

A guide to showing Hebridean Sheep - Vicky Mason (mostly) with Gordon Johnston

VM. If you haven't shown animals before, or indeed if you are familiar only with another breed or species, the thought of showing your Hebrideans can be a bit daunting, so we have produced these guidelines which we hope may inspire some more members out there to have a go. You don't need to start at the top end (Royal Highland, Great Yorkshire etc.) as more and more local shows are putting on Rare/Traditional breed classes, and even though we are no longer a Rare Breed as such, they are usually glad of our entries, especially if they have classes for Primitive breeds. These can be a nice friendly introduction to a fun pastime.

GJ. In an ideal world, we would all be showing sheep straight off the hill, as indeed still happens at a number of shows particularly in Scotland. Preparation here consists of picking the worst of the vegetation off the fleece and that's it. Nothing else, no shiny horns, no halters, nothing. However, at major shows, the competitive spirit comes to the fore along with an urge to show sheep at their best. So here are some guidelines to help everyone do just that.

Horns

VM. The question of whether horns should be oiled has always been left to the individual. Plenty of successful show animals have been shown without oiling, but I personally believe that the head is set off by a moderate amount of oil on the horns. On a ewe it adds to the attractive appearance, and on a ram it can tidy up the scuff marks and fighting scars, as well as just giving a clean overall appearance. Please don't overdo this either – the judges will not enjoy having gallons of hoof oil wiped over them, and ideally it should be applied the day before, to allow time for it to sink in. (Baby oil is more user-friendly). Whilst some may consider oiling to be outside the term of "natural", it is again only giving the appearance, albeit enhanced, of the animal when wet.

GJ. I am not keen on using black polish or oil on horns. To my eyes this can give them a cheap plastic look. But that's just my view.

Fleece

VM. "Animals should not be backed down, trimmed or excessively brushed" – so read our only showing rules, but why, and what is deemed acceptable in the showing?

The idea is that Hebrideans should be shown in a "natural" state, but this does not have to mean straight from the field with no attempt at enhancement. As Exhibitors it is up to us to exhibit the sheep to their best advantage within the rules, not just with an aim to winning prizes, but to show the rest of the sheep world what an attractive and practical breed they are. "Backing down" (as practised in Down breeds) would change the shape of the animal, and that, together with trimming would also destroy the natural appearance of the fleece. Anyone who has ever tried to really brush a Heb will know that the end result resembles a fluffy cartoon sheep, ready to take off in the first wind and it also completely ruins the structure of the fleece. Ideal preparation would involve standing the animals outside in a heavy thunderstorm the day before the show, followed by gentle breeze and sunshine to do the drying. This is the "natural" effect we are trying to achieve, but the elements are not always that obliging, so to that end, judicious use of the waterspray is acceptable, both to refresh the fleece after travelling, add some shine and, lets face it, they always appear blacker when wet! Don't overdo it, as the drowned rat look doesn't improve them a lot.

GJ. Finally, the fleece should not be oiled or coloured. Judges will notice if their hands are black or oily and take appropriate note. And try and be neat with the dagging and/or crutching.

Halters

VM. Be aware that at some (securely fenced!) shows, the judge may want the animals to run free in the ring, and may ask for halters/headcollars to be removed. Again, don't worry as everyone will help with the subsequent rounding-up. We have agreed that in the interest of safety, headcollars may be left on rams. Once in the line-up, the decision as to whether or not to show on halters is left up to you, but as the aim is to show the correct conformation of the animal, you should be aware that getting a sheep to stand properly whilst being held under the chin can take as much work as halter-training, and animals must not be dragged around by the horns! Finally, if you are unsure of anything, watch or ask those who have been doing it for a long time, they will be pleased to help, and will I hope, encourage you to participate.

GJ. If you are going to show your sheep on halters, try and get your sheep used to being haltered before the show. They have this dreadful habit of lying upside down in the show ring if they have just been haltered for the first time. To see this in action, watch the Shetland lamb classes!

Handling

GJ. The sheep should be haltered or held under the chin and in a way that permits the judge to assess the sheep. Standing astride the sheep (as has happened) obstructs the judge and may result in the sheep not being judged.

Shearing etc.

VM. The judge is not going to be fooled into putting a bad animal up by these preparations, but it gives a better overall impression of the class to the world at large, and demonstrates pride in one's stock. Quite honestly, with the improvement in the standard of show sheep over the years, some classes can be almost impossible to judge and it can just be the little details that catch the judge's eye and make a sheep stand out from the crowd. These light improvements would not come into the category of "faking", but note that applying any blackening products to the fleece would do so and is not allowed. Remember that all judges are different, and judging will often boil down to a matter of personal taste, so the placings are not going to be the same at every outing, even if all the entries happen to be the same. The sheep change throughout the season too. An animal with good conformation but a less good fleece will obviously do better earlier in the season when the wool is short and the structure less evident, whereas one with a stunning fleece can star later on. Take care with your shearing, remove any tramlines and ideally try to shear at least 4 weeks before the first show. Don't panic if you don't manage this - our uncertain climate has resulted in occasional exhibits arriving straight from the shearing shed. A rooed fleece can look great at early shows, but can look a bit tatty towards the end of the season. For early shows, check the small print in the schedule as to rules regarding shearing - it may not be required.