

# Finnsheep and Texels: Falling Tree Ranch

By Walter R. Threlfall, DVM, MS, PhD, DACT, and Ronda A. Threlfall, BA

The Finnsheep breed originated in Finland over 200 years ago. It was developed for the multiple birth trait and increased milk production. Purebreds were introduced into the United States about 1968. Since I am a theriogenologist (a veterinarian who specializes in reproduction and obstetrics), I began to read with great interest the capabilities of the Finnsheep in regard to their multiple births, and the hardiness of the "small" offspring in the mid-70s.

Published information suggests the record number is nine lambs from a ewe at one lambing. The best that we have accomplished has been seven of which all survived with assistance. The lamb's small size at birth has its advantages and disadvantages. Birth weights of approximately two pounds in the high number multiple births reduces difficult deliveries unless more than one lamb attempts to exit the reproductive tract at the same time. This small size, however, is a disadvantage in cold weather, because they are less able to control their body temperature.

The ewes generally milk extremely well and usually need to receive grain during lactation in order to maintain body condition. They are similar to heavy producing dairy cattle and will lose considerable weight in a short period of time while attempting to raise four or more offspring.

## Our experience

When my wife and I first started our Finn flock in 1977, we began with 3/8 Finn ewes added to our commercial flock. I had raised sheep since age 8 as my father, grandfather, great grandfather and great great grandfather had been shepherds as well. The 3/8 blood ewes all produced triplets with excellent growth and survivability, so we decided to obtain purebreds. We brought in our stock from Canada. The first years were disappointing. As our ewes began to produce offspring it became apparent that problems such as bad mouth, bad feet, and back conformation as

well as OPP were present. We probably only maintained 10 to 15% of the offspring in the beginning, and the rest were sold at slaughter. The flock gradually became better in quality and quantity as we selected for genetic improvement. We have been OPP negative and foot rot and scrapie free for at least 15 years. All of these diseases can be extremely detrimental to a flocks' health.

I was happy with the results of the pure Finns and the crosses when I had a commercial flock. The ideal percentage for us was 3/8 Finn. We have crossed the Finns with most breeds including Suffolk, Dorset, Hampshire, Montadale, Coopworth, Corredale, Dorper, Texel, etc. Our pick for crosses have been the old style Dorset and currently the Texel.

The pure Finn is not a meat sheep although I have been informed the meat quality is excellent. The wool has been utilized by spinners in our area, but the market has been very limited and it is not an economical advantage for us to maintain blanketed fleeces. I really have enjoyed the multiple births as the most exciting part of the Finns. The 3s, 4s, 5s, 6s

and 7 are great! Lamb bars are recommended for anything above three but may not always (usually is a good idea) be needed, depending on the ewes' milking capability. Also, special care at lambing may be necessary in order to have high neonatal survival. All our ewes raise the 4s with little problem depending on lactation ability, but the higher litters do need supplementation. The lambs are hardy at birth, and mature rapidly. Another big point going for the Finns is that they have been selected for offspring number production, and have not been ruined (yet) by judges in a show ring (I showed sheep for 8 years in 4-H and FFA). The ewes are very easy keepers except when heavily lactating following lambing. Many have laughed at the purebred Finn as a meat animal. Few would argue the purebred Finn is competitive with other breeds as a meat animal. However, when the Finn is crossed with other meat breeds to produce a commercial ewe, they shine. They increase both the number lambbed and the milk production.

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## Crossbreeding

My original crosses with Suffolk and other breeds were satisfactory, but the increasing size of the pure Suffolk did not make the cross as good for our commercial ewes because they were still too large for our purposes. The lambs were excellent, but the ewes were too expensive to maintain under our management. The other crosses were acceptable, but the Finn-Dorset and Finn-Textel crosses are our favorites. In both cases, the crossbred ewes are great mothers and easy to maintain on pasture without major expense. Twelve years ago we reverted to year-round pasture and stock-piled grasses as the major method of foodstuffs for our sheep (my grandfather and father did it this way) as it was that or sell all our sheep as raising them the recommended way (grain) was too expensive. We were running approximately 150 commercial ewes at that time and have since reduced our flock to mostly pure Finn and Textels with some Finn-Textels and a few remaining Textel-Dorpers. We obtained Textels about 14 years ago. We had purebred Dorpers for 10 years but phased them out when we saw side-by-side production comparisons with the Textels. We used the accelerated lambing system (three lambings in two years) when possible for two years, but eliminated it again since it was not profitable for our operation.

## Textel

The Textel sheep breed originated on the isle of Textel off the coast of the Netherlands. The exact origin of the breed is unknown although it is thought to be a cross of multiple English breeds. It was slowly bred into a meat breed of outstanding carcass quality. It is now one of the most common meat breeds in the Netherlands, making up approximately seventy percent of the national flock.

The Textel breed is a white-faced breed with no wool on the head or legs. The breed is characterized by a distinctive short, wide face with a black nose and widely placed, short ears. The original Textels were prob-

ably a short-tailed variety of sheep. Limited importations of Lincoln and Leicesters were crossed with the original Textel ewes during the mid-1800s. The emphasis was on a sheep that would produce heavily muscled lambs of superior eating quality. Since the primary market for these lambs was Continental Europe where excess fat on meat cuts has always been unpopular.

What is now known as the British Textel has proven to be a huge success in the British Isles, with many stud rams being used in commercial flocks for the production of meat. The breed has shown that its hardy nature and ability to finish for slaughter in a competitive period of time has been

well suited to the requirements of the British food market. These qualities have helped the Textel breed become the most popular terminal sire breed in the UK. In August 2009, a Textel ram in Scotland was sold for a world record price for a sheep of \$360,000. Textels were introduced into New Zealand and Australia from Denmark and Finland. In addition to their natural attributes of heavy muscling and leanness, they had to be mobile sheep capable of travelling distances, free lambing and easy care.

The most outstanding characteristic of the Textel is its remarkable muscle development and leanness. Textel-sired lambs show an advantage of higher leg scores in breed comparisons and less total carcass fat. A mutation of the myostatin gene in the Textel breed is likely to be the genetic cause of the muscular phenotype of this breed of sheep.

Research results from Clay Center and the University of Wisconsin have indicated that Textel-sired lambs typically have a 6-10% advantage in loin-eye area when compared to American black-face-sired lambs. Even though Textel lambs in these trials grew slightly slower than the black-faced lambs, their feed efficiency was better. In a

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trial comparing Textel ram lambs to black-faced ram lambs, the Textels required about 15 pounds less feed to produce 60 pounds of gain.

The Textel's excellent milk yield ensures good lamb growth with lamb growth rates of around 250 grams per day. Ewes first come into season at about seven months and then have an annual breeding season of about 5 months. They are generally excellent mothers, producing a good litter size. Textel sheep have excellent temperaments. They are docile, easy to work around, and have a curious nature. They tend not to be easily excitable or nervous.

## Finn/Textel Cross

The Finn and Textel ewes are easily maintained during the non-lambing portion of the year. The smaller size compared to larger breeds result in more ewes being maintained on the same pasture. We have found both breeds to be well suited to Ohio and from the owners in other states they appear suited for the southern states as well as Canada.

We only grain our Finn ewes during the last three weeks of pregnancy and during the early lactation period. The Textel ewes require little if any grain and one needs to be cautious if grain is fed that they do not become too heavy pre-lambing. Excellent quality hay (first or second cutting alfalfa) is fed the last month of gestation and through lambing.

Sheep mineral containing selenium is available to all sheep continually. We do not flush with grain and they receive no other grain throughout gestation. We place the Finn and Textel ewes on grazing alfalfa pasture, which has been baled approximately four to six weeks previously for flushing and through breeding. They are then maintained through the winter on stock piled grasses and round bales of first cutting alfalfa grass

hay if needed. We have used this procedure for the past 15 years since graining ewes during breeding and most of the pregnancy does not fit into our management system or pock-

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etbook. This method has not reduced the multiple births and although we are familiar with the literature that numbers are reduced if ewes are not grained during gestation, we think seven lambs at one lambing is enough!

Foot rot can be a problem in any breed and management to prevent entry to a farm is always indicated and proper management to treat early and thoroughly if it is a problem. We have not had a problem with foot rot since the original Finns (over 20 years). We have no dietary problems but again their exposure to grain is relatively limited and controlled.

Most people discredit the Finn due to the high numbers and the small size at birth. The small size does not make them less hardy, but lambing in January will be a problem without proper management. Remember, with the increased number of lambs, she becomes like a sow. When and if the lambs crawl away they chill rapidly, blood sugar drops and they die. More intense management is necessary if pure Finns are being raised. I would not want a flock of 100 pure Finn ewes lambing in January in Ohio! They are great as a source of future breeding stock when crossed with other breeds. We believe the biggest strength of the Finn is to increase the number of commercial lambs produced without having little if any detectable detriment effect on the lamb carcass.

I believe there is no perfect breed; I wish there was. I think the most important thing is for each shepherd to find the breed(s) that work best for their managerial system. Some managerial systems should never have ewes that produce more than one lamb while for others two is enough. One must consider the time involved, pasture and facilities available, other expenditures such as hay and grain, and the interest level.

My daughter, Ronda, has worked with our sheep since she was 5-years-old and became my partner in the sheep operation two years ago. Our farms, Falling Tree Ranch and Fox Run Farm, are located in Powell and Prospect, Ohio, respectively. For more information regarding the Texels, Finnsheep, or crossbred; please contact us at 740-881-4417.

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