

Sherana Sheep Report No 10
“Meating the Market
The case for Meatmasters.”
April 2007.

1. Meating the Market

Here is a picture of the future:

- Grain prices are sky high because of the excessive demand for grain from subsidised ethanol plants.
- Community pressure for better treatment of animals has multiplied the cost of feedlots.
- The community demands chemical free food.
- The rich pampered baby boomers suddenly become conscious of health and pay good prices for Pasture Perfect Lamb – the healthy red meat raised exclusively on pasture.
- There is an epidemic of ill health caused by the current fads in fats – most people are totally deficient in those good pure animal fats that our cave man ancestors evolved on, and have begun to suffer a plethora of problems caused by the artificial and toxic fats once promoted as “healthy”.
- The community prohibits mulesing, tail docking and all the other things needed to keep most sheep alive in harsh Australian conditions.

To meet this coming market we need a hardy fertile sheep, able to survive predators and parasites without chemical support on poor to middling Australian native pastures. That sheep needs to come from a long line of survivors in that sort of environment. It needs to be alert, quick on its feet, have good flocking and survival instinct, able to live on anything green or brown, with attentive fertile mothers and hardy protective rams. It needs to be a hardy natural breed toughened in the furnace of natural selection.

It needs to be a Damara.

But, there is a problem. Damaras are different. They look funny. They are different to handle, and if stressed before slaughter, it affects meat quality (not only damaras). They spook easy (how else did they survive?). They are a different shape. Butchers are used to wide bums, not long bums. And THAT TAIL, what do you do with it? Damaras have a perception problem, and that is the current reality. And they have been badly mouthed by a few agents, competitors and people fearful of the demise of the merino, which provides a good income for a whole chain of people, but too often scant profit for the owner.

One sheep man is reported to have called damara “the cane toads of the sheep industry”. What a compliment. Cane toads survive, thrive and continue to conquer new environments despite a bad press, a hostile community and enemies everywhere. So do damaras – from the deserts of Damaraland (and Rosevale) to the snows of Canada, from the hot tropics to the dry furnace of the interior, from pampered pets in suburbia to feedlots in Arabia – once people learn how to handle these different sheep, they appreciate their unique characteristics. Like Brahman cattle (and the cane toad), damaras will fight a wall of criticism, but their bloodlines will keep spreading into all commercial meat sheep flocks.

2. The Rise of Dorpers, and their Problems.

Dorpers are going gang busters in the markets in Australia. At an auction a while back a genuine price of \$41,000 was paid for a dorper ram, with average prices above \$4,000. Ewes were similarly bid for.

Dorpers are a man-designed sheep – supposed to be a hardy easy care sheep with a body that looks like the traditional British sheep that UK housewives were used to. Dorpers were bred from Dorset Horn and Black Faced Persians. They were very successful and became one of the biggest breeds of meat sheep in South Africa.

But, a synthetic breed created by one man can be tinkered with by his son, and his grandson. And Dorpers entered the show rings, which is the worst thing that can happen to a useful commercial animal. They get judged, not on real performance, but on appearances - mainly how neatly they have been shorn, how well they stand, their physique and how much grain has been stuffed into them. As their show ring appearance and popularity grew, real performance fell. Many dorper lines now are too pampered to survive in hard conditions, and require supplements, attention and drugs to survive and breed. Thus, the Meatmaster was born by adding hardy useful Damara blood to the good looking dorper body.

3. Hail the Meatmaster

Meatmasters are defined as any sheep crossed with a damara, but most have dorper blood also. We currently define Meatmasters by the "Triple 25" rule – at least 25% damara, at least 25% dorper, no more than 25% any other breed. We cull heavily to select our best rams, and about 90% of our MM ram lambs have gone to the butcher or been turned into grass eating wethers. Our selection criteria are – a good fertile trouble free mother and father, short hair and good shedding characteristics, good hooves/feet, dark skin, good temperament, good teeth, respects fences, flocks well and preferably not totally black hair colour. We use pure damara and dorper rams to produce them – Damara ram over dorper and dorper cross ewes as well as Dorper ram over damara and damara cross ewes. When we produce our absolutely ideal MM ram, he may be used as the starter for a pure line-bred MM line. Results to date have been very good – a long legged, good shedding, thick bodied, calm temperament sheep, with most of the good features of damara and improvements in the faults in dorper. MM have most of the good flocking instinct of the damara and less fence crawling tendencies than most dorpers.

4. What's happening in your world?

We get lots of calls from customers (and even non customers) asking for help on various sheep concerns – worms, dogs, birthing, fertility and sickness problems. We are a bit like the new graduate who said "Three year ago I could not spell "geogolist" and now I are one". Luckily, being rank amateurs when we started this sheep adventure, we have made most of the mistakes. And we have a few good old reference books. And then there is always the sheep masters, Denis Russell and Helmut Lang, who are both generous in sharing their sheep knowledge and experience. But it would be appreciated if people also gave us feedback as to what happened, what worked, what didn't, especially when we have given some advice and are left wondering if it was good advice. So, let's have more of your war stories please, especially your solutions to common problems.

5. Gems from our Readers

Keep em pregnant.

Just read this in a text book. "The cost of maintaining one non-pregnant ewe through the entire production year is the equivalent to the profits from 6 -7 productive ewes".

Now that is with sheep that produce once yearly (eg merino and Wiltipoll) not your damaras that produce 1.5 times per year, so a Wiltipoll that does not produce in an entire year is costing you the profits of 9 -11 damaras.

Cane Toads of the Sheep Industry?

"I have very fine wool merinos and recently failed to get \$1/head for my 650 lambs. A hobby farmer neighbour had no trouble dispersing his flock of damaras for \$60/hd when he sold up!"

We need Damara Blood out here (Longreach).

"I am going to keep some Damara in our mix because the more of the Dorper rams I get the more go in the legs. Three of the older rams are very proppy now and I think the younger ones are not far behind. The Dorpers are good doers, but they are not robust sheep in this environment. If we are to have some meat sheep output it will be some form of Meatmaster".

"We lot feed lambs. We like damara and dorper in the feedlot. Suffolk are too wild, merino too hard to start."

Enquiries for sheep. A Malaysian Importer is looking for 200 Damara sheep for slaughter. Dudley Leitch, who owns the Pittsworth Abattoir and four butcher shops in Brisbane, is also looking for a steady supply of damara lambs. He is looking to produce Damara Branded Meat. Dudley also breeds damaras and is looking for ewes to expand his Inglewood operation.

6. Damaras are Different

The key difference between damaras and other sheep breeds is this – Damaras are a wild natural breed, so every characteristic from colour, temperament, mothering ability and flocking instinct is focussed on “SURVIVAL”.

Yesterday we had two new mothers in the Nursery awaiting lambs tags - one pure damara, one pure dorper. Once they were done Mother-of-all-Things took them back to their flocks.

MOAT captured the difference well when she came back. “If Dorpers were wild sheep they would not survive the night. The damara lamb stuck to its mother like glue as they went out, and the mother stomped her feet at the White Wolf whenever she came near. But the dorper baby lost its mother immediately, cried piteously and its mother took no notice. When the White Wolf appeared, the baby ran up thinking it was Mum.”

7. Noises in the Night

We have dingos, foxes and wild dogs here, so all ewes come home at night to get under the protective umbrella of the White Wolf. Last night, one mob was quite close to the house.

We are early risers, Rouseabout first, MOAT next. Just before dawn, MOAT usually brings down a fruit starter and a report on the night to Rouseabout in the office. Today the morning conversation was:

“There’s a new lamb in the Cross mob”.

“Have you been peering at them already?” (It is still pitch dark).

“Oh no, I can tell by the noises”.

“Explain that”.

“Well, about an hour ago I heard grunting and bleating from a ewe – that starts before the birth. Then it all stopped, so the baby was born. Next I could hear licking sounds and small mother bleats. Then I heard tiny mewling and reassuring mother bleats – that’s mother and baby getting to know one another. Now it is all silent, so the baby is probably on its feet trying to suck.”

All quite simple of course.

***“Never be afraid to try something new.
Remember that a lone amateur built the Ark.
A large group of professionals built the Titanic.”***

8. Sheep, Shepherds and Wolves

Sheep, shepherds and wolves have co-existed in mutual hostility since the days of Adam. You may say they form a sustainable trio, as all three are still with us.

New sheep people are often telling us “We have no trouble with dogs at our place” (insinuating, I think, that their neighbourhood is more refined than that).

Be assured, if you have sheep and are not a protective shepherd, some night the dogs will find them. In really classy neighbourhoods, the attacks will be in broad daylight probably from well bred, fun loving pooches from the big house on the hill.

Even with alert, agile and protective sheep like damaras, dogs will get some sheep, especially if they are confined in small flat paddocks where the sheep have nowhere to run without hitting a fence. Slow, trusting, docile traditional sheep will be slaughtered like sheep.

If you want to keep your sheep safe, you must prepare to exclude dogs, deter dogs, destroy dogs, or provide guards for your sheep. Here on Sherana, the neighbours told us “You will never keep sheep here – dingoes will get them – sheep are like ice cream to dingoes”. So we started this adventure determined and suspicious. We estimate we have been shepherds for 1,900 sheep years, and in that time have lost 8 sheep – a dingo tax of about 0.4% per year (dingoes cost far less than Canberra to sustain).

How do you minimise the dog tax?

- **Fence the dogs out** – this means keeping dogs and sheep permanently separated. This is not easy. Dogs are very clever, and any totally safe fences are very expensive – very high dog wire or lots of electrics. The old sheep men used netting that would keep out rabbits too, about 5 feet high. But they had sappy merinos which need protection from foxes and even wandering Chihuahuas. One fence we have seen that looked very effective was traditional hinge joint with one outlying hot wire about 18 inches from the fence and dog nose high.

You can achieve 90% protection by bringing sheep home at night into secure yards near the house. Another good idea is to encourage neighbours on all sides to get sheep or goats. Their fences will provide added protection and hopefully any dogs that get in will get their sheep first. Also keep all gates in surrounding paddocks shut to maintain a dog-free buffer.

Don't even trust your own dog. One visitor told us he had shot his own dog on two separate nights when he fired on dogs attacking his sheep.

- **Deter the dogs.**

Various methods have some value. Try a few of them – anything to reduce the odds.

We have read about solar powered gadgets that flash light erratically at night. We don't think that would work, but someone does.

Dogs don't like man sounds - put bells on a couple of sheep – any erratic “man” noises would help (our neighbour has a gas gun to scare ducks from his lucerne – most dogs bolt if they hear a shot.) We have used bells and think they help. A milk sheep dairy we visited recently left a light on in the dairy and the wireless on a talk back station turned up loud, playing all night to the assembled sheep (he now has some radical right-wing sheep).

Another idea sounded good. They say it is no good killing your local predators – the vacuum left in the predator network will just be filled by new predators that may be worse than the ones you had before. What you need to do is train your local predators to live on kangaroos, hares, wild ducks – anything except your livestock. So, you get a dead lamb and put some lithium chloride into a slit in the meat. If a canine eats the bait, it does not kill him, but makes him as sick as a dog (with fresh lamb taste in his mouth). He vows to NEVA, NEVA, NEVA touch lamb again as long as he lives. So, he stays there, filling the predator niche, defending his territory against other canines, and lives on kangaroos, hares, or the neighbour's calves, but he leaves your lambs strictly alone. They say it works.

- **Destroy the Dogs.**

The most direct way (and the most fun) is to shoot all dingoes seen on your property. (“Dingoes” are defined as any canine roaming free who is not our White Wolf or the Hunting Dog). But it is a bit time consuming, and if you miss, that dog becomes more wary and smarter.

The sneaky Government way is to entice people to lay baits on all properties except in their own pest ridden parks and forests. They say it works, and we have participated, but have never ever found a dead dingo, and prefer to not poison the White Wolf.

We have found that trapping works, especially with a smart trapper and good lures.

We have decided that kangaroos and wallabies are doing more damage to us than are dingoes right now when pastures are stressed, so we protect our sheep and hope our local dingoes develop a real taste for macropods.

- **Employ some Sheep Guards**

Probably the best sheep guards are llamas – they hate dogs, are very considerate of sheep, can be active and aggressive to strange dogs, seem to become attached to their mob of sheep and need no special food beyond what the sheep eat. We are told that alpacas are also good, but we have also heard of alpacas being killed by dogs (alpacas are a lot smaller than llamas). I imagine the big boys of the camelid family (camels) would be OK too.

People have used donkeys. They will chase dogs, but also may playfully engage in a bit of “toss the furry ball” with baby lambs. Horses may act similarly. Generally females or geldings are more to be trusted to guard sheep.

Running cattle with sheep will help too – cattle will chase strange dogs, especially when they have small calves. Maybe a big long-horn steer left to grow into a huge bullock while running with the sheep would pay for his grass in sheep saved or meat added.

Dogs have been used to guard sheep for as long as there have been shepherds. Our White Wolf is a Maremma, and her brain is hard wired to guard her pack, which includes anything she has been brought up to accept as belonging in her territory. Maremmas have some big advantages – they look and sound fierce so they also deter two legged coyotes, but they usually don't bite unless provoked, so they won't provoke too many law suits. In today's unjust world, if a lamb snatcher is bitten while trying to hit the dog with a stick while he shoves your top ewe and lamb into his van, he will find a lawyer to sue you and some sappy judge will fine you and maybe destroy your dog. Midnight sheep thieves must be protected from white wolves and mad Shepherds wielding lumps of poly pipe (John Howard stole and destroyed the gun).

Did you know? “A gun in the hand always beats a cop on the phone”.

9. The Periods of Our Day.

Mother-of-All-things disdains modern contraptions like watches, and even the grandfather clock is not often consulted - the sun sets the time and divides the day into the periods of a Lady Shepherd's life. Her day starts with breakfast, which must be over before horn dawn. The divisions of the day are then as follows:

- Breakfast time
- Horn Dawn – when you can see the horn of a bullock against the skyline. (From Africa – horn dawn was the favourite time for a Zulu attack, according to Wilbur Smith.)
- Dawn – when you can see to walk around without falling over some tool the useless Rouseabout has left lying around.
- Daylight – when you can see if there are any dingoes on the hillside where the sheep are going.
- Sunup – all sheep should be out by sunup, chooks fed, nearly time for morning tea.
- Morning Tea – time for a quiet half hour with a cup of coffee and something good to read.
- Early Morning – lasts from morning tea up to when it is too hot to work outside. Time for morning jobs like checking waters and fences.
- Late morning – when Rouseabout fixes the day's water and fence crises, and Fixit gets an engine going (only Rouseabout and Fixit are silly enough to be outside in the heat of late morning).
- Noon – when the sun is directly overhead, or at its highest point. Reset clocks and watches now by the sun (if you need such gadgets.). Plus or minus half an hour is good enough.
- Lunch time
- Siesta – as soon as possible after lunch. No phones are answered, and the White Wolf dares not bark.
- Smoko – the end of Siesta - at least 1.5 hours after lunch, but not before the outside thermometer has dropped below 33 deg
- Afternoon – jobs time.
- Sundown – all sheep in and fed. New lambs into the nursery for tagging.
- Dusk – drinks on the veranda if Rouseabout and Fixit can be got inside or off computers and cleaned up before dark. Drinks finish when the ABC weather report comes on.
- Dark – when it is too dark to shut up the chooks without a torch. Time for dinner – roast lamb or lamb chops (the only two cuts of meat produced by Rouseabout, the apprentice butcher).
- Weather report – the only ABC segment free of propaganda and the only time you need to check the clock - 7.27pm precisely. (Do not ring then).

- Evening – after the weather report. Time to watch “Dancing with the Stars” or a John Wayne or Clint Eastwood video.
- Bedtime – at the end of the video, or 9pm, whichever comes first.
- NIGHT – strictly for sleeping.
- Middle of the night – when Rouseabout, dairy farmers and other insomniacs get out of bed.
- Thence back to yet another dusty, red, droughty, horn dawn.

Note: Any politician who mucks about with the clocks so that the ABC weather report is over before dark is not advised to visit Rosevale for any reason. MOAT will tell him “The sun, not some dope in George Street, sets the time.”

Did you know? “A boiled egg is hard to beat.”

10. Sheep for Sale/Delivery

We have a new crop of pure damara and dorper rams, and different blood lines for those needing to change rams. Anyone who buys a second ram from us can ask for a 15% discount on current prices for the second ram. We also have the first crop of good Meatmaster rams for sale. And wethers to order for roasting, pets or grass control. We have no trouble selling all ewes we want to, but if this drought keeps up we will sell even more. Don't be afraid to ask about ewes.

We have sold all of our turkeys (they got on the wrong side of Mother of all Things), but have new Senepol and Senepol cross bulls for sale again.

Our Bruce Highway transport took another load of sheep to various spots in North Queensland from Rockhampton to Malanda with no sheep lost on the highway. Let us know if you would like to get organised for the next trip. Contact us early. We also still deliver animals to some places or people we would like to visit. Proposals welcome.

If you think our prices are too high, don't be afraid to make an offer. We will not be offended and are not forced to accept your offer. Both parties need to be happy with the values exchanged. But remember, we guarantee to give you what we say we will, to give you breeding and age details that can be relied on, to tell you why we are selling any animal and to stand by any guarantees we make (for example, we will guarantee any sheep we sell will have four legs and two of the other things, whatever is appropriate).

11. Mailing Lists

Every time we send out a Sherana Report on Sheep or Cattle, we have two problems – too many envelopes to stuff, and too many letters and emails returned because they are “Unknown at this address”, “left address” or their email is “Full” or “Over Quota”. So Please:

- Advise promptly of change of address
- Empty your email box
- Advise if you wish to be taken off our mail list

We prefer to send this newsletter by email (printing and postage costs too much). Our next newsletter will have a section on “Coping with Worms” – If you want to see it, you had better send your email address or buy some sheep and thus get onto our “good customer” list (we will even stuff envelopes every now and then for “Good Customers”).

PS we are in the process of changing our email address to vforbes@damaras.com. Pls use the new address from now on. Bye for now.

Best Wishes for Easter or Christmas whichever comes soon after you get this newsletter.

From Mother-of-All-Things, Rouseabout, Fixit, Sheba the White Wolf, Karlee the Hunting Dog, Coffee and Spitfire, the damara kings, Chad, Waldo & Poncho, Max and Ben, the Senepol aristocrats and all the other Ovines and Bovines, and our growing population of Murines..

Viv & Judy Forbes