

Road to the Royal

From the days the lambs are born, we manage the flock to maximize their growth potential.

It is morning and evening chores, late suppers during hay and straw harvest and middle-of-the-night trips to the barn to deliver a potential champion that make it all worth the effort.

Lambing is timed to start when we return home from the Royal in anticipation for next year. Top genetic and conformation selection is where it starts. Managing the farms' three flocks of Texels, Polled Dorsets and our son's Suffolk separately optimizes each breed's potential.

To fit animals for the Royal, we shear six weeks ahead of show day, this ensures the wool will not be too long yet have enough length to be fresh and clean. We check health, conformation fitness, trim feet and wash and blanket them, to keep them clean in the weeks leading to the show penning them together in preparation for the day we head to Toronto for the week. It is a family effort with animals in and out of the pens, to get them accustomed and trained for show takes more hours.

Fingers so cold they won't bend is part of the ritual of washing sheep for the royal. The ramp leads up to the expanded metal floor which rolls up and down of the custom-made wash tank. A neck piece holds the sheep's head. The floor drops; thrashing water splashes as the sheep is submerged in the heated tank water. We use the same Orvus soap that textile conservators use for the wool to conserve the lanolin. The contrast of warm water and minus 5 degrees with snowflakes landing on your face make for a long afternoon. Washed, rinsed and blow out salon style with an industrial air blower, the blankets go on to protect the work to this point, then back to their pens. A second set of blankets will be swapped out after the fleece has been shaped and contoured for the show. The process will take hours for each one. The schedule for shearing the string of show sheep has been carefully planned to ensure the fleece has time to grow back to a length to look fresh and neat. Gone are the days of showing the sheep in 5 inches of wool which would take weeks to dry and trim.

The ongoing process of packing the truck and trailer with grain, hay, straw, tack for the show and ourselves seems endless. Double check the pedigrees, business cards, advertising, pen cards to display are checked off the to-do list. Toronto accommodations confirmed and hired help to take care of chores are checked as well.

Leaving in the middle of the night and arriving in Toronto takes planning for the delicate balance of moving in while the other livestock moves out is tricky. Bed the pens, set up the feed and tack pen, set-up pen farm display and let the animals rest for a day before showing. We are now ready for seven exhausting days of Tradition.