

# 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.

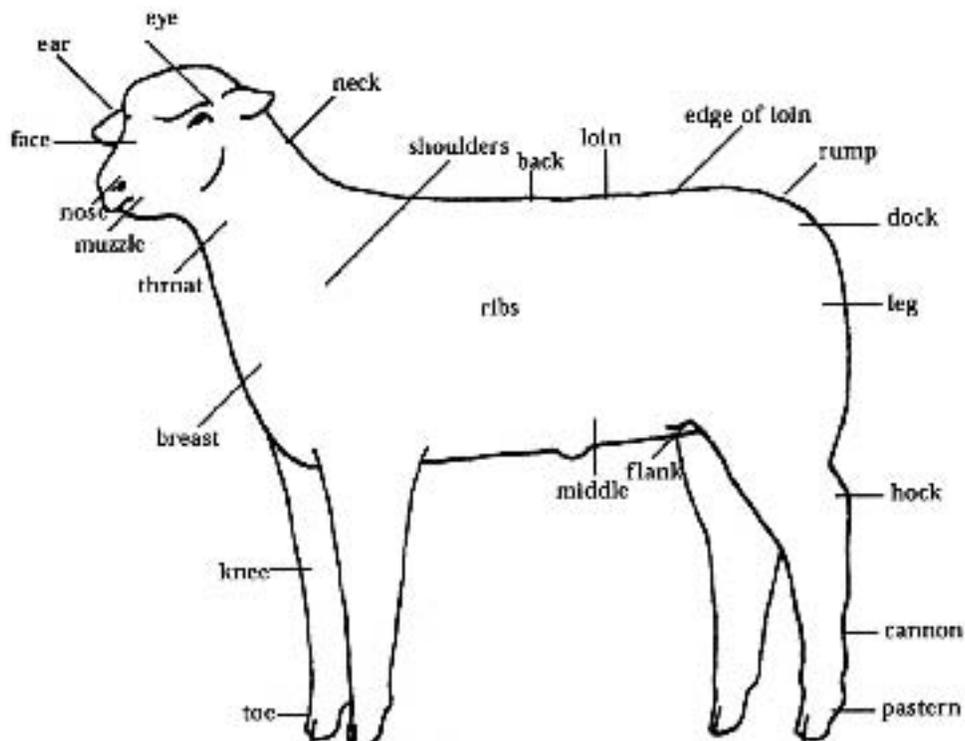
This is not easy. To accomplish this as a producer of sheep, you must be knowledgeable about the type and quality of the sheep you purchase and know how to feed and manage them so you can achieve the desired results.

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 the Sheep



Second, you need to know how to judge and prepare your reasons. For detailed information, consult Section 1 - Judging.

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.

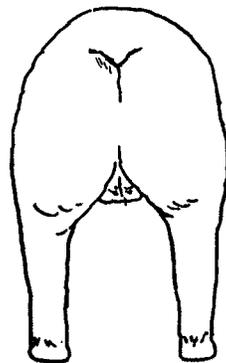
Follow the steps below when judging market lambs. Judging will become easier if you follow the same system each time you judge.

### 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.

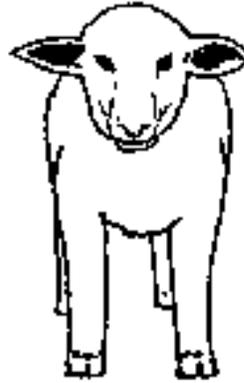
### From the rear

- 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. (Refer to the Canadian Code of Practice, page 12.)
- 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



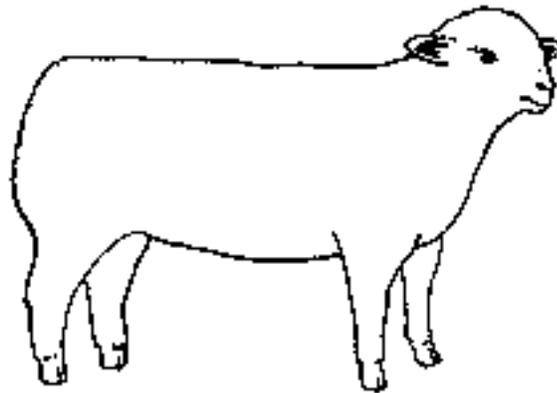
### From the front

- 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 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.



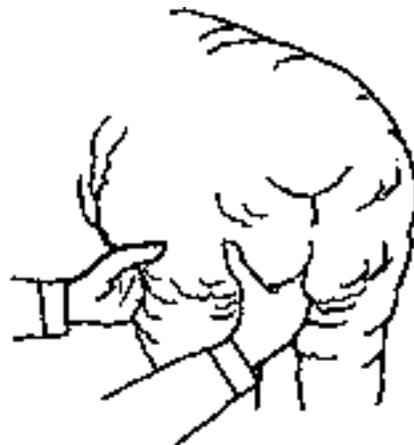
Check the length, width and depth of the loin. Look for a thick, deep, firm, well-muscled loin.



Check the length, width and depth of the rump.



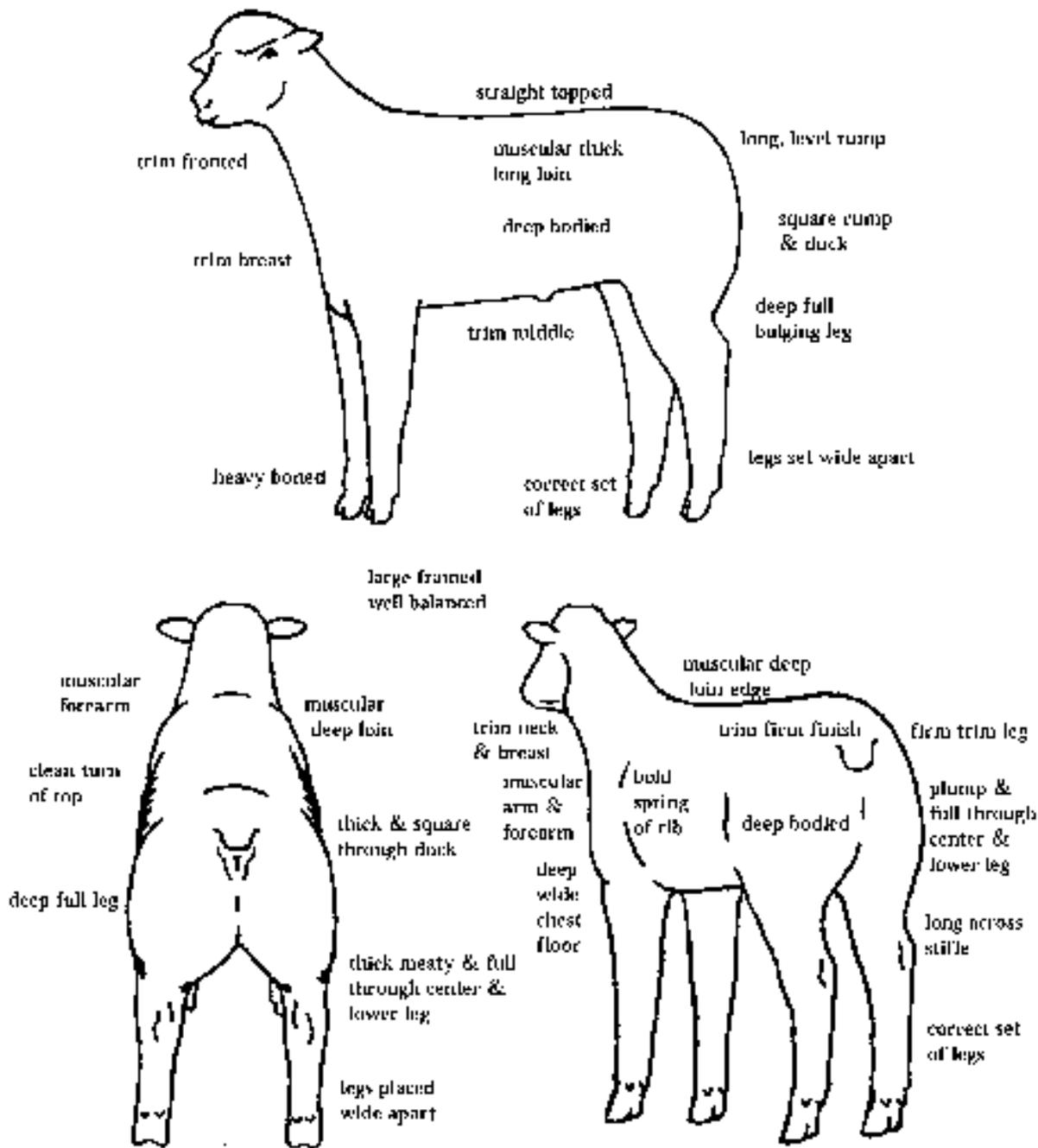
Determine the depth and volume of muscle in the leg.



## 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      | 4. Shoulder |
|                                   | 2. Loin     | 5. Breast   |
|                                   | 3. Rack     | 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"> <li>• Longer in the rump, with more total dimension to the leg</li> <li>• Thickest, heaviest muscled lamb in the class</li> <li>• Showed more total volume of leg</li> <li>• Showed more muscle expression in the lower leg</li> <li>• Longest hindsaddled lamb in the class, with more length in the loin</li> <li>• Wider topped lamb with more thickness over the loin edge</li> <li>• Stood wider on the rear legs</li> <li>• Thicker, more squared rump</li> <li>• Showed more muscling in the forearm</li> <li>• Carried out longer and squarer to the dock</li> <li>• Fuller behind the shoulder</li> <li>• Widest through the stifle</li> <li>• Showed more evidence of muscling through the stifle region</li> </ul> |
| Finish   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A firmer finished lamb</li> <li>• Firmer handling lamb</li> <li>• More uniformly covered, with a more desirable degree of finish</li> <li>• Cleaner designed, trimmer lamb</li> <li>• Lamb that is trimmer up front and cleaner through his underline</li> <li>• More correctly and uniformly finished lamb</li> </ul>  |

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <p>General Appearance</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Larger, growthier lamb</li> <li>• Taller, more upstanding wether</li> <li>• Shows more size and scale</li> <li>• More length of hindsaddle</li> <li>• More depth of body</li> <li>• Largest framed, longest bodied, heaviest muscled lamb in the class</li> <li>• Showed more balance overall</li> <li>• Straighter in his lines and more correct on his feet and legs</li> <li>• Stronger topped lamb</li> <li>• Cleaner fronted and smoother shouldered</li> <li>• Longer bodied, cleaner fronted, and trimmer through the middle</li> </ul> |
|---------------------------|---|

## 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.