Twenty seven years ago I took on a 600 ha block of scrub, with only 40 ha in pasture. My only substantial assets were youthful enthusiasm and my wife. With a development program Perendales were the fashionable choice of the day, but sale-yard returns made me look to another breed. A Border Leicester cross (now called Coopworths) proved disastrous, leaving only the Romney.

At that period the few Romney breeders who were production orientated were fully booked for flock rams, but had no demand for stud rams. By paying £50 more than flock ram price, I was able to buy the highest index ram for sale in the country. Having selected 5 year olds that had never missed a lamb and had high wool weights, and in those days the few 2 tooths that had twins, I was in business breeding my own rams. For less than 40 man/hours/year, I probably made half today's genetic progress with 10% of the work load.

Unfortunately I then became interested in sheep breeding. For the next 10 years this exercise probably cost the farm $2,000 p.a. My wife in her more kindly moments used to say, "It is his form of relaxation, and better than grog or racehorses." It is my belief that in New Zealand few stud operations return financially as much as could be expected if the owner put the same drive and energy into orthodox farming. The catch is that ram breeding like racehorses offers a mythical jackpot that keeps us working, where an efficient money making machine wouldn't.

Since we are in an isolated farming district, I could not expect ram sales without a hard selling campaign. This left me with no option but to concentrate on genetics. In conjunction with other farmers in the areas, we screened our flocks for 2 tooths that produced twins, or 2 tooths with the top body and wool weights. Initially the "contributors" stock was embarrassingly good but today it is doubtful if their genetic contribution out-weighs the trouble and the risk of introducing disease. What was vital in the early days was a body of men behind me that considered I was sound. These men contributed multiples of 4 ewes for 1 ram taken home, but most took extra rams at market price.

Sheeplan (a national recording scheme run by the M.A.F.) has been the basis of our recording. However with us winters are kinder than further South, but summers are erratic and harsh, so we place greater emphasis on growth rate particularly through the hard autumn period than does Sheeplan. With immunisation just around the corner this may have been shrewd. Also the Sheeplan index is worked out on gross returns. We consider net returns would place wool a bit higher, and like most farmers make allowance for this.

So long as I am involved in ram breeding all sheep will be run as near to commercial flock conditions as possible. Except for tupping and lambing the elite ewes are run in one mob with the commercial ewes. After weaning in November all ewe, wether, and ram lambs are run in one mob of over 2,000. Unlike your Merino the Romney is territorial, and the potentially more valuable ram lambs in particular would do better if set stocked on top quality pasture. However the ram hoggets that fail are not the ones we want.

Also 22 years ago I stopped intensively shepherding the ewes at lambing. This decision was based on a study of my diaries which suggested that while the work was emotionally very rewarding, a generous allowance for the value of stock saved didn't return labourers' rates of pay. Although I went from intensive shepherding to nothing, you could not tell from my diary on stock losses which season I changed. After 10 years the ewe losses at lambing fell to negligible numbers, and orphan lambs "that could have been saved" have gone.

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However after 10 years the rams were worth selling. A traditional stud stock agent said, "You are too far from markets to be worth bringing clients, but even so I don't know where I could place such rubbish". We got no further interest from orthodox selling channels until I had a full order book from my own efforts. This would be the experience of most men who in the early 60's tried to put population genetics into practice. Today I don't know one who is a viable ram breeding enterprise without initially doing his own marketing. One I know put his unsaleable rams on a trailer, called on farmers offering two free, if they gave the rams a fair go.

Our solution was to take a commercial stand at the National Agricultural Field-days. We select from all our 4 tooths 20 typical even looking sheep, and then select the top 4 on genetic merit and the bottom 4 on genetic merit. Often the best looking sheep have reared mediocre singles and so are the lowest genetically.

Deliberately I have not included hard facts. It would be easy to run up pseudo-scientific tables showing for example how we have increased lambing over 30%, (which we have) and the dishonest inference that "genetics" alone did it wouldn't harm ram sales, but doesn't allow for other improvements. After 20 years I am only certain of 2 things.

1. The only dramatic improvement has been in things that cannot be measured. We have a free moving, easily mustered sheep, free lambing, and more adapted to the pressure of modern farming.

2. My wife and I have a base flock and the basic skills to start and make progress.

One unscientific fact that must be understood about farmers is that to us choosing a breed, a strain or a ram is like selecting a wife (or husband). The first essential is LOVE. A woman can be a bitch, but if you love her, you'll still probably get value for money. However no matter how talented she is, if you don't love her you've got problems.

Financially "successful" stud men have always known this, and learn to keep a straight face whilst otherwise intelligent men go through a weird courting dance to select their rams. Over the last few years I have noticed that our agricultural extension workers are taking into account our frailty in this direction. In strange contrast, there have been no suggested improvements in our chaotic matrimonial selection procedures.