

# Fleeners set sights on breeding champion sheep

BY TRISH WILLIAMS

LANCASTER — Quality not quantity is the guiding principle Tim and Sarah Fleener use to manage their flock of registered Shropshire and Hampshire sheep.

It is that eye for quality and the discriminating hand for culling that recently led the Fleeners to a long string of winnings at the Keystone International Livestock Exposition. Having captured both the grand champion ram and ewe in the National Shropshire Show, they went on to the highly coveted Governor's Trophy for a group class.

Years of breeding and showing sheep have earned the Fleeners their obvious ovine advantage. It was showing sheep that originally brought Tim and Sarah together. And a mutual interest and participation in organized sheep activities that brought the couple to head the Pennsylvania Hampshire Association. Tim serves as president and Sarah is the secretary-treasurer for the largest sheep breed association in the state.

Tim grew up in the wide open spaces of Modoc, Indiana. Tim's parents have been showing Shropshire sheep since 1963. Tim took over responsibility for the flock in 1970 and began a program to upgrade the flock.

Sarah, like her mother and grandparents, is a Lancaster County native. She was raised and still lives on her family's farm that seems as if it is being swept ever closer to Lancaster, as urban sprawl nears their farm, only a mile and a half from the Park City Mall.

Sarah's parents, Clyde and Dorothy Brubaker, have raised Hampshire sheep for more than 20 years. Her parents started her and her brother, Ken, raising sheep when they were young. Sarah was only nine years old when she began showing sheep in 4-H competition.

In 1980, Sarah's last year of junior showing competition Sarah had achieved a level of quality in her Hampshire show string that permitted her to participate in the North American International Livestock Exposition, in Louisville, Ky.

That same year Tim's string of Shropshire show sheep did well enough that he postponed going to college at Kansas State University in order to compete at Louisville. Vicki, an excellent show ewe of Sarah's was penned next to Tim's sheep. Tim offered to buy her from Sarah, she wouldn't sell her, but nonetheless Vicki had brought the two together.

Now the couple maintains a flock of each breed and continues to show with ever more success. The Fleeners have 35 Hampshire ewes, two stud rams and ten fall lambs. They also raise 20 Shropshire sheep.

Emphasis in the breeding program is placed on good ewes.

"We haven't spent a lot of money on rams," Tim explained. "We base most of our progress on the ewe. If the ewe doesn't produce year after year, she is shipped."

"We like to see twins and triplets out of our ewes," Sarah added. "If we have an outstanding ewe family, and the ewe throws single births, we will keep some of the outstanding lambs. If her lambs are not outstanding, then she goes. A lot also depends on her milking ability. We do have one commercial ewe that we keep because she throws good market lambs and she is a terrific milker. We can milk her out and freeze the milk for orphan lambs or lambs not getting enough to eat."

"Probably the worst ewe we have now, we have a ram out of that won the champion ram at Farm Show," Tim stated, stressing the importance of culling.

How did the Fleener's achieve



The Fleener's pasture their sheep on a rented meadow near their home. Each day they make a head count and health check of the flock.

this level of quality in their sheep. Tim attributes much of the genetic progress to a program of carefully planned inbreeding. As an example of half brother and half sister of outstanding quality might be mated.

Embryo transfer is a genetic tool these progressive breeders are considering.

"Right now embryo transfer techniques in sheep still need refinement," Tim explained. "Most of the work is being done in Illinois. I think the going price for a transfer is around \$500. At that price I would want to know it was a sure thing. But I would definitely go that way when it is refined, that way I wouldn't have to haul a ewe clear across the country."

Feeding a balanced ration is also given much attention. The Fleener's flock is fed a custom mixed concentrate consisting of cracked corn, rolled oats, soybean oil meal, molasses and Vigortone minerals. Tim estimates the cost of the concentrate at about \$200-\$220 per ton depending on grain prices. He feels the ground concentrate gives better feed efficiency than commercially pelleted feeds that 'tend to lay in the bottom of the sheep's stomach.'

The crop and pasture land on Sarah's grandfather's farm is used to feed his commercial beef animals. So Tim and Sarah buy all the feed the sheep require, and rent pastures for grazing their sheep from neighbors.

The sheep are divided into three flocks for pasturing, two flocks of Hampshire and one flock of



From their year's of showing sheep, Tim and Sarah Fleener have accumulated quite a collection of ribbons, banners, trays and trophies, which they display in their home.

Shropshire.

"We try to keep them on pasture as long as we can so we don't have to purchase feed," Tim said. "When the ewes have lambs we feed them 2.5 to 3.0 pounds of concentrates."

4-H members in the Lancaster Woolies club have also benefited from the sheep production experience of Sarah's parent, Clyde and Dorothy, who are leaders of the club. The Brubakers have helped to organize shows and sales.

Dorothy has a special interest in lead line competitions. She has coordinated the lead line competition at the KILE for four years. Sarah who competed in the contest for six years herself, has helped her mother to run the contest for

the last two years, and this year for the first time they organized a lead line contest at Lancaster County's roundup.

Ken, Sarah's brother, still has an interest in sheep, although he no longer lives on the farm. Ken was the auctioneer for all but the Suffolk sheep auctions held in conjunction with KILE.

With this kind of family involvement and expertise one might assume that sheep farming was a full-time job for the Fleeners. It is definitely a full-time avocation, for Tim who works full-time for Warner Lambert in Lititz. And for Sarah it is a lifelong love of the species that she believes has a personality more like humans than any of the other barnyard animal.



Sarah and Tim are pictured with their grand champion ewe and ram at the 1983 National Shropshire Show.



This Hampshire ewe, Vicki, is responsible for bringing Tim and Sarah together. Tim wanted to buy her from Sarah, but she wouldn't sell. So Tim had to marry Sarah to get "joint custody" of Vicki. As one can see the relationship is a growing enterprise.