

# THE SCIENCE OF SHOW PREPARATION

SO YOU WANT TO SHOW A MARKET LAMB,  
BUT DON'T KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN?

by JILL JOHNSON

Getting your sheep showing ready isn't something that happens by chance. It takes careful planning and dedication each step along the way.

Brad Anderson of Clair Club Lambs, Ault, Colo., and Mark Walker, 4 U 2 WIN Supplements, Eastland, Texas, have spent a lifetime in the sheep industry. They have made their marks on the club lamb business by purchasing and showing some of the top lambs in the country. With backgrounds in animal science and nutrition, Anderson and Walker have developed top-notch club lamb programs.

These experts say selection and show preparation is a science that will aid in predicting the final product of your sheep. And, they say, a well-planned feed and exercise program is the foundation for any winning project.

## *understanding the project*

In order to establish a feed and exercise program, you have to understand the lamb's genetics, and thus, how to tailor your program to that individual project.

Walker says the type of lamb selected will have a major influence on the project's results. He recommends you consider the following when selecting

a lamb: structural correctness, muscle, eye appeal and growth potential.

If you are a novice showman, Walker suggests talking to the breeder about the lamb's genetics and growth potential.

"Some people like to buy their lambs when they are only a few days old, but I like to select a project at two or three months of age," Walker says. "If the lamb has noticeably good muscle shape or structural flaws at two to three months, they will likely look the same at a year of age."

Anderson encourages youth to evaluate lambs on the farm in their natural environment and to look at the lamb several times before purchase to evaluate its growth. It is also important to know if the lamb has been vaccinated for enterotoxemia, or overeating disease, before purchase.

## *crafting consumption*

Once you have purchased your sheep, it is time to develop a feeding program. Anderson says ideally the lamb will reach 100 pounds 90 days prior to the first show. This weight, he says, is ideal to begin managing weight and finish for show.

Once the lamb reaches 100 pounds, it is time to take the show schedule into account and feed accordingly. Anderson says a feeding program is the simplest way to manage the project's weight gain.

"Each lamb is an individual, and they will not all feed and grow the same or have the same body composition," Anderson says. "So it's important to feed every sheep individually after they have reached the 100-pound mark."

He recommends the base of every feeding program be a 14-18 percent protein ration in pellet form. He and Walker both feed a 15 or 16 percent protein feed. Walker says the higher the protein content, the easier it is for the sheep to put on fat.

"The 16-percent ration works well in terms of growth and muscle building," Anderson says. "It's a good base. As lambs get older, the protein should be decreased because sheep require less as they reach their natural endpoint."

Throughout the 60 days before the first show, lambs should be fed a protein ration to develop muscle shape and expression and the proper amount of back fat.

Anderson says one month from the show, the exhibitor should take into account the lamb's natural endpoint. For example, if the lamb's endpoint is 140 pounds with 0.2 inches of back fat, a month before the show, the target weight should be about 130 pounds and 0.15 inches of back fat.

Pounds of feed help calculate where the lamb should be. For example, he says, if you are feeding six pounds per day of an 18-percent protein feed, the lamb should gain one pound per day. Therefore, feeding three pounds daily should promote a gain of half a pound per day, which would be 15 pounds in 30 days.

He says there is not a simple conversion in adjusting back fat – it's something that is dependent on the size of the lamb, and determining the proper amount of finish comes with experience. He also says exhibitors should take travel into consideration, because the stress can often decrease weight and fat.

Walker says water intake is important and always remains the same in a feeding program. Anderson agrees and recommends adding electrolytes and to the water a few weeks before the show.

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— Brad Anderson

Most feed suppliers offer electrolyte packets with mixing instructions.

“The show is a foreign environment, and the water available might not be to the lamb’s liking,” he says. “Sheep will become more accustomed to additives at the show if you introduce them at home first.”

Walker suggests muzzling the sheep two weeks before the show for the best results from a feeding program.

“Muzzling the lamb cleans out their digestive system,” he says. “Sheep ingest leaves and dirt and muzzling them ensures the lamb is only eating the feed you give them, which helps make the ideal weight for show.”

The proper feeding program also promotes good skin and fleece condition.

“If you are feeding a nutritionally sound, balanced diet, and keep the lamb blanketed, skin and hair will take care of itself,” Anderson says.

### *exercise is wise*

Exercising lambs is a necessity. Anderson says the best ways to exercise lambs is by tracking or treadmilling. When tracking, it is important to remove all rocks from the path and provide a soft surface with fresh dirt or sand.

Just like with feeding, a schedule is also critical for exercise, Anderson and Walker say. Anderson says once the lamb reaches 100 pounds, the exercise program begins.

Every other day throughout show season, he walks the lamb on a walker and then puts the lamb on a treadmill or track. He says tracking and treadmilling should not be used in the same exercise period. Rather, he says, alternate them during exercise sessions.

Walker exercises his lambs soon after purchase. Ninety days before the first show, he says he runs the sheep on a treadmill for three minutes. He also says it’s important to consistently use a walker and build endurance. He also alternates tracking and treadmilling, but uses the walker every time he exercises.

“Start walking for one minute, and then let the sheep stand for one minute.

Eventually, work up to walking for an hour,” Walker says. “At big shows, classes can take an hour to judge. So preparing your sheep to stand and walk for that long is important for showmanship.”

Anderson also considers teaching the sheep to brace as part of the exercise program.

“After walking I like to practice bracing,” he says. “The best way is to push the rear end of the sheep against a wall. Once they touch the wall they will start pushing back.”

### *consistency is key*

Anderson says the key to a successful feed and exercise program is consistency.

“Set a schedule. Always to stick the same feeding and exercise times,” he says. “Drastic changes in the management program will do more harm than good.”

### *do your homework*

Anderson and Walker say that every lamb is different and understanding how to tailor a feeding and exercise program to each sheep takes time and experience.

“It’s important to establish a relationship with the breeder you purchase your lamb from and inform them of the lamb’s progress so they can give you feeding tips,” Anderson says.

Walker says to find a mentor – whether it be an extension agent or more experienced family in your 4-H club.

He adds, “Those of us that have been doing this for a while are more than willing to share our expertise and knowledge – all you need is the courage to ask and the drive to succeed.”

By putting in the needed work in the months leading up to show time, you can have a successful lamb project. It’s all a matter of understanding the science.

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# WINNING FORMULA

Brad Anderson, Hawarden, Iowa, and Mark Walker, Eastland, Texas, have a lifetime of experience in the sheep industry. They offer these tips on what to consider during the months leading up to show time.

## 90 DAYS OUT

“Speak with the breeder to identify the project’s growth pattern and target weight. Feed the sheep to 100 pounds and at 90 days from the show, begin implementing a pre-show feeding program,” Anderson says.

Walker says beginning an exercise programs is also key at this point.

## 60 DAYS OUT

Anderson and Walker say to continue exercising and feeding a 14- to 18-percent protein feed to develop muscle and the appropriate finish.

## 30 DAYS OUT

Anderson says, “Talk to the breeder at the time of purchase to get an idea of how much the lamb should weigh and how much finish it should have before it becomes too fat. Use the six pounds of feed/one pound of gain ratio to alter feed to achieve target weights.”

Walker encourages preparing the lamb for changes that could occur at the show. He says water at show facilities often tastes different to lambs than what they receive at home. Therefore, they may not drink the water. He suggests flavoring the water with electrolyte packets at home so the lamb is used to drinking it. The electrolytes will help mask the taste of water at the show.

Pictured left to right: Brad Anderson and Mark Walker share their tips and tricks to successfully getting a champion from the barn to the showring.

