

Combining An Urban Career With A Rural Lifestyle

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CENTRE HALL (Centre) —

Although his children and his sheep certainly are just two of the many facets of Roger Dudick's fast-paced life, a conversation with this progressive shepherd quickly proves that his kids and his Corriedales are the most rewarding. When I visited Roger on a recent Sunday afternoon, he and son, Eugene, were vaccinating and weighing lambs while wife and registered nurse, Margaret, was in the kitchen baking cookies and looking after five-month-old, Blair, Allison, Elliot, and Rachel, ages three through seven, romped in the backyard with their recently-"shorn" Standard Poodle named DISC, a.k.a. Dog in Sheep's Clothing. Because Roger is a self-employed consultant who travels throughout the country during the week, the sheep receive his attention primarily on the weekends; Eugene shepherds on weekdays. So, while father and son worked, I picked Roger's brain on his theories and goals for his prize-winning sheep.

As spring breaks, the Dudick's thoughts turn toward the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival, which is held the first weekend in May in West Friendship, Md. This wool sheep extravaganza, in its 16th year, is the largest festival of its kind in the East. It draws wool sheep competitors from all over the nation, as the Dudicks are well aware. After all, at the 1988 festival, they captured the premier natural colored exhibitor award after a nine-year absence from the show. Chances are that colored sheep competitors will be watching pensively as the Dudicks campaign their Corriedales at Maryland again this May.

What events brought about the Dudicks' successful flock? Roger attests that he is "a country boy by choice, not birth, and that's a lot better." In 1969, toward the end of his "hippy days," he rented a small farm in Maryland. Four years later Roger bought his first place and, for a short period of time, raised registered Angus cattle and a few hogs. After a stint as a college teacher, Roger bought a 40-acre farm, married Margaret, began a family, and became a shepherd. The Dudick family has pushed full-steam-ahead since then. Those first few sheep that Roger purchased were "whatever cheap animals I could get away with," he admits. The two elder Dudick boys were in 4-H, and Roger says that many shepherds were quick to tell him, "you can't do anything if

you don't have Suffolks or Hampshires." Dudick found such statements difficult to accept: "I got tired of hearing that. I'm a contrary so-and-so, I wanted to do something different."

It was at this point that Roger purchased his first colored sheep from Randy Irwin. Irwin manages a farm for John Hopkins University and is now a well-known breeder of Border Leisters and North Country Cheviots. In 1981, Roger showed his animals at the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival, and in his words, "got my buns kicked from one end of the ring to the other, and deservedly so."

The Dudicks later moved to York County, and Roger began looking at his flock with a very critical eye, concentrating his efforts on rebuilding. Using crossbred rams to this point, Dudick found no consistency in his lamb crop -- no uniformity of fleece or of conformation, in which he was particularly interested. Roger explained that conformation makes up 40 percent of the total score in wool sheep classes, and he added: "I didn't know if the handspinning fad would last." Because of his doubts plus the fact that "everyone said that black sheep had terrible carcasses," he set out to produce colored sheep with the goals of fleece quality and carcass composition

being equally crucial. In the mid-80's, Randy Irwin was able to locate two black purebred Corriedale rams, which became the basis of the current 25-ewe Dudick flock.

Three years ago, Roger and family moved to a 10½-acre farm in Centre Hall. Here, in Centre County, Dudick continues to develop his flock by emphasizing wool quality and body scale. He has concentrated on medium-fine fleeces, culling stock with Karakul blood. Karakul is a predominately black breed with coarse-textured wool. He believes that his animals still have room for improvement in the area of rate of growth. Roger also would like to develop finer wool that reaches a longer staple length in a relatively short period of time. A staple length is a year's growth of wool. "When I started with these sheep, I realized that it would be a 20-year project," says Dudick.

The Dudicks market their fleeces locally to handspinners and also ship wool to Europe. Most of their lambs are marketed as breeding stock to colored sheep breeders. Roger is reluctant, however, to take complete credit for his successes in the sheep indus-



A group of the Dudicks' Corriedale rams gather as the sun sets on their Centre Hall farm.



David Harpster, a purebred sheep breeder and part-time employee of the Dudicks, has been instrumental in creating their top show string.

try. "I would say that 80 percent of our success is due to David Harpster," he stated. Harpster, a purebred breeder from Boalsburg, began working on a part-time basis for the Dudicks a little over a year ago. David very successfully has campaigned the Dudick flock at many county fairs in Pennsylvania. Harpster also aids in making selection and breeding decisions and is a master in the show ring, according to Roger. "When it comes to decision making, I defer to David's judgment," said Dudick.

Dudick spoke frankly about his mix of an urban career and a rural lifestyle. When asked why he chose shepherding, he answered: "It's a conscious choice. I despise urban living, personally, and as an environment for me and my family. I like sheep more than any other animal I've worked with."

Roger hopes to spend his golden years with his flock, and he refers to his sheep as his "I.R.A."

It may have been nine years in the making, but it seems that, with a little help from his friends, Roger Dudick has produced a top show string of colored sheep. More importantly, however, he and Margaret have produced a beautiful family that's obviously benefitting from the lifestyle their parents have chosen. As for his six children, Roger smiles, "We found having kids to be addictive." He joked, "When my kids grow up, they'll probably not want to even look at a sheep!" As for his flock, "I'd love to have a big operation with 1,000 or so ewes someday," he mused. But, for this spring, anyway, Roger and Margaret are making plans to pack up the family (including baby, Blair) and head to Maryland in May for a very exciting weekend.



Allison, Rachel, and Elliot Dudick (l to r) with DISC a.k.a. Dog in Sheep's Clothing.

Homestead Notes