

# Market Lamb Evaluation

The trend in judging market lambs across the United States over the past decade or more has been one of putting pressure on selecting lambs with a “Modern Look”. There are many ways to express this; clean, smooth, trim and etc. The problem is as this movement has evolved, the show ring has moved away from lambs, for the most part, that will yield a carcass useful for the processor and the consumer. There has been and continues to be great discussion on this matter, with all sides believing they are correct. Every judge needs to keep in mind what the quality of the “**END PRODUCT**” will be of the lambs they are naming champion. Many will say the show ring has nothing to do with the packer or the real world, sorry this is shallow thinking. The industry responsible for preparing this lamb for our consumer needs to be heard. If lambs that come from a show ring background are not fit to be eaten unless they are fed an additional 30 to 60 days, then something is dreadfully wrong. The other problem created with continuing to select these very clean, trim, tubular lambs is we develop a mind set in our youth that performance is not important, instead we emphasis programs of how to manipulate, exercise and hold the project at a given weight for extended periods of time. Another concern many sheep producers have, as they observe the present day show lamb industry, is the poor perception it establishes in the minds of those looking at it from the outside. Growth is the most important factor determining profit for any commercial lamb producer, how can it be that were are teaching our youth that selecting for slow growth in their lambs will make the project more manageable. I do believe there has been a gradual movement during recent years to add more volume to our show lambs. Several Midwestern states have added performance or derby classes for the youth divisions, which terminate in a carcass competition as well. I applaud this movement, it brings a balanced educational value back into the lamb project for youth, allowing them to gain a broader grasp of the true lamb industry.

My thoughts on market lamb evaluation are molded by over three decades of working with the beef industry as an educator along with running a flock of Suffolks during that same time frame. Whenever you set out to evaluate anything you must have some guidelines or goals, this “ideal” in the back of your mind, is what you are looking to find as you approach each class to be judged. The prototype of your “ideal lamb” will depend on your training and background, but I encourage you to always keep the “End Product” in your thoughts.

## Weight/Size

The weight of market lambs has been steadily increasing over the past thirty years. It depends on the market you sell to but generally speaking the packer wants lambs weighing in a range of: **135-150 pounds or more**. These heavier lambs cost the same to harvest plus they produce more pounds of product to be merchandised and hopefully will yield larger rib and loin cuts for the consumer. Problem is that many of the lambs weighting 140 pounds (a weight many judges feel the industry is looking to procure), having been held, will dress upwards of 60% or more. Thus these lambs yield carcasses that end up being larger then many of the packers can fit into their case ready trays, cuts being too large. I not sure a judge needs to rule out lighter lambs as they select their champions but rather select the most ideal lamb from the show that day which possesses the most positive traits they are looking to find. You should understand the market, which is represented by the region or area, which you are judging. Keep in mind that heavier lambs require additional frame to balance their weight. Lambs that possess scale along with being structurally correct, naturally wide standing, maintaining muscling on excellent bone, to go along with their added frame, should be competitive, plus these are lambs that usually have grown well.

## Muscle

The emphasis placed on muscle should be paramount. These are red meat animals and are destine for the food chain. Lambs should have well-muscled tops starting with a pronounced full rack followed by an expressive loin region which carries into a thick, level rump and square dock. The loin needs to indicate depth as well as width and length. Today, our packers are putting more emphasis on the size of the rib eye muscle, measured between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> rib. We need to **keep the REA's near or exceeding 3 square inches** and many of today's lambs fall short of this mark. The forearm muscle is a good indicator of a lamb's total muscle along with the stifle muscle, which should be the widest portion of a lamb (center of the

leg). When lambs are shown slick shorn, it is relatively easy to evaluate the fullness of the leg, along with its depth. Once again, length of body and of hindsaddle are very important when evaluating the preferred muscle of a lamb.

### **Finish**

A champion lamb must have good handling qualities. Many judges have been very aggressive on selecting lambs with around a tenth of an inch (measured at the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> rib again). Most textbooks would concur that an ideal finish for market lambs should be .1 to .15 of an inch, however if we listen to the packing industry, they will tell us this is too lean. Preferred rib fat from their perspective would be **.2 to .25 of an inch** which would be a top end yield grade two lamb. The very lean lambs will dehydrate and lose weight in the cooler and during transit. It may require 7-10 days from the time a lamb is harvested until it reaches the meat counter. True the consumer wants a lean product but they also want a quality eating experience. Fat adds flavor and juiciness, a fact we should observe from the beef industry, plus a problem the pork industry is currently addressing to correct. Lambs need to be uniform in their cover, not exhibiting excess finish like what is sometimes found around the tail, lower rib cage, breast and flank areas. Most judges prefer lambs to handle firm or hard, but I doubt once on the rail most could tell the difference. Remember the consumer and “End Product”. Very firm lambs to the touch, for the most part, will eat dry and tough. I have included a second paper in the packet, written by Jim Jensen, which refers to work done at Utah State University on this exact topic. This has been a very eye opening study bringing to light that many of the top lambs fail to offer the quality and value found in lambs placed down the line.

### **General Body Conformation**

I like to compare the side-profile of a lamb to that of a **balanced rectangle**. The lamb has to have three dimensions; length, width and depth. Yes, I said depth, these are ruminants and must possess adequate volume or the balanced rectangle will not be complete. I don't feel we have a good practical kind of lamb unless it possesses some uniform body capacity. From the side view, the total blending of parts can be evaluated. A lamb should express eye-appeal, which of course will be a subjective call. Every judge will not view style with the same criteria and it can take on a mind of its own, steering us away from practicality. The shoulder region is very important and many judges want the lamb to have very little. This will not be a functional animal representing parents that any breeder would want to maintain twelve months of the year. The shoulder should be laid in neatly, but when you stand in front of the lamb, you need to see some width of chest, smooth breast and enough power to pull a massive caboose. I like to see the neck come out of the top of the shoulder and I do not worry about how long and refined the neck is, very few high priced cuts come from here. I want to see length in the hindsaddle, including length of rump, which is another measure of the lamb's leg volume. Remember length is more important than height. Daylight does not weigh much over the scale. When lambs are walked, structurally correct lambs will rise to the top. When lambs are braced, many will appear very similar, that is when movement can help sort the class.

### **Final Thoughts**

Livestock projects serve the growth and development of our youth in many ways. The positives far exceed the negatives and I can't think of a more enjoyable way for livestock families to grow together, developing responsible young adults to assume leadership roles in tomorrow's agriculture. We as adults and as judges have a responsibility to these youth to make sure the show ring is **positive, educational and a building process for their future**.

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