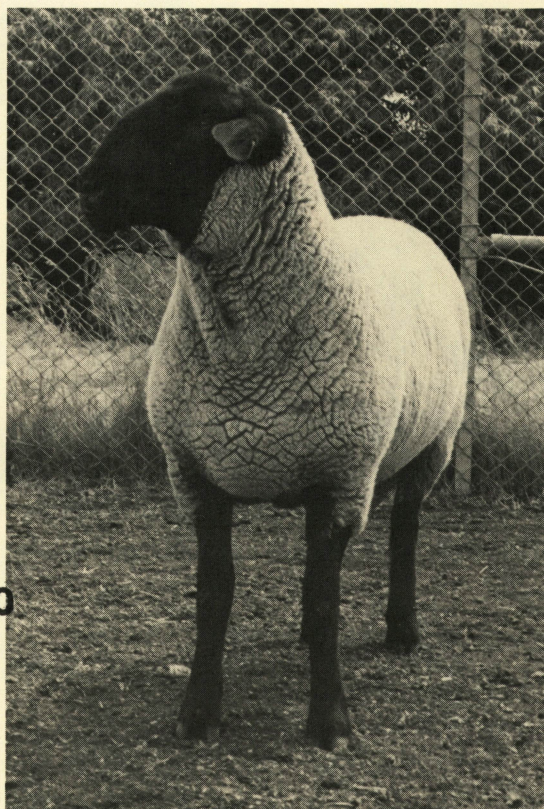




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# Ram Selection for Flock Improvement

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A modern, clean fronted yearling Suffolk ram

J. J. Dahmen and Ed Duren

To make the most rapid progress in flock improvement, you must use good rams, and it is here that many producers are most negligent. Selection of a ram is a major decision, not something to be done on the spur of the moment. Nearly always the best ram will prove to be by far the cheapest. Likewise, a poor ram will certainly be expensive. Give some time and thought to the selection and management of the ram. Progress can be made when superior rams are mated to superior ewes of a desired breed.

You have heard the statement that the ram is half of the flock. However, Dr. C. E. Terrill, ARS-USDA National Program Staff, believes that underplays the ram's importance. Terrill stated:

"We need to emphasize the selection of rams because hereditary gains are largely made from these selections. The statement that the sire is half the flock is wrong. In terms of the gains that can be made through selection, the sire is much more than half the flock. In fact, USDA work shows that 80 to 90% of the gains made in improving a trait like fleece weight came from the selection of rams and only 10 to 20% came from the selection of the ewes."

## Factors in Selecting a Ram

### Twinning

First choice should always be a ram of multiple birth. Progress can be made in increasing lambing

percentage by selecting for twinning. Under Idaho conditions, a good set of twins is more profitable than a good single lamb.

### Growth

Select rapid-gaining rams that meet your other standards. Rapid-gaining animals usually make the most efficient use of feed and can be marketed at a younger age. A realistic goal to shoot for would be to purchase a yearling Suffolk ram with a record of 0.8 pound gain per day of age which would mean that the ram should weigh approximately 275 pounds at one year of age. A minimum weight per day of age should not be less than 0.5 pound gain as a yearling, which would mean at least a 185-pound ram at one year of age.

It makes sense to buy a good ram, preferably one with production data. If no production data is available, select a ram when he is an 80- to 100-pound lamb. If he weighs 100 pounds at 100 days, he is more apt to sire fast-gaining lambs than a yearling ram that looks good but whose merit as a 100-day old lamb is a mystery. In short, we are more concerned with how fast a lamb gets big than how big he eventually gets.

### Carcass

Carcass information on the progeny of half-sibs is important in predicting the value of a ram for producing meaty, high-cutting lambs. Some breeders



This Suffolk ram shows good length of hind saddle

have carcass information available. The trend in the sheep industry is an ever-increasing demand for the production of a meat-type lamb.

What is a meat-type lamb? At present it is an efficient, rapid-gaining lamb. One that will produce a highly desirable carcass containing a minimum amount of fat and a maximum amount of muscle, especially in the leg and loin areas. To be more specific, lambs should weigh at least 90 pounds at 100 to 120 days of age, yield 50% more when slaughtered, carry no less than 0.1 inch and no more than 0.3 inch of subcutaneous fat, have at least 2.5 square inches of loin eye and grade choice in quality.

#### Soundness

**Feet and legs:** Rams should stand squarely on their feet when properly trimmed. Select rams that have short, strong pasterns and straight legs with plenty of width between them.

**Mouth:** Check the ram's mouth for age and unsoundnesses. Among the hereditary unsoundnesses of the mouth, overshot jaws are common and undershot jaws nearly as numerous. In the first case, the upper jaw is too long or the lower one too short,

causing the incisor teeth in the lower jaw to miss the rubber-like dental pad with which they normally make contact. This condition may be referred to as "parrot mouth." The undershot jaw is the reverse condition. In either case, the ram is unable to graze well, especially on fine or short forage, and thus cannot stay in strong breeding condition. This condition should be avoided since it is a heritable trait. Be especially diligent in checking mouths of stud rams.

**Testicles:** Palpate the scrotal contents to be sure both testicles are present, fully descended, sound and nearly equal in size. A ram should be examined for epididymitis by an experienced veterinarian.

#### Other Selection Criteria

**Conformation:** The ideal conformation probably varies from one breed to another. However, within a breed, you should select a well-balanced ram of modern type with plenty of bone, size and ruggedness. The ram should have a long body with major emphasis on length from the last rib to the dock (hind saddle). The ram should be well muscled with a deep, thick and full leg of mutton.

**Fleece:** One factor that is often neglected in ram selection is fleece. It should not be since wool makes a sizable contribution to total income. Less emphasis may be placed on the fleece of a meat-type ram than that of a white-faced medium or fine wool breed of ram. Select rams that have dense, uniform, high-quality fleeces with no dark fibers. More emphasis should be placed on heavy-shearing rams when selecting "ewe breed" sires.

**Age:** Yearlings are preferable when it is necessary to buy a ram. They are usually more vigorous and can be used longer. Tried rams are desirable and often can be purchased at a bargain. Many breeders refuse to sell ram lambs because they do not feel that they can be guaranteed to give satisfactory service. Excessive service will retard a lamb's growth. If used too heavily, he may not be a sure breeder in years to follow. As a rule of thumb, under normal field-mating conditions, a well-grown ram lamb 8 to 10 months old may be used on about 12 to 15 ewes, a yearling ram on 25 to 35. A ram more than one year old, handled properly, should serve 50 ewes. These numbers also depend on sex-drive and topography of pasture and range.

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