



Sheep Selection

Keith A. Bryan, instructor in dairy and animal science.

Why judge livestock?

Stockpersons judge livestock to differentiate among the “superior,” “average,” and “inferior” animals within each of the livestock industries. They are looking for the “most desirable” animals for their particular needs. Stockpersons often compare their own livestock to those of others. Using their judging knowledge and skills, producers analyze the potential value of animals for particular purposes.

In order to successfully evaluate livestock you should be able to:

- Identify the different breeds of livestock,
- Compare livestock for their merit and value as either breeding or market animals,
- Look at an animal and determine its more desirable characteristics and its less desirable traits,
- Improve your livestock by selecting more desirable animals and gain an appreciation of their value for a particular purpose,
- Make decisions and defend them in a logical, well-organized manner,
- Make complex decisions based on a variety of information available, and
- Appreciate the opinions of other

Introduction

Evaluation of breeding and market animals is the foundation of livestock production. Selection of animals is actually judging livestock, which is comparing the merits of one animal against the merits of other animals. This selection process is just one of many applications of livestock evaluation and judging.

Livestock producers, breeders, feeders, buyers, and packers evaluate livestock for their potential as either breeding or market animals. These people try to relate the "form" of an animal with the "function" for which it is intended to serve. That is why livestock judging is often called the application of "form and function" to livestock.

Breeds of livestock

Before learning to compare animals of the same breed, knowledge of the most popular breeds is necessary. The website www.ansi.okstate.edu/BREEDS/SHEEP has an extensive listing and description of breeds of sheep. Table 1 outlines some of the breeds of sheep that are common to the United States. Each breed has been assigned a breed class (ram, ewe, or dual) according to whether the dominant characteristics of the breed are associated with growth and carcass traits (ram), or reproductive characteristics (ewe). The dual breed class indicates that the breed is noted equally for growth, carcass, and reproductive characteristics.

Average weights for mature rams and ewes are listed. Again, these are included to allow you to compare one breed with another breed. The weights and other characteristics listed are breed averages; there is as much variation within a breed as there is among breeds for these traits.

Growth rate, hardiness, gregariousness, prolificacy, and milking ability are ranked among breeds, using a six-point scale, with 1 as the most desirable and 6 as the least desirable. Fleece weight is given in pounds of wool per year from the average animal of that breed. Fleece type is listed as fine, medium, or long, and describes the type of wool fiber characteristic of the breed.

Table 1. Breeds of Sheep

Breed	Breed Class	Ram wt.	Ewe wt.	Growth Rate a	Hardiness a	Gregariousness a	Prolificacy a	Milking Ability a	Fleece Weight	Wool Type	Face Color
Border Leicester	ram	210	160	4	6	6	3	3	9	long	white
Cheviot	ewe	180	135	4	4	6	4	4	5	medium	white
Columbia	dual	260	165	2	4	4	4	4	11	medium	white
Corriedale	ewe	190	140	5	4	4	4	4	11	medium	white
Debouillet	ewe	190	140	5	2	2	5	5	11	fine	white
Delaine	ewe	195	130	5	2	2	5	5	11	fine	white
Dorset	dual	225	170	3	6	6	3	2	6	medium	white
Finnsheep	ewe	200	140	5	6	6	1	2	6	medium	white
Hampshire	ram	275	200	2	6	6	3	2	7	medium	black
Lincoln	dual	300	225	5	6	6	4	5	12	long	white
Montadale	ram	235	160	4	5	6	4	4	8	medium	white
Oxford	ram	250	190	3	6	6	4	4	8	medium	brown
Rambouillet	ewe	225	160	3	2	2	5	5	11	fine	white
Romney	dual	220	175	5	6	6	4	5	10	long	white
Shropshire	ram	235	170	3	5	6	3	3	8	medium	dark brown

Southdown	ram	200	145	4	6	6	4	4	5	medium	light brown
Suffolk	ram	300	215	1	6	6	2	2	5	medium	black
Targhee	ewe	250	175	3	4	4	4	4	11	medium	white

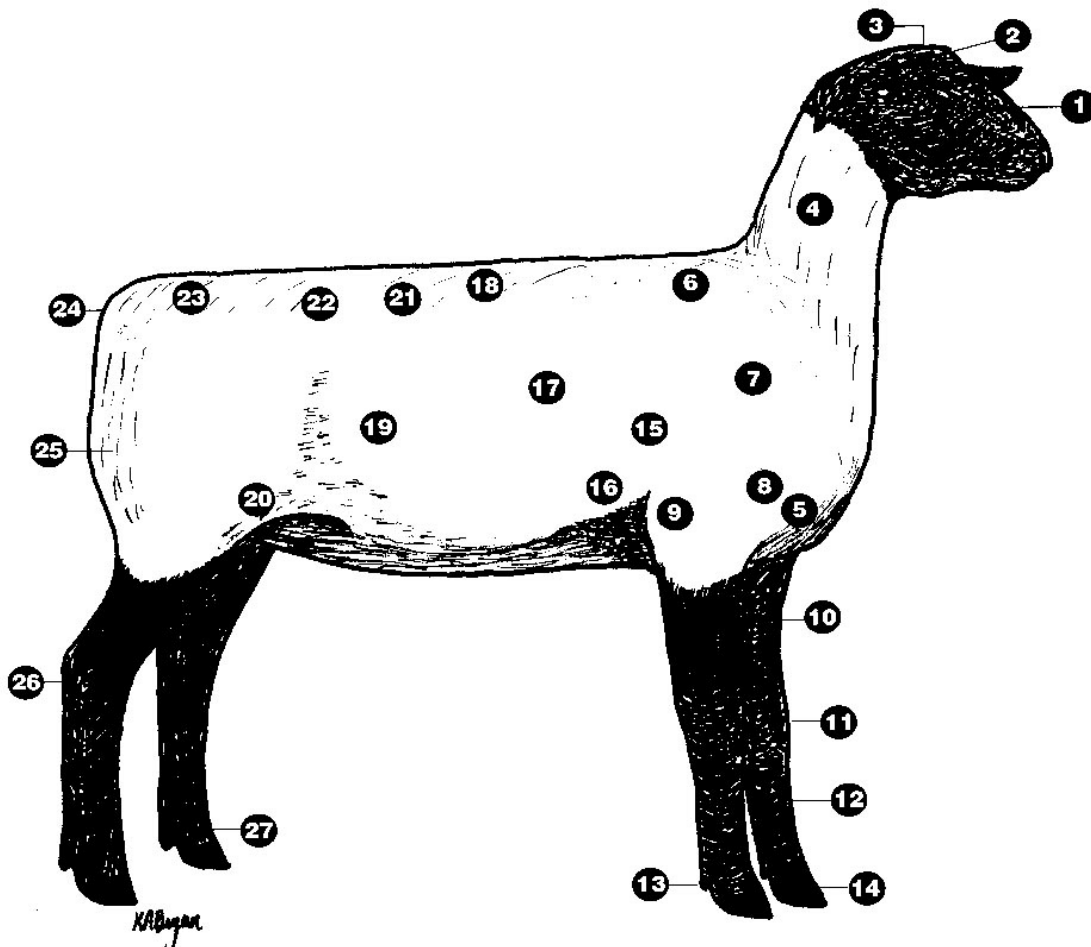
^aRanking based on 1 (most desirable) through 6 (least desirable).

(Adapted from The Sheepman's Production Handbook, 1982, George E. Scott, editor.)

Parts of an animal

After you have become familiar with the breeds of livestock, you should learn the external parts and carcass regions of each species. In the next section you will be provided with a diagram of the external parts of an animal, characteristics of an ideal female, and characteristics of an ideal market animal. (See figures 1–3.) Characteristics of the ideal breeding female and ideal market animal are included for reference only. Depending on the location and production situation, an *ideal* can take on various shapes and forms.

Figure 1. External Parts of Sheep



- | | | |
|------------|------------|---------------|
| 1 face | 10 forearm | 19 middle |
| 2 forehead | 11 knee | 20 rear flank |
| 3 poll | 12 cannon | 21 loin |
| 4 neck | 13 dewclaw | 22 hip |

- 1 face
- 2 forehead
- 3 poll
- 4 neck
- 5 breast
- 6 top of shoulder
- 7 shoulder
- 8 point of shoulder
- 9 elbow

- 10 forearm
- 11 knee
- 12 cannon
- 13 dewclaw
- 14 foot
- 15 forerib
- 16 lower forerib
- 17 rib
- 18 back or top

- 19 middle
- 20 rear flank
- 21 loin
- 22 hip
- 23 rump
- 24 dock
- 25 leg
- 26 hock
- 27 pastern

Figure 2. Ideal Ewe

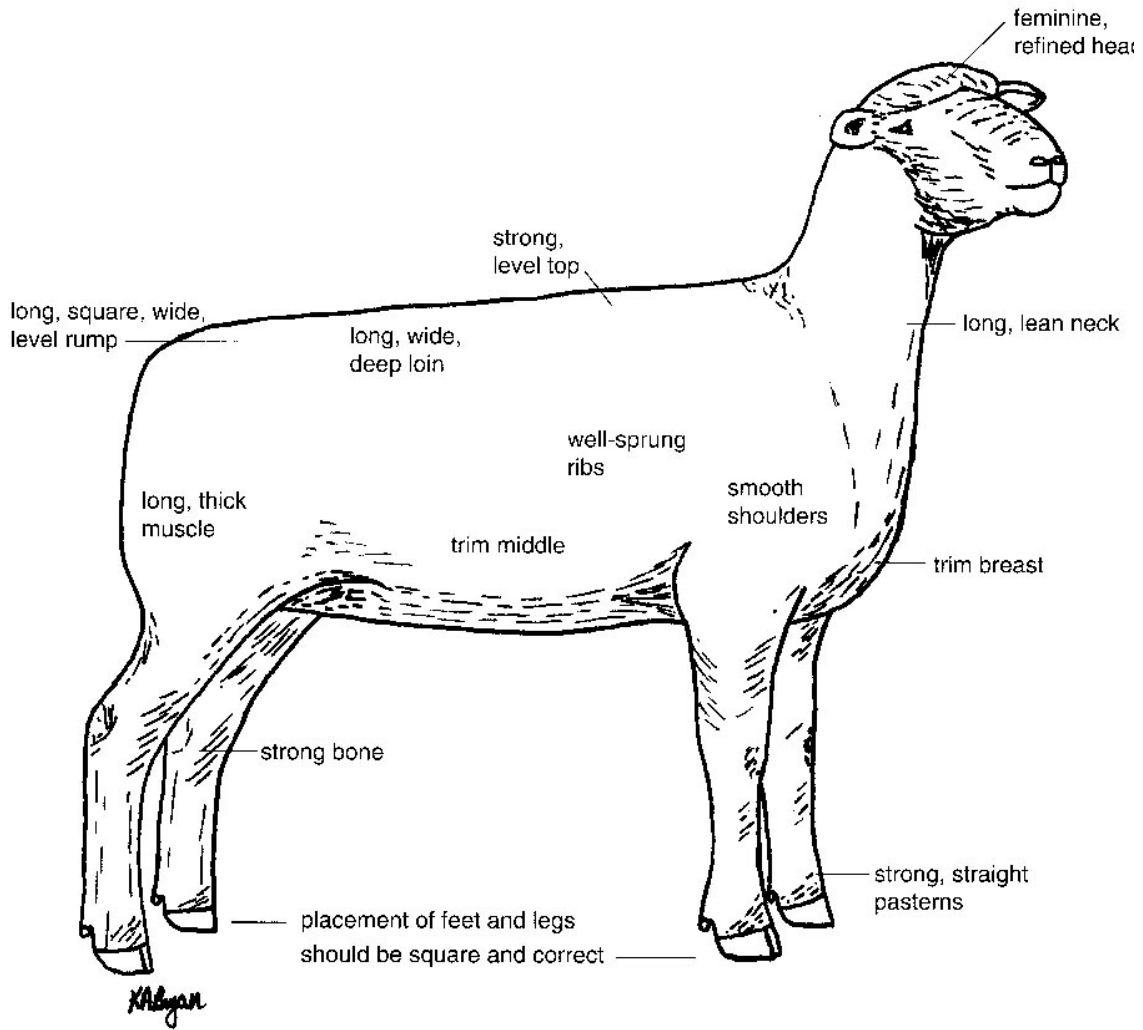
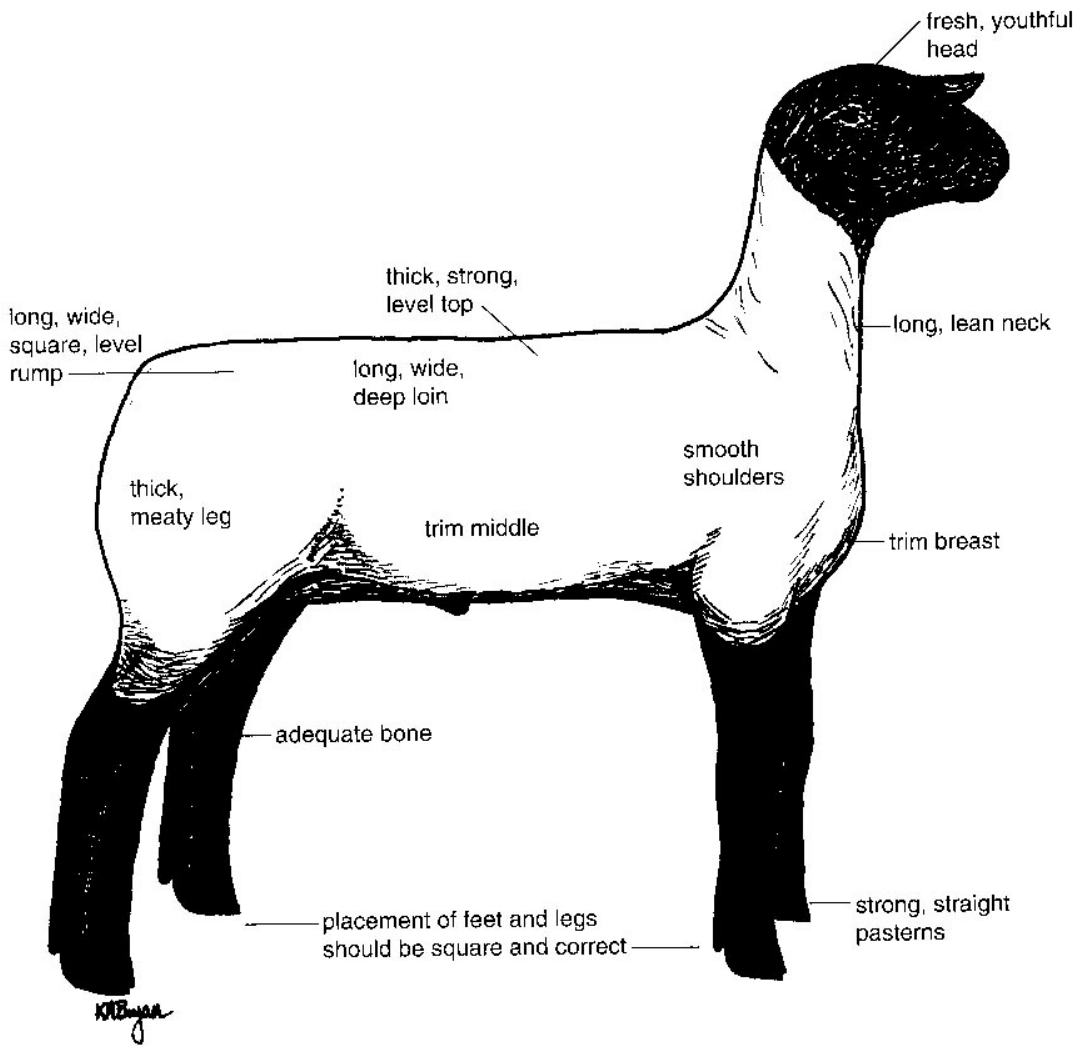


Figure 3. Ideal Market Wether



	NORMAL RANGE	AVERAGE	IDEAL
Live weight (lb.)	85 - 145	110.0	120.0
Dressing percent	45 - 58	52.0	52.0
Fat thickness (in.)	.05 - .60	.30	.12
Ribeye area (sq. in.)	1.5 - 3.2	2.25	2.80
KP fat percent	1.5 - 6.0	3.5	2.0
Leg score	low Good - high Prime	avg Choice	low Prime

Adapted from *Live Animal Carcass Evaluation and Selection Manual*, 4th edition, 1993, Donald L. Boggs and Robert A. Merkel.

Livestock judging

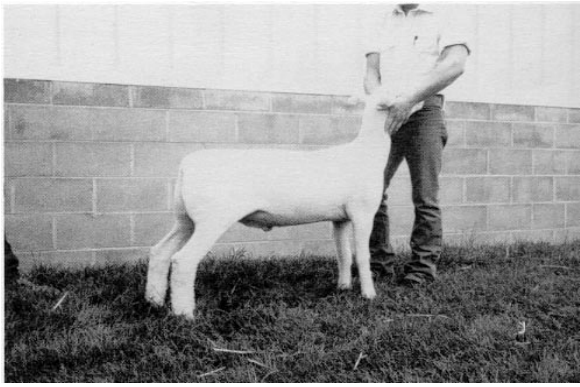
Now that you know why we judge livestock, what the major breeds of livestock are, what they look like, and the external parts, you can begin to appreciate why it takes considerable practice to become a good judge of livestock. Before you start judging livestock, try to make a mental image of the perfect animal. You can do this by recalling the most desirable features of the high-quality animals that you have seen and thinking of them as belonging to one animal. You can also study pictures of champions, show reports, current livestock magazines, or “ideal-type” pictures from the breed associations.

Each time you judge a class of livestock or analyze a group of livestock, you should rely on a system of observing the animals. Listed below are a few pointers for judging a class or group of livestock:

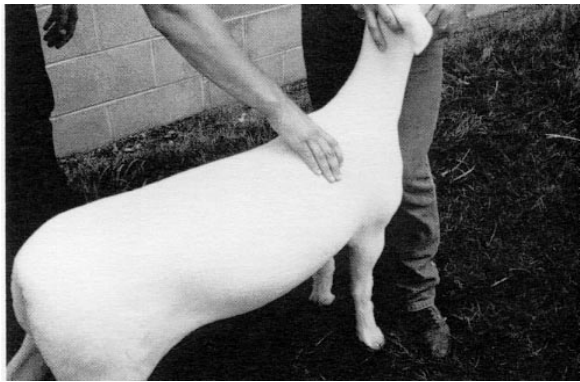
1. Stand back—Allow enough room between yourself and the animals so that you can see all animals at one time. Usually, 25 to 30 feet is a good distance from which to view the class. You should become skilled in placing the classes from a distance and handle the animals only to confirm your observations. It is a mistake to place a class only with the hands. Market lambs are often placed on visual appraisal and handling.
2. Three angles—Try to look at the class from the side, front, and rear. Compare each animal to the others in the class and to the “ideal” animal that you have pictured in your mind.
3. Big things first—Always look for and analyze the good and bad characteristics of each animal, in major areas such as: frame size, volume, condition, muscling, structural correctness, movement, and breed character. Learn to study the animals carefully. Concentrate on the parts where we get the high-priced cuts. A keen judge of livestock is orderly and never haphazard. Make your placings according to the big things, unless a pair of animals is very similar, in which case you must analyze the minor differences between the animals.
4. Close inspection— When you are near the animals for close inspection or handling, you should simply confirm the decisions you made at a distance. If an animal appears or handles differently than what it looked like from a distance, and if the difference merits consideration, then change your decision. During close inspection of sheep, move quietly and cautiously so the animals don’t become nervous or excited. The following section deals with the preferred method of handling sheep:

Handling market lambs

One key to handling market lambs is to develop a system to accurately determine differences in muscle and finish. Each lamb should be handled in the same manner. If you handle one lamb from rear to front for finish or fleshing on the back, handle all lambs that way.



The way the sheep stands will affect what you are able to feel. The sheep should be standing squarely on all four feet while it is being handled.



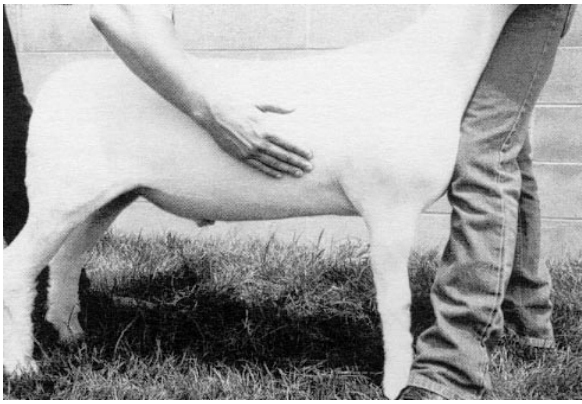
With your fingers extended and together, check the width and smoothness of the top of his shoulders.



Handle the topline of the lamb for finish and muscle. Begin by evaluating the width, spread of muscle, and firmness of finish directly behind the shoulders.



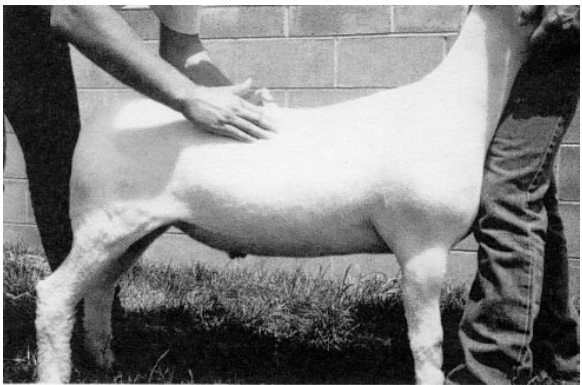
Continue down the topline of the lamb. End by evaluating width of the loin and rump.



Next, check for finish over the rib of the lamb by starting in his lower forerib.



Continue handling toward the last rib of the lamb.



The final location used to determine finish of a lamb is at the last rib. Lambs should feel trimmer at the last rib compared with the forerib. Trim. Muscular lambs are firm and hard when handled. Fat lambs are soft to the touch, and you will find it is difficult to distinguish the bones of the shoulder, spine, and ribs.



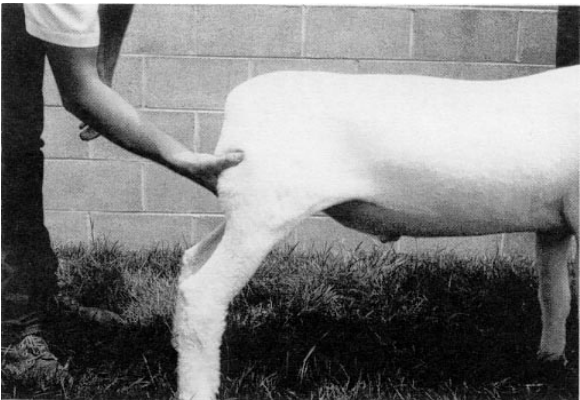
Evaluate muscle dimension of the high-priced regions of the lamb by grasping the loin and checking for width and depth.



Handle for length of loin by placing your fingertips at the last rib and determining where the lamb's hooks fall on your hand or forearm. The three dimensions –width, depth, length- contribute to the total volume of muscle in the loin, which is one of the more valuable cuts.



Next, handle the lamb for width and length of rump.



Determine the size of the leg and the amount and firmness of inside and outside muscling by grasping the leg firmly at the stifle region. Using one hand, or both hands, press firmly with the fingers meeting on the inside. The leg should be firm and heavily muscled, and the muscle should extend toward the hock.

Summary

Evaluating livestock is a skill that takes many years and much practice to perfect. After purchasing your first livestock it may take years to breed a group of animals that best fits your needs. Be sure to stay current with industry standards as you work toward your goal.

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