



FOCUS

Baglien Suffolks – An Emphasis on Production

Baglien Suffolks, of Corvallis, Oregon, is a family-owned Suffolk seedstock operation with an emphasis on production traits. Breeding Suffolk sheep since 2000, the operation is family affair, with five members of the clan actively involved. The business operates chiefly as a contract grazing operation. Most of the pastures under management are made available to the flock by owners in return for the Bagliens' land management and property improvement services. The flock typically runs between 20 to 35 ewes, depending on the land and labor resources available.

Family patriarch Jim Baglien has been one of the more articulate spokesmen for a production orientation in the Suffolk breed during the past few years. Baglien had a long career in the food

processing and allied industries prior to developing the sheep operation. Following is our interview with him:

TS: How do you define a 'production' sheep, as opposed to other types?

JB: A 'production sheep' delivers a desired end product, or products, at the lowest possible system cost. For a meat breed like the Suffolk, the desired end result is a superior product on the consumer's plate. If we can accomplish that with low cost feed inputs, and with minimal labor and capital, we have a business.

TS: What is your customer base? Who do you sell to?

JB: First, other seedstock producers that see traits in our sheep they can use. Second, rams to commercial producers selling lamb directly to restaurants and consumers, where superior carcasses count. Third, rams to range flocks that value longevity, easy keeping, and good yields. Finally, our own direct-sale meat customers. We sell exclusively by private treaty, to regular customers and through our web site.

TS: What trait do you emphasize most?

JB: Carcass merit. If we're really concerned about what the consumer sees in a restaurant or at home, this must be our first priority: plate coverage, proper finish, and tenderness. One of the rea-

See Baglien Suffolks page 46



The flock makes extensive use of electric netting for rotational grazing.

sons we maintain a retail meat business is to stay close to that end-product reality. There is nothing like seeing your own vacuum-packed chops to tell you whether your program is producing a superior product. And since we sell direct, our customers' expectations keep us focused. A number of years ago we experimented with some genetics that did not pan out well for us at all – and the lambs from those genetics went into commodity feeder channels, because we could not sell meat like that to our regular customers. Being 'foodies' that enjoy eating lamb helps, too. I am surprised when I encounter meat sheep breeders that don't eat their own product – how can they know what they're delivering? Imagine, by analogy, a wine maker that doesn't drink wine – the very idea is odd.

TS: How do you select for better carcasses?

JB: Several metrics. We have used ultrasound measurement of rib eye area (REA) for many years. This provides a measure of muscling depth in the highest-value cuts and correlates, to some extent, with general muscularity. Over the years, we have moved most of our lamb crop to a level above 3.5 sq. in. REA at 135 pounds. By comparison, the average Suffolk REA at that weight runs about 2.7 sq. in. The 135 lb. benchmark is impor-

tant, because this corresponds to desired slaughter weight. We want lambs that are adequately developed and properly finished around that weight, not at 100 or 170. Carcass yields, both hanging and processed cut weights, are also important. Yield is both a carcass merit and production efficiency measure. We expect our retail lambs to consistently exceed 55% hanging weight yield, and see upside potential from that. We also make use of linear measurements and ratio analysis. We want to see conformations that deliver higher-value cuts – the proverbial extra loin chops.

TS: What else?

JB: It is important to recognize that few, if any, physical traits are absolutes. For example, we talk about our sheep having 'good bone' and this is meaningful since many contemporary Suffolks are deficient in this trait. However, bone is not an absolute – more is not always better. It should be remembered that the first thing Sir Robert Bakewell did in building good meat sheep in his day was to reduce the amount of bone, since it was then excessive and detracted from yield. There are tradeoffs almost everywhere. Even muscling can become a problem, if it's in the wrong place and affects functionality.

TS: What about the cost side?

JB: Prolificacy, conversion rate on roughage, health program, and lambing ease are key for us. A ewe has two teats, so we select for twinning. I know some breeders have developed low-labor lamb feeding systems for extra lambs, but we find that hard to manage under our system. Ruminants are wonderful creatures, and we like sheep that maintain condition on pasture and by-product feeds. Here in western Oregon, 'by-product feeds' usually means vegetable processing waste – not distillers grains. We are also fanatical about flock health. Chronic health problems sap ewe productivity at every stage, and demand labor input to treat. Our flock is free of the usual culprits – OPP, caseous lymphadenitis, and foot rot, and is nearing Export Certification under the USDA Voluntary Scrapie program. Finally, we are pretty ruthless in culling ewes that require assistance past their first ewe lamb lambing year. We don't like practicing ovine obstetrics.

TS: Do you use EPDs in your program?

JB: We have a fairly numbers-intensive selection system and have participated in NSIP in the past, but are not currently active. Our rationale

for this is simple. Management systems in the United States vary enormously, which makes comparability an ongoing issue. Beyond the range of production systems, it is also quite possible to 'game' the system in pursuit of better numbers. Let me give an example. Our ewes with newborn lambs get 10 days under cover, at which point they are kicked out to pasture with little or no shelter. Since we are located in the Willamette Valley and lamb in winter, that means they are exposed to days and nights of cold rain, sleet, and freezing fog. This selects for tough sheep that are well-adapted to our climate. Those lambs necessarily use energy to stay warm that might otherwise be used for growth. On the other hand, if we built a big barn and raised our lambs in it,



Two year old Baglien ram at stud in Wisconsin.

and replaced a limited ration of soybean meal and cracked corn in our creep stations with fully-formulated show sheep rations, we'd get a nice bump in weaning weight EPDs – and end up with worse sheep in the long run.

TS: So you're against the NSIP?

JB: Not at all. We may re-enter the program in the future to generate flock EPDs for our own use. Let's just say I'm cautionary when it comes to being too focused on index values. It's a mathematical certainty that whatever you don't measure in an index will ultimately become an issue. For example the Suffolk Sire Reference Scheme in the UK rewarded high index sheep for many years without incorporating a component for lambing ease. The carcass value component drove the index and breed towards heavy-fronted sheep, with predictable results. I've spent a lot of time in the UK, and one thing you don't want to ask a UK Suffolk breeder is how many lambs he pulls –



A fourth-generation Baglien yearling ram. Jim says he likes the “aircraft carrier look.”



Typical Baglien ewes.

JUNE 2015

and remember, they don't breed ewe lambs in the UK as we do here. They get away with it because the commercial rams they sell will be bred to F1 'mules' with superior maternal traits, but that's not the kind of labor input I want in my own seed-stock operation.

In general, there's always a temptation for seed-stock producers to 'hothouse' their lambs, to force growth for greater size at show and sale time. We're reluctant to do this – even for ram lambs, and never for ewe lambs – which is one reason why we sell private treaty. We need to see how lambs grow under commercial conditions, if we are to make good selection decisions. Genetics vary enormously in their response to rich or lean rations – one is not a surrogate for the other.

TS: You've talked a lot about general selection criteria – how do you actually make decisions?

JB: There is no substitute for good stock evaluation skills. A Suffolk can have great numbers and a great pedigree, but if it has low pasterns, extra teats, or dark fiber, you don't want it. We are blessed with six former and current livestock judges in the family, and so we begin the evaluation of prospective replacements with an assessment of physical soundness and freedom of movement: we want sheep that have good capacity, that are long, level, square on the corners, square-hipped, and wide across the top. I really like sheep that, viewed from behind, remind me of an aircraft carrier. To this we add quantitative data from ultrasound and linear measurements. Then we go to the pedigrees, with particular attention on the females: what are the longevity, prolificacy, keeping and lambing ease of the ewes? What is their health history, including worming frequency? What do their lambs scan, and what did the processed ones yield? What are their weaning weights?

TS: And breeding decisions?

JB: We are line breeders. This is necessary for two reasons. First, it is impossible to judge the true merit of a ram without lining up his genetics to see if he harbors genetic defects, and to assess his prepotency with respect to conformation and the vig-

or he sires in his offspring even when closely bred. Second, we want our stock to perform predictably. Our regular customers come back to us knowing that we will select rams that match up well with their existing genetics, and therefore increase the odds that they'll get lambs that look just like those rams. We compute a breeding coefficient for every proposed match, and have a desired range that we target.

TS: Why do you raise Suffolks, as opposed to another meat breed? And how do you see the future of the breed?

JB: For all its travails in recent years, the Suffolk is still the world's preeminent breed of meat sheep. The underlying genetics, with respect to carcass quality, rate of growth, prolificacy, and lambing ease, are still tough to beat. To the extent we ever had 'jumpers', we bred that trait out of our flock long ago, and of course our flock is 'white pedigreed' with respect to genetic defects like spider syndrome. Our wounds today as a breed are all self-inflicted, the result of chasing show-ring ideals instead of commercial utility. The long-predicted fall of the breed last year from first place in registrations and transfers has been, I think, a useful wake-up call for breeders still in denial as to the changes needed. Production-oriented sheep are getting more attention, which is what most people really want to breed anyway. The show ring, however, will continue to exercise a negative influence. Judges will be slow to change the way they place sheep, both out of long habit and for fear of alienating influential breeders. In the youth judging ranks, even kids from production-sheep families (or beef kids, whose stock shows are more production-oriented) will continue to be trained to place sheep according to prevailing show ring fashion, rather than on commercial merit. It will be many years before they are 'licensed' to place meat sheep similarly to how they place beef cattle. This 'drag' from the show ring makes it a struggle for many breeders to implement a truly production-oriented program. Combining a desire for commercial utility with competing agendas (such as an attachment to a particular 'look' or a desire for show ring recognition) gets in the way of making correct stock selection decisions. For that reason, the single biggest asset to change will be the development of show standards that really measure conformational merit from a production standpoint, with ultrasounding and the end of fitted wool, and accompanying carcass competitions. I'm guardedly optimistic, but only in the long run. In the meantime, we'll keep breeding this kind of sheep.

For more information about Baglien Suffolks of Corvallis, Oregon, check out the family's website at: thicksheep.com.