, character, purity, soundness, foreign matter, colour and covering. Look for a long fiber, a distinct wave and density in the fleece. The fleece should be uniform in grade or fineness from shoulder to breech (hind leg). A bright fleece and pink skin indicate a healthy animal.

Feet, Legs, Bone

Strong, straight legs and pasterns with adequate bone are essential for breeding sheep. Hind legs that are too straight (post legs) will contribute to lameness and difficulty in moving in breeding animals. The legs should be of ample bone, wide set and squarely placed under the animal. The pasterns should be short and strong with the toes rather close together. Pasterns that are flat or crooked in a young animal worsen as the animal ages and contribute to difficult movement. To produce well, the breeding animal should move freely and easily with no evidence of unsoundness.

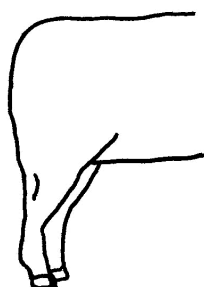
Some of the defects which cause unsoundness in the feet and legs of sheep are shown.



Sickle hocked
(too much set to the hocks)



Cow hocked
(hocks too close together)



Post Legs
(too little set to the hocks)



Weak Pastern
(short, strong pasterns desired)

Scorecard For Breeding Sheep

	Perfect Score	
	Wool Breeds	Meat Breeds
Body Conformation	25	40
skeletal structure		
muscling is more important than condition		
size and scale of animal should be according to breed		
Feet, Legs, and Bone	20	20
strong, straight legs with heavy bone are a must		
in breeding sheep		
legs set on four corners of body		
sound feet and legs		
Breed and Sex Character	20	20
rams should be masculine with strong bones		
ewes should be more refined		
characteristics should be according to breed		
Fleece	25	10
black fiber is not desirable		
the finest quality wool in the fleece is found at the side		
of the shoulder		
length - long fiber is desirable character - look for a		
distinct wave density		
fleece should be clean, shiny, uniform in grade or fineness		
from shoulder to breech (hind leg)		
bright fleece and pink skin indicate a healthy animal		
General Appearance	10	10
overall appearance should be pleasing		
proportionately balanced throughout		
Total	100	100

Source: Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency

Breed Standards of Excellence

To help you understand more about the differences between the breeds, this chart summarizes the characteristics of three common breeds.

	Suffolk	Dorset	Hampshire
Head	black face hornless long muzzle wrinkle free	neat, white face large nostrils broad muzzle wool covered crown	open faced wool cap hornless brown or black polled or horned
Ears	long, bell shaped black fine textured flip up on ends bright full	medium size medium length short white hair prominent bright	medium size long, thick free of wool dark in colour
Neck	moderate length well blended wrinkle free	moderate length trim, well set wrinkle free	moderate length well set wrinkle free
Chest	moderately deep well defined	moderately deep well defined	moderately deep well defined
Back	long, straight strong long, thick loin long level rump moderate capacity	long, straight strong adequate length long, thick loin long, level rump moderate capacity	long, straight strong long, level rump long, thick loin long from rib to dock strong top
Legs	black long, straight well placed	moderately long free of wool muscular rear legs	long, straight well placed free of wool muscular rear legs
Feet	short, strong toes close	short, strong toes close white hooves	short, strong toes close
Fleece	dense no black fibers uniform	dense no black fibers uniform	good length no black fibers dense uniform
Skin	fine, soft, pink	soft, pink	pink

Breeding Sheep Terminology

When you judge breeding sheep, give attention to size, soundness, breed character, length and muscling. Your sheep should walk freely and easily. Rams should be masculine. Ewes should be feminine and more refined.

The following terms are samples of the terms you should be using in your reasons when judging breeding sheep.

Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exhibited more size, scale, and volume• Larger framed, growthier ewe with more size and scale• More width to her chest floor• More spring to her rib• More overall capacity• Bigger, stretchier ewe with more length to hindsaddle• More width and depth of heart and overall spring of rib
Head	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Showed more breed character about the head• More feminine headed (ewes)• More masculine headed (rams)• More open faced• Suffolk head - blacker about the head and ears• Longer, cleaner, more feminine head• Longer ear with a more desirable set
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heavier boned, straighter legged, squarer standing ewe• More upstanding, longer legged ewe with more structural correctness• Larger framed, heavier boned ewe• Taller at the point of the shoulder• Greater length of hindsaddle
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Smoother fronted, blended more smoothly in the shoulder• More width through the chest floor, more boldness to the rib• Bigger volumed ewe with more total capacity• Deeper, wider chested ewe with more substance and volume
Muscling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fuller behind the shoulder• Wider in the stifle region• Carried out longer and squarer to the dock• A heavier muscled ewe with more natural thickness down the top• More thickness over the loin and more volume of muscle to the leg• Stronger topped, thicker muscled ewe• Longer rumped and thicker through the leg• An ewe with more natural thickness throughout the body• More muscling over the top and more flare to the rump
Condition	<p>When judging the breeding ewe, mention condition only if the ewe is very fat or very thin.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A fat, over conditioned ewe• An extremely under conditioned ewe• A thin, under conditioned ewe

Quality, Balance, Femininity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher quality, more balanced ewe • More feminine head and more free of wool about the eye • Longer necked, cleaner fronted ewe • <u>Typier</u> ewe with more eye appeal • Longer, smoother necked ewe • More stylish ewe showing more smoothness and quality • Neater fronted ewe • Smoother shouldered ewe
Fleece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A longer, denser fleece • More uniform, denser fleece free of black fibers

Sample Reasons - Hampshire Breeding Ewes

I placed this class of Hampshire breeding ewes 4 2 3 1.

I placed 4 over 2 because 4 was a stretchier ewe showing more size, scale and Hampshire breed character than 2. 4 was wider over the shoulder, back and loin, fuller in the heart and longer and leveler in the rump than 2. I grant that 2 stood straighter on her front legs and has a denser fleece than 4.

I placed 2 over 3 because 2 showed a straighter topline and more spring of rib than 3. 2 was wider fronted and wider and stronger through the loin than 3. 2 was tighter in her fleece and stood straighter on her front legs than 3. I admit that 3 was more open faced and deeper bodied than 2.

I placed 3 over 1 because 3 was longer bodied, more balanced and more open faced than 1. 3 showed more thickness over the top, and was longer, leveler and squarer in the rump than 1. I grant that 1 was stronger over the top than 3.

I placed 1 at the bottom of the class because 1 was the smallest ewe in the class, and was narrow in her rump and light in her leg.

These are my reasons for placing this class of Hampshire breeding ewes 4 2 3 1.

Primary Purpose of Sheep Breeds

The following table lists the primary purpose of sheep breeds in North America.

Meat	Wool	Dual Purpose	Dairy
Border Cheviot	Bluefaced Leicester	Border Leicester	East Friesian
Clun Forest	Cotswold	Columbia	
Dorper	Delaine Merino	Coopworth	
Dorset	Icelandic	Corriedale	
Hampshire	Karakul	Finn	
Katahdin	Leicester Longwool	Lincoln	
Montadale	Rambouillet	Perendale	
North Country Cheviot	Shetland	Polypay	
Oxford	Targhee	Romney	
Romanov			
Royal White			
Shropshire			
Southdown			
St. Croix			
Suffolk			
Texel			
Tunis			
Wiltshire Horn			

Sections of the Judging Fact Sheets were adapted from the Alberta 4-H Judging Project Guide with the permission of the Alberta 4-H Council and the 4-H Ontario Judging Toolkit with the permission of the Ontario 4-H Council.

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