

VIEWPOINT

From the Premier Breeder of British Registered Soay Sheep
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A Happy Ending

By Kathie Miller

Sitting at the computer I couldn't believe what I was seeing out my window, a yearling ram "Innes" thrown up in the air like a volley ball in a pen across from my office. My senior ram Holloway had broadsided the youngster so hard it threw him several feet in the air and he landed on the cement skirt of the hay barn, badly shaken. And as is typical in this kind of a situation Holloway began bashing his victim as he struggled to get up. I FLEW out the door. When I got there I discovered a gate that I had left open had accidentally closed. I ran Holloway off and went to check Innes who was staggering to his feet, very wobbly. I wasn't sure he could walk back to his barn and I was afraid to pull him (especially by his horns) for fear of doing more damage so risked carrying him to a small pen where he would be safe and I could keep a close eye on him.

My hay broker delivers a year's worth of hay filling my barn each summer and always leaves a large pile of loose ends on the skirt outside the front door. I have a small catch pen in front of the barn between the ram's and ewe's pens to keep anyone from escaping when I go into one pen or the other. The rather large pile of loose hay was lying in the middle of this pen. To clean it up I gave the rams access to the pile by leaving the gate from their pen open so they could come and go. When the gate fell closed the two rams, competing for food, were trapped with no escape for "Innes". I am always so careful to avoid this situation, and should have secured the gate so it could not close. I had to take full responsibility for Innes's accident. Now I had a seriously injured young ram to contend with. He was on my fall line up for breeding but at this point didn't know if he would even survive. I have had similar situations during the rut in the past and they didn't always have a good outcome.

I got him **Dexamethasone**, a strong anti inflammatory from the vet (which *sometimes* helps) and gave him an antibiotic in case of a secondary infection, but quiet and rest were going to be my best hope of a positive recovery. Several weeks passed and he seemed to be better; it is always hard to tell if that is in fact happening or if it is one's imagination, but eventually because he was going stir crazy alone I moved him to the OAP (Old Age Pensioner) pen with my very old placid ram Tucker. They got along well and gradually he improved, but he still wobbled and staggered and his breeding future was still in question. Because he was important to my program I decided I'd give it a try. I gave him two young ewes who were small and quiet and left them for six weeks in a very small pen so he would not have to chase them around ---- in the ram barn of all places but I hung blankets on the dividing fence like a curtain and the boys on the other side never got wind (pun intended) of what was going on three feet from them.

At the end of the six weeks the girls were returned to the ewe flock. Because he had such a nice personality and he could never run with a ram flock again, I had the vet castrate him because he would make a good mentor for lambs and be easier to manage. To my amazement in April both of his "wives" produced lambs, one ram and one ewe. I got the son I had hoped for. I was elated. The following summer my friend Val came to visit from California and I told her Innes's story. "I'd love to have him" she said. He, along with another adult wether I had, would make wonderful ambassadors for the breed at her community garden/roadside vegetable stand in the foothills above Sacramento. "The children in my school gardening program would get so much out of seeing him. No one down there knows a breed such as this exists". And so Innes and his friend Hamish, rather than going to the butcher, will go to a new home to teach children about the wonders of keeping farm animals. Moral of the story, sometimes things don't have a happy ending, but sometimes they do.

Think like a sheep

By Kathie Miller

I've kept LGDs (livestock guarding dogs) for a quarter century, each dog has had its own



Katie



Hannah

personality and its own set of challenges, but my puppy Katie came up with something new. She came to me at three months and was the perfect pup -- "wonder dog", I call her. She didn't dig, she didn't climb, she didn't bark excessively, and she got along with the sheep.

Over the next few months she formed a friendship with Hannah, a very mellow four year old ewe, and I would often find them sleeping together. Then one freezing morning when Katie was about eleven months old I found Hannah standing at the feeder shivering. Upon closer inspection I realized most of her wool had been plucked. There was fleece

everywhere. Katie was the obvious culprit, but things didn't add up. Hannah was eating her hay, totally unfazed, as the pup sniffed her all over and licked her face repeatedly. The ewe didn't react as she would have to an attacker. I didn't know what to think. I pulled Katie from the sheep while I tried to figure out what to do. I put a small goat bell on the pup's collar so I would be reminded to check on her regularly. Time passed and all seemed well. I gradually let the dog run with the sheep. Katie and Hannah were back to being pals again.

About three weeks later I heard the bell ringing in the barn, went to check and discovered Hannah cornered in a small pen being chewed on by her buddy. Again, the ewe didn't seem that distressed. Now I really was baffled. Nothing fit.

I wrote to Christine. "I bet Hannah is in heat" she said, "Katie is drawn to her by the smell and because the ewe is receptive - in this case to the dog (a neutered female at that) not a ram, she allows it to happen. You need to get her bred so she doesn't keep coming into heat," she wrote back.

Mature ewes often continue coming into estrus for an extended period of time if they have not been bred during the normal breeding season of November/December. As they get older they seem to get increasingly frustrated. I had not bred Hannah this year, so she was open and this could explain why she was seeking out her friend Katie to solve her problem.

Hannah is still with the ram and I won't get a definitive answer until she rejoins the flock but Katie is back with the girls doing very well with no further problems.

Inter species relationships are amazing and complicated and if you can learn to think a little bit like a sheep and a little bit like a dog you can often sort out problems that come up around the farm.

Monthly calendar

The rut is winding down, merge rams back to their bachelor flock. Doing it this late in the season the rams are more interested in eating than fighting and you will have fewer skirmishes.

Merge the ewes back to their flock, but be prepared for skirmishes among them for a few days.

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Continue to watch weight, my rams seem to get thinner than ewes in winter. Continue to use soaked beet pulp, as a supplement especially for rams.

Watch for coughing, LA200 (Liquamycin) works very well for upper respiratory coughs but consult your vet first.

Tip of the Month



In the fall when I put the ram lambs ("ramblings") with the adult rams, I set up a separate feed pen for them using my lamb creep panel. The spaces are adjusted for little horns, but are small enough that the adults can not pass through to steal the lamb's hay.

Resources

Livestock Protection Dogs, Selection, Care and Training, Orysia Dawydiak and David Sims
ISBN 1-57779-062-6

Livestock Guardians, Using Dogs, Donkeys and Llamas to Protect Your Herd, Janet Vorwald Dohner
ISBN 978-1-58017-695-8

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