FUNDAMENTALS IN SHEEP JUDGING
A Description of the System Followed by a Recognized Master of the Art
(The Breeders Gazette, Vol. LXXIV – Chicago, July 25, 1918)

SHEEP are more difficult than any other class of stock competently to judge, because many of their merits and defects are obscured by wool. To an important extent, however, a sheep may be judged by the clothes it wears. Representatives of the fine-wool breeds are judged with special reference to their fleeces, wool being the chief object in breeding them, while the mutton types and classes are rated in the showyard according to their conformation, size, and meat-making characteristics.

An onlooker at a show of sheep undergoing examination by an experienced judge may think the art simple and easy, which it is to one who has mastered it, but let him try his hand at the work and he will revise his superficial opinion. For fifteen years I had watched critical judges select the winners in strong classes of sheep at fairs and stock exhibitions in America and Great Britain, and, like many another observer, fancied that if called on I could do the work equally well. It appeared to be little more than arbitrary guessing founded upon osteopathy; so why not? Later a memorable disillusionment came; I officially judged a few classes of sheep at a students’ stock show. What happened? It would be embarrassing to answer. Suffice it to say that one man’s respect for the ability and experience which are essential to creditable work in sheep judging was greatly increased.

A man who expects profitably to breed domestic animals must acquire a considerable knowledge of their standard characteristics, in relation to the demands of the pedigree trade or the block. It is not essential that every farmer who maintains a small flock should achieve expertness in judging individuals of his adopted breed, but his returns, whether he sell stock for reproduction or to the packers, will be largely conditioned by his ability quickly and unerringly to distinguish merit and identify special breeding powers in his own sheep, and in the flocks of fellow-breeders.

Not all well qualified judges are successful breeders, usually because public duties gradually lure them away from their flocks, and noted breeders are not invariably popular judges; but the annals of the pedigree sheep industry show that the most outstanding flockmasters were first-rate judges of sheep. Due to temperamental timidities, some men cannot perform under public scrutiny the sure, steady and consistent work as judges which in private they can accomplish without a slip.

Marked ability on the part of a judge of sheep is innate; it is cultivated and sharpened by experience and observation. Apart from cultivated skill, which is indispensable, the personal equation, which means the sum total of operative mental factors, plays a big but commonly unnoticed part in the work of a stock judge. Many of the leading judges employed at shows have received their training at agricultural colleges; others have developed their native abilities in this direction by breeding, feeding, exhibiting, selling, and buying sheep. One of this number is H. Noel Gibson, a son of the late Richard Gibson of Ontario. Noel Gibson, who is manager of James Brown’s Thaxton Farms in Illinois, is the descendant of a family of pedigree stock breeders in Great Britain and America. He was brought up on a stockfarm, where sheep were
bred for exhibition and high-class breeding purposes. He has judged sheep of the down or mutton breeds at dozens of the largest fairs and shows during the past dozen years. It is interesting to see him do it. How does he proceed? What is his system? The following remarks, supplementing the pictures on another page, taken expressly for THE GAZETTE at Thaxton Farms, are submitted as his answers:

“In judging sheep the first impression one gets is usually the most convincing. My method, therefore, is to watch the animals as they enter the ring. A deal of time as well as overmuch handling is thus saved. Many touches and movements on the part of a judge are wholly unnecessary. I have often seen cases of too much handling, leading to confused and inconsistent decisions. My advice to a beginner is this: Go over the class carefully, know what you are looking for, and remember what you find. First, walk round the sheep, observing with particularity how its legs are placed, and how it stands on its feet. If the animal has crooked legs or long, weak pasterns it need not be handled or further considered. The presence of any of these faults automatically eliminates the animal from the list. Select the entries whose underpinning is strong, straight and short, and then begin a systematic handling in order to discover defects not visible to the eye.

Several methods of handling are practiced. Some men use both hands. I can work more successfully with one. I well remember years ago seeing Robert Miller of Ontario go over several imported sheep in quarantine. I was impressed by his quickness of decision. After going over them once, his mind was made up. I have since noticed that many of the most successful exhibitors, in going over their sheep, use but one hand. The two-hand system is all right. I adopted the single-hand method because when a boy at home I had no assistance when I went over our own sheep; I would hold a sheep with one hand and go over it with the other, and in that way became accustomed to one-hand judging.

“An important point in judging breeding classes is to stick to type. Begin with the type which to you is the correct one, for the breed, and adhere to it. If one does this, one is not likely to be criticized, even if one places down a goodish sheep which does not match entries above it. The sheep might be an uncommonly good one, but lack the type that would justify its being ranked at the head of the class. Being off in type such a sheep could not be sandwiched in between others of the accepted type without breaking the uniformity of the line-up.

“In a ram a competent judge demands bone and constitution, a full neck of medium length, fitting smoothly into the shoulders; a wide brisket and a full heart girth; straight, short legs properly placed. A straight underline denotes full, well-developed flanks. A ram with a wide muzzle is commonly regarded by experienced breeders as more prepotent than one undistinguished by this characteristic. I have known rams, however, with rather feminine heads to sire especially good ewes; but in the long run the sheep with a masculine head, a strong back, a good, deep loin, smooth shoulders, evenly covered with muscle or flesh, and a good-sized leg of mutton makes the best sire.

“Wool is an important consideration, and should be taken into account in making awards in the showing. An animal with a coarse or an open fleece never was in favor, even when wool was worth less than it is now. Black fibers in any part of the fleece are regarded as a
disqualification, except when they are found forward of the ears, and even there their presence is held to be an objection, in Shropshires and Southdowns especially. According to the Shropshire scale of points, the skin of a representative of that breed should be pink and free from spots. Until existing rules are changed, a judge assumes an unwarranted responsibility when he awards a prize to a sheep showing a dark or spotted skin. I have seen some capital sheep with dark skins; in fact, they were good enough to win, but what could the judge do? He is supposed to abide by the rules and regulations formulated by the registry association.

“It would be a large satisfaction to sheepmen if all the shows were equipped with large, well-lighted arenas in which to judge. In a dark and crowded ring it is difficult for a judge to do his work, especially when it is necessary to have the sheep walked. All heavy sheep should be walked; they should move away and come toward the judge boldly and without awkwardness, and, using an equine phrase, ‘go straight all round.’ In a close contest it is a good plan to let the sheep loose, and then watch them as they stand, naturally. A good showman can hide many defects which would not otherwise be easily discovered.

“Having finished the examining and handling of the sheep before him, the judge should line them up in their positions, walk round them, and see if they appear right; if they do, let him make the awards, and stick by his decisions.”

“The successive steps followed in my system of judging are illustrated in the pictures elsewhere in this issue. Obviously the general appearance presented during the preliminary examination should be attractive, revealing careful breeding and sterling quality, while the carriage should be easy and impressive, and the form symmetrical, covered with a dense fleece, which should be elastic and medium-fine, in the case of Shropshires. Rams of this breed should combine size with quality, and, mature and in breeding condition, weigh 180 to 225 pounds, ewes weighing 125 to 170 pounds. The sheep is studied from the rear, front and side. A side view reveals general outline and type. From the front the judge forms his judgment as to chest development, character and head. When taking a rear view of the sheep the judge usually stoops or squats, in order to get a line on the set and width of the legs.

“A general view and sizing up of the ram are represented by the first photograph. In a showing a number of animals would appear in competition, and they would of course be unshorn. While each entry would be judged as an individual, and breed type considered, the three, four or five prize-winners would severally and collectively enforce contrasts and comparisons which might in instances affect final decisions.

“Picture 2 logically should be 3; in it the depth and width of the loin are the points under consideration. The fingers are pressed in slightly under that part of the anatomy, the thumb resting upon the top, giving a trained judge a keen sense of the bulk, size and firmness of the muscles or flesh under his hand. A strong-joined, musc Warbly-coupled sheep is the experienced breeder’s ideal. The loin is high-priced meat.

“The extent to which the back is fleshed or cushioned with muscle is ascertained by pressing the hand firmly and moving it briskly upon that area, as shown in Picture 4. Sheep with good feeding qualities are snugly covered over the back, so that in judging them one does not
think of bones or vertebra. The crops and shoulder blades should also be smoothly and generously fleshed. Whether they are or are not, is determined by using the hand, as shown in Pictures 5 and 6. Where the collar or neck merges into or connects with the body is often a weak point in sheep. The connection here should be strong, close and symmetrical. A judge places the thumb on one side of the neck and the fingers on the other, and by his cultivated sense of feel can quickly assign the proper relative value to this point. Picture 7 covers this feature of judging.

“In a sheep or man ample width between the ears indicates masculinity and good cranial development. Narrowness here commonly is associated with other skeletal deficiencies, and consequent muscular short-comings. With the thumb and the second and third fingers the judge acquaints himself with this department of the sheep’s frame, as shown in Picture 8.

“The brisket should project forward, and be wide. If the forelegs are set well apart, and the sheep is well-built, the brisket is likely to pass muster all right. How to judge this point is the subject of Picture 9, while in 10, the size, strength and quality of the forearm are receiving attention. Small, weak-feeling forearms are of course objectionable. Picture 11 illustrates the judging of the flank and inside fleshing of the thigh. The leg of mutton, which should be deep, full and wide, is high-priced meat, and mutton sheep should be well developed in this part. Picture 12 covers the point. In 13 attention is centered upon the width and fleshing of the rump. Patchiness here is penalized.

“The other photographs show the opening of the fleece over different parts; as, for example, the hind-quarter, middle, shoulder and neck. A sheep should be well covered with wool. Judges, however, must have a working knowledge of the breed represented, in order intelligently to pass upon wool characteristics. A Shropshire, for instance, should be woolled from nose to toes, according to many breeders. A sheep of any breed should wear a good fleece over the body. In numerous cases bare or thinly-wooled bellies are possessed by otherwise excellent show sheep, while the floor of the chest also is not uncommonly deficiently woolled. By good fleece one means denseness, luster and crimp. When the fleece is opened the judge takes note of the condition and character of the skin.

“I have judged sheep for many years. It is sometimes a pleasure, but often a thankless task. I hope that I have learned something of value every year in connection with the work. I decline to judge breeds concerning which I am not informed. A judge should be well posted on the official scales of points for sheep of the breeds which he passes on; otherwise he may overlook or confuse certain characteristics or breed differences. Official scales of points are printed in numerous textbooks. They can also be obtained from the secretaries of the various pedigree sheep registry associations. Students in animal husbandry at the agricultural colleges are required carefully to study the official standard points of the breeds. Hundreds of these young men, after they have spent some years in breeding, fitting and showing sheep, will surely be well qualified to serve with distinction as judges.”
A "MOVIE" SHOWING SUCCESSIVE STEPS IN SHEEP JUDGING.