

Brian Magee, Outstanding Shepherd

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Few of us know what our life's work will be at a young age, but for Brian Magee the path was set when at age 6 or 7, he received orphan lambs from his veterinarian neighbor. Assuming responsibility for the lambs, Brian developed the skills that would lay the foundation for a lifelong career as an animal scientist, shepherd and teacher. In addition to receiving the lambs, Brian was given a subscription to **THE SHEPHERD** magazine which he devoured. He readily applied the knowledge he gleaned from reading articles to the practical art of raising sheep.

Magee's initial shepherding experience was in Colorado, but his family returned to their native Ohio by the time he was in high school. He continued his interest in raising sheep as well as other livestock and was active in 4-H. After high school he attended Wilmington College in Ohio, majoring in chemistry and biology.

After working in Maryland in soybean research, Magee and his bride applied to the Peace Corps and were sent to Ecuador. Here, in the land of the equator, where the length of days is 12-14 hours, Brian observed that the native sheep bred year round, in as short as a 7 month lambing interval. This was quite different than the yearly cycle of breeding in the fall and lambing in the spring, typical of the United States and northern Europe. Observing this pattern gave Magee the confidence to develop what would eventually become known as the STAR system

Returning to the US after his time in the Peace Corp, Magee landed a job at the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho. His primary responsibilities lay in research of coyote predation of sheep. During this time, he further developed his understanding of accelerated lambing with Polypay sheep and learned the concerns of farmers and shepherds on the western range.

In 1978 Magee completed a Master's Degree and accepted a position at Cornell University as Sheep Superintendent and Sheep Extensionist for New York State. Here, in collaboration with Professor Doug Hogue, he designed the Star System of lamb production. Magee's colleagues were at first skeptical of increasing the frequency of lambing, as most American and European breeds of sheep are bred once a year, during the fall, to lamb in the spring. However, an increase in production is an asset to the financial stability of the shepherd and the consistent availability of lamb to discerning clients

Magee and Hogue found that in addition to increasing frequency of yearly lamb production with 7.2 or 9.7 monthly intervals, the Cornell Dorsets combined with Finnsheep increased accelerated lambing to nearly 300%. Ewes come in to heat based on the fading light pattern in the fall. However there are some primitive breeds like Finnsheep, native to Finland that are known for fertility and producing "off-season". The chance discovery of an outstanding Dorset ram whose daughters lambed consistently at 7-month intervals and the observation that the ram's scrotal

circumference increased slightly during the spring made this phenotypic measurement a selective parameter on the sire side for Dorsets and Finnsheep.

Through colleagues at Penn State Magee learned of a ram with an unusually high fertility. By studying this and other rams, the realization that the size of the testes impacts fertility was added to the mix.

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In addition, the daughters of the ram with an increased testes size showed an increase in fertility. This knowledge combined with his South American sheep observations and awareness of Finnsheep and their natural off season breeding encouraged Magee to continue to study an increased lambing frequency and develop the STAR system. If you have access to the internet you can learn more about the STAR system at this website: <http://sheep.cornell.edu/cornell-star-accelerated-lambing-management-video/>

In May, 2016 The Finnsheep Breeders Association inducted Brian into the Finnsheep Hall of Fame at their annual meeting held in Wooster, Ohio. The award was in recognition of all that Magee has accomplished as an outstanding shepherd, breeder and promoter of Finnsheep. While Magee is perhaps best known for the STAR system of accelerated lamb production, he also developed an effective method to address foot rot and was instrumental in tackling Ovine Progressive Pneumonia when it infected the Cornell flock. According to the OPP society, “when Cornell’s Finns and his own flock were found to be infected with the OPP virus, Brian’s writings made their way into the popular press, generating a great deal of respect for one of the first breeds to openly tackle OPP”. (1)

For breeders of purebred Finnsheep and members of the Finnsheep Breeders Association, his clarity and understanding of inbreeding vs. outbreeding helped the organization maintain the integrity of the breed when the proposal to re-open the flock books was presented in 2011. He pointed to the depressive effect on prolificacy that outbreeding had had on 1/2 Finn 1/2 Dorset research flocks at Cornell University in the early 1980s. In the late 1970s, the Finnsheep Breeders Association had still allowed “upbreeding”, the introduction of another parent line into the breed. When a sheep reached 15/16s Finn, they were allowed to be registered as purebred Finnsheep. This subtle shift in parentage resulted in a significantly lower lamb crop. The 1/2 Finn 1/2 Dorset flock produced a 197% lamb crop as opposed to the average 260% lamb crop for Dorset and Finnsheep.

In the 1980s Finnsheep breeders worked hard to recover the unique genetic traits of the Finnsheep by allowing registration of only the traditional short tail lamb and by strongly encouraging registration of lambs only from mature ewes who gave birth to four or more lambs annually and raised three lambs or more without supplemental milk. A careful breeding program, where the sheep with best conformity are selected for breeding and lambs with negative recessive traits as well as their parents are sent to market can greatly reduce the undesirable traits and strengthen the foundation flock. This careful breeding allowed the Finnsheep Breeders Association to maintain the unique genetic traits of the purebred Finnsheep that support prolificacy and other strong maternal traits. (2)

Though Magee retired from Cornell in 2009, he has not retired from shepherding. He implements the STAR system on his own flock of Finn/Dorset crossbred sheep, providing whole carcass lamb year round to a culinary institute. His Finn/Dorset crossbreds produce the carcass size and fat content desired by chefs. He can be found at community events demonstrating shearing for the public. Soft spoken, with a dry wit and keen intellect, Magee is well known in sheep circles and well thought of by all who have had the good fortune to “talk sheep” with him.

(1) OPP Concerned Sheep Breeders Society Newsletter. April 2011

(2) *Inbreeding vs Outbreeding* **The Banner Sheep Magazine**, vol. 36 No. 6 July/August 2013, this can be found on our website: www.finnsheep.org under “Finnsheep in Print”