

FITTING TO

WIN

by JILL JOHNSON

GIVING YOUR SHEEP ITS BEST LOOK CAN HELP IT EXCEL IN THE SHOWRING

A well-presented sheep sends a positive message in the show ring. Fitting sheep for show is a lengthy process and requires both talent and skill. It's much more than just buying the right pair of clippers.

Brad Amthauer, Amthauer Club Lambs, Beaman, Iowa, and Lelton Morse, Morse Club Lambs, Kingbury, Texas, break down the tools of the trade.

Amthauer and Morse say fitting doesn't just happen at the show. It requires work at home, and the type of fitting you do often depends on what kind of show you're attending.

weight

Most people would assume fitting refers to fleece preparation. However, Amthauer and Morse say feeding to the ideal market weight is part of the fitting process.

"Monitoring the lamb's weight throughout the show season is important and often depends on the kind of show," Amthauer says. "If you're going to jackpot shows every weekend you typically don't have to take as much weight off your lambs."

Amthauer prefers to keep lambs on full feed for jackpot shows and only cut feed back the day before the show. This helps reduce stress when showing frequently. He suggests changing the diet one to two weeks

prior to state fairs or national shows. If the sheep weighs 10-15 pounds above its ideal weight, Amthauer prefers to supplement grain with a drench that's high in amino acids, electrolytes and calories.

"Drench two days before a jackpot and a week before a state or national show," he says. "Drenching pulls weight off the sheep and increases freshness and tone."

Morse agrees that drenches are part of a feeding program and enhance the freshness of an animal. However, his feeding program differs from Amthauer's. Morse prefers to keep his lambs in "coast mode" for gradual gain and then puts the lamb on full feed before the show.

Morse says there is no right or wrong feeding program and the exhibitor should know how to feed each individual lamb to achieve ideal body condition.

Amthauer and Morse say there is not an exact weight for show – it all depends on what weight is best for the frame of the sheep. Amthauer says between 125 pounds to 155 pounds is the range of acceptability depending on the time of year, the animal's frame and the judge's preference.

"Fitting occurs from the time of purchase to the time of show," he says.

"It all starts with feeding and exercising, and you have to figure out the appropriate weight and fill for each lamb."

exercise

Amthauer and Morse consider exercise a part of the fitting process, as well. They recommend beginning an exercise program after purchasing the lamb and continuing all the way up to the show. Running on a track and walking on a walker or treadmill is a necessity to build muscle shape.

fleece preparation at home

After establishing a feeding and exercise program, the next step is shearing, Amthauer and Morse say. At home, the fleece should be kept longer, providing lanolin as a natural conditioner and ringworm preventative.

Amthauer says one of the most important things to do at home for show preparation is to work leg wool.

"I do not regularly wash the body of the sheep at home, but will wash and blow dry the leg wool, apply a conditioner, and brush up the legs to promote growth," he says.

Morse agrees: leg wool is important.

"Most people don't rinse and blow dry the legs at home, but it's key to take care of it and manage it," he says. "During the

SHEAR GENIUS

Amthauer and Morse both suggest the use of a super surgical blade for the body and a surgical blade for blending on the head and hocks. Also, be sure to check the rules of the show and shear accordingly.



BRING IT UP

These experts agree, the leg wool is important! Care for the leg wool begins at home with regular washing and conditioning. They suggest brushing the leg wool up to promote good growth.



summer, sheep will shed boot wool so if you don't take care of it, it won't grow."

shearing

Morse says to shear the fleece 24 to 48 hours before the show so the wool appears natural and has time to set up, so it will appear fresh and smooth. Not all shows allow the use of clippers on the grounds, so it's important to read the show rules and shear accordingly.

Amthauer and Morse both use Lister clippers with surgical or super surgical blades. Amthauer uses a super surgical blade on the body and a surgical blade for blending on the head and hocks. Both recommend novices use a surgical blade.

They say sheep should always be shorn in a horizontal motion.

"I always start at the tailhead and work from tailhead to chest," says Morse. "Long horizontal strokes across the body gives the body a longer, smoother appearance."

Amthauer says to use as few vertical strokes as possible, only using an upward motion from the hock to center hip and from knee to chest.

Amthauer and Morse say the key to shearing is to not push too hard and let the blade do the work. Forcing the blade or shearing with too much angle will create jabs in the fleece and red welts on the hide.

washing

Amthauer and Morse recommend washing the sheep 24 to 48 hours before the show. Any type of soap can be used, as long as it is thoroughly rinsed out. Morse prefers to use a shampoo like Head and Shoulders because it does not strip the lanolin like dish soap. He also recommends washing with cool water because it promotes freshness and makes the fleece easier to shear.

Whether shearing at home or touching up at the show, Amthauer and Morse say

to blow dry the fleece, but leave the body slightly damp – making shearing easier.

shorn and washed – now what?

After the lamb is shorn and washed, at some point before the show, Amthauer says to apply a conditioner, such as Cornhusker's lotion, all over the body to replenish moisture in the hide. He recommends brushing it in with a soft-bristled brush, which helps the wool lie in the same direction. Then blanket the lamb.

"Rewash close to show time, blow dry, apply lotion and brush the legs," Amthauer says. "Brush the legs in an upward motion." Amthauer also takes bedding into consideration.

"Use straw or shavings for bedding at home, but use mulch or rubber mats at the show," he says. "Sheep will often eat the bedding at a show, which could throw off a pre-show feeding program."

If sheep have to be on shavings, Morse suggests muzzling them.

be a student of the industry

Amthauer and Morse both say it is important to ask questions and work at home when learning the fitting process.

"It doesn't cost any more to look good," Morse says. "The first step is getting the sheep ready and broke at home. Then, you will be ready to go to the show and learn how to shear and clip."

Amthauer encourages youth to pay attention to what more experienced people are doing at the show and mimic it.

"The best thing to do is go to a show and start asking questions," he says. "Everyone is there to help."

Yes, by putting in the work at home and learning the proper techniques, you, too, can be showing ready at your next sheep show.

TIPS & TRICKS FROM THE PROS

Brad Amthauer, Amthauer Club Lambs, Beaman, Iowa, and Lelton Morse, Morse Club Lambs, Kingbury, Texas, have worked in the sheep business for years. They offer these tricks they have picked up throughout the years.

1 LESS IS MORE

"Some shows allow paint. Painting the hooves, legs, chest floor and belly adds to the appeal of the sheep," Amthauer says. "But don't get carried away and let paint drift on the body or take away from the overall appearance."

2 FIGHT THE FUNGUS

Morse says ringworm can be detrimental to a lamb's appearance, and once it infects a barn, it's almost impossible to get rid of. But there are things to do after a show to prevent infection.

"Never leave a show without disinfecting the sheep with an anti-bacterial soap, and let them air dry on the ride home," Morse says. "Wash them again as soon as you get home."

3 GET A FRESH START

Amthauer says no matter how hard you work to keep the sheep clean before a show, accidents happen.

"I like to use waterless soap – it's the best product ever invented," he says. "You spray it on, brush it off and the lamb is clean."

4 KNOW YOUR ANIMAL LIKE THE BACK OF YOUR HAND

"Each sheep is different, and only you can know what each animal needs to improve its appearance," Amthauer says. "It's all about being able to know what it takes to make him look good."

5 YOU CAN'T TURN A DONKEY INTO A THOROUGHBRED

"Instead of buying three lambs for \$200 each, take that money and buy the best sheep possible," Morse says. "Then put all of your energy into making that sheep look as good as you can."

6 SHOWMANSHIP SKILLS ARE A HUGE WEAPON

"Once you have a quality sheep, it's important to understand the lamb's flaws, and it's your job as a showman to hide those flaws," Morse says. "When showmanship comes together with a good project, then you have the chance to be a winner."



"SHEAR THE FLEECE 24 TO 48 HOURS BEFORE THE SHOW SO THE WOOL WILL APPEAR MORE NATURAL." – Lelton Morse

"ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO AT HOME FOR SHOW PREPARATION IS TO WORK THE LEG WOOL." – Brad Amthauer

