

Tips For Fitting and Showing Dorper Sheep

By Douglas P. Gillespie

The Dorper and White Dorper breeds have brought hundreds of new families into the purebred sheep industry. Many of these families enjoy their sheep grazing on their land, but some get bitten by “the show bug”! If you have a competitive urge, enjoy the social interaction of the sheep shows, or want to market your breeding stock through shows and sales, you will need to consider preparation and presentation of your sheep in the show ring.

TAIL DOCKING

Preparation for the show begins shortly after birth! Seriously, your first attempt to accentuate a positive look for your sheep comes with tail docking. Dorpers and White Dorpers are presented docked in the show ring, so plan to dock the tails on future breeding stock. Like Goldilocks in the fairy tale: don’t dock too close, or leave the stub too long, you’ll want it to be just right! If you are docking with an elastrator or burdizzo, I suggest leaving room for your little finger under the tail between the rump and the point of docking. Docking long detracts from the rump structure appearance, while docking too close leaves an indent, and can increase the chances of rectal prolapses.

CONDITIONING

The next thing to consider in preparing for a show is feeding. You will want to have your show stock in good flesh, and that starts a few months before the first show. Don’t over condition; you don’t want localized fat (particularly around the dock), and you should be able to feel the backbone and ribs if you rub your fingers along the sheep’s topline or ribcage. Feeding a little grain helps condition your sheep, but it also makes them friendlier and easier to handle when training for the show.

HOOF TRIMMING

We all like to avoid this task, but the truth is it is one of the most important tasks to prepare sheep for the show ring, or just to maintain the flock. Dorpers and White Dorpers have soft hooves, so hoof trimming is required more frequently than most breeds (unless they live on the rocks of Texas!). In other breeds of sheep, I roll the animal over and sit it on its butt between my legs with the four feet out in front of me, then reach down and grasp each leg while trimming the hoof. However, I find that Dorpers and White Dorpers fight this position and so it becomes quite a task. You may want to stand them on a fitting stand and lift each leg to trim the hoof. Look at the bottom of the hoof. Trim the outer wall of the hoof so that the surface is flat. You may need to trim some off the point, as this tends to get a bit long. Keep your hooves trimmed regularly and it will be easier at show time. I suggest trimming hooves the last time about 5 days before each show. That way, if you get too close and draw a little blood, it has time to heal. You don’t want a sheep limping in the show ring!

HALTER TRAINING

You should begin halter training a few weeks before your first show. I think Dorpers and White Dorpers are ideally shown on halters. Some show them the traditional way by holding the animal by the skin under the jaw and throat, but I find that Dorpers and White Dorpers resist having humans “muckle onto them”! They perform better on a halter, when the handler is 6 inches to a foot away from the animal on the other end of the lead.

Halter training need not be painful! Rope halters work very well on sheep. Catch your show animals in a small pen. For the first few days, simply halter them and tie the leads to the fence at a height parallel to the animal’s head. Let them stand for 15 minutes the first day, and extend that to 30-45 minutes over a few days. Once they stop fighting the halter, you can take the lead and take them for a walk. I let the animal go where it wants to go, but keep up on the other end of the lead. Dragging on a halter won’t accomplish anything! After a few days you can “take control” by walking alongside the sheep with your hand about 6-8 inches from the head. Once they’ve done it a few times they accept it, and leading becomes easy. Once trained to lead on a halter, your sheep will accept it for the rest of their life.

Once the animal is comfortable on a halter, teach them to stand square. You can hold them under the chin, and reach down to set all four feet squarely at the corners. Don't stretch the hind legs. Dopers and White Dopers are set up standing square, not stretched. Hold the head up but the nose tipped down so the jawline is parallel to the ground. After a little practice your animals will become very comfortable with this natural pose.

FITTING FOR SHOW

Everyone in the sheep business has their favorite way to fit their animals. The end result is what counts! You want your animal to look its best, and look natural, on the day of the show. How you get there is debated, and everyone has an opinion. I suggest washing about ten days to a week before the show. You can buy the expensive livestock soap of your choice, or you can use liquid laundry detergents (I buy "Sensitive Skin" detergents; I don't know if the sheep like it any better, but I do!), or dish soap. I like to "tank wash". Set up two wash tanks each large enough to fit a sheep. For the wash cycle, I prefer warm water with the soap added. Roll the sheep in, and keep them off their feet (on their back or rump) with the head out of the water. You will need to bob them in the wash water for about 2 minutes, then allow them to stand up while you wipe some water off. Then roll them into the second tub for the rinse cycle. Bob them in this clean water (cold is OK, warm is ideal), and then put them on the fitting stand and use a curry comb to remove as much of the water as possible. Some people use electric blowers to remove more water from the body surface, but a towel rub can accomplish the same thing.

You are now ready for clipping or shearing. I like to shear about 7 days before the show, so that enough hair has grown back so the animal is white, or black and white, but not skin pink and grey. In cold weather, or if your sheep carry a lot of wool cover, you may need to wash and shear closer to show date, but not within the last two days. I use a 20-tooth three-inch shearing comb and 4-point cutter on a shearing head. Other folks will use a cattle clipping head. I also like the animal to be damp when I shear, as I think I get a smoother result. Shear using long, continuous strokes, and shear against the lay of the hair and wool. This usually means forward and upward strokes against the lay of the hair. Leave the hair on the rear legs from the hocks down to enhance the look of heavy bone on your sheep. Try to blend the hair coat at the point you stop shearing. On the front legs, I shear the muscled part of the upper leg, and then blend into the hair on the legs. When shearing the belly, lift a front leg so the skin is smooth between the front legs.

When you shear the neck, you will need to flex the neck to eliminate wrinkles and get a smooth result. Most breeders also completely shear the head on Dopers and White Dopers. I like to blend that hair and leave as much as possible, but too much hair on a ewe's face will make her appear less feminine. But leaving a hair coat on the head makes them shine in the light and highlights the black and white contrast. So pick your pleasure on that one!

You can either blanket the fitted sheep or leave them uncovered. You will need to rewash within 24 hours of the actual show, so travel prepared. This last minute washing can be done with a hose, but warm water and soap will yield the best results.

SHOWMANSHIP

OK. It's now show day, and it's time to be ready to go. Hopefully you are not the first breed to show, so you can stand at ringside and watch how the judge and ring steward are working each class. Once you enter the ring you want to appear confident and know what you are doing. A judge will usually follow a consistent method of moving and working each class, so learn how this judge does it. Make sure that you have show help to assist you with your flock. If you have more than one entry in a class, you will need a competent showman to take the second animal. Many shows allow a "heeler" or second showman to set the hind legs and keep the sheep's topline straight. If you've done a good job training your sheep you should not need a second person, but you can follow the ways of that show. Remember that if you are competing in group classes, you will need additional show help ready to take each animal. In the ring, make occasional eye contact with the judge, and know where the judge is in the ring at all times. Don't glare at the judge or overdo the eye contact. There is a balance between the eye contact and maintaining an awareness of how your sheep is being presented at all times. You want to present your sheep so it looks its best at all times. As I tell my son, we call this sheep SHOWING, not HOLDING, so don't just

walk them in and hold them and expect to win! Looking its best means feet set squarely at the corners, topline straight, and neck arched with head set looking forward. When the judge comes to look at the head, the ears should be forward.

Good showmanship can move an animal up several placings in a show. Poor showmanship sends a signal to the judge that you are not particularly proud of this animal, and you will be placed accordingly! The best advice I can offer is watch several classes before you show the first time. Watch how the class winners are presenting their sheep.

Remember sportsmanship. Once a class is placed, congratulate the winner on the way out of the ring, and get ready for your next class. If you take showmanship seriously, you will be well rewarded. Keep the show in perspective: it is one person's opinion on one given day. Placings can and will change from show to show. Keep the event fun, yet be competitive. Remember the purpose of show ring competition is marketing of your stock. You are advertising your sheep every time you compete, so work to make a good impression, and Good Luck!

Doug Gillespie, former Executive Secretary and current board member of ADSBS, has shown breeding sheep in numerous breeds for 50 years. While he doesn't consider himself an "expert", he offers one perspective and these "tips" for those beginning to fit and show Dorpers and White Dorpers.