

Lincoln/East Adams County Weekly 4-H Article

By Randy Williams, Lincoln/East Adams 4-H Program Coordinator



Article VII

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Market Lamb Showmanship (Part II)

Bracing

After lambs have learned to lead without a halter and to place their feet correctly each time they are stopped, you are ready to begin training your lamb to brace. In the braced position,



Figure 1. Correct hand, knee, and feet placement by the showman is critical to effectively brace a lamb. A = ideal for smaller showman, B = ideal for intermediate showman, C = ideal for larger showman, D and E = hands and knees are correct, but keep feet in front of lamb instead of potentially sticking out in the way of the judge or other showmen.

the lamb's muscles are tensed and its body feels firm, not soft. A firm handling lamb is more desirable because softness tends to indicate that an animal is fat. Teaching a lamb to brace can be one of the most frustrating parts of training. Some lambs naturally brace when pressure is properly applied to the chest, but most lambs tend to move backward. To properly brace an animal, the showman's hands, knees, and feet must be positioned correctly. This will differ based on the showman's size and what feels more comfortable and natural (Figure 1). Use the combination of hand, knee, and foot positioning that works best for you and the lamb. Techniques may change as the showman becomes taller and stronger. Examples A, B, and C in Figure 1 are the most desirable show positions. Examples D and E can create problems because the showman's foot can become an obstacle to another showman and the judge. In addition, the showman cannot apply as much pressure from those positions as from A, B, or C. The most effective way to brace a lamb is to use what feels most comfortable and natural to the showman while getting the best possible brace from the lamb. The lamb's front feet can be lifted slightly off of the ground to set them or to cue the beginning of a brace; however, **all four feet should remain on the ground when the desired show look is achieved.**

Be careful not to choke the lamb or hinder its breathing by applying too much pressure directly down the middle portion of its neck. If a lamb begins to pull its head downward or seems to be trying to cough, immediately remove all pressure from its neck. Some lambs may begin to tremble slightly, but will return to normal in a few seconds without harm. The most effective way to teach a lamb to brace requires a combination of techniques. First, the lamb's feet should be positioned properly on the corners of his body. Second, the showman's hands, knees, and feet also must be in the correct positions. Third, apply pressure by placing the knee into the lamb's shoulder and chest. Never pull the lamb forward, but always push toward the lamb. At first, the lamb will probably step backward. If that happens, lift or squeeze the lamb's dock and apply enough pressure to make it move forward. Allow the animal to take several steps



forward, then stop and repeat. This exercise may require the help of another person, but should be the most effective.

Continue practicing until the lamb begins to respond by bracing against the pressure applied by the showman.

Teaching a lamb to brace requires time and PATIENCE! It is natural for the animal to move away from pressure, not toward it. Never try to force a lamb to brace downhill. Instead, position the lamb so he is on level footing or facing uphill to practice bracing. That position is more natural for the animal.

Another training method involves placing a lamb on a platform just high enough so he thinks nothing is below him. A trimming stand works well for this method. Some showmen may choose to set the stand in an inclined position. Brace the lamb, and as he steps backward and cannot feel solid ground, he will tend to push against the showman. When he does this, allow the lamb to move forward, and repeat the steps until he does not step backward. Make sure the platform is high enough to be effective, yet low enough to assure the safety of the lamb and showman. Some trainers push a lamb backward into a fence or wall where the animal cannot step back. While this can be effective, it should be attempted only after trying the other methods discussed, and with care to avoid possible injury to the lamb. Another method involves backing lambs into a water puddle to teach them to brace, because sheep tend to avoid water. This might be effective, but again, try other methods first. Bracing is a critical part of showmanship, so showmen must make sure lambs learn to brace. Just as people are right- or left-handed, lambs are right or left dominant. Determine which side is the dominant side, and use it to your advantage when bracing your lamb. Bracing lambs for an extended period will increase the endurance of both lamb and showman. Practice bracing for one minute, then two minutes, and finally three minutes.

At-home practice

As lambs begin to master the training, showmen should practice show ring techniques. Ask parents, siblings, friends, or volunteer leaders to act as "judges." This will allow you and your lamb to test your skills as a show team. A lamb should be comfortable when handled by a

judge, so the more this can be practiced, the less likely that the lamb will act out in the show ring. Practice moving the lamb from one location to another. Master the ability to change from one side of the animal to the other at the appropriate time to keep the animal between the showman and judge. This movement will be beneficial in the show ring.

Show Time

Preparing to show

Preparing for a show involves attention to details that vary depending on the show. For example, much more preparation will be required before a state fair than a local show. Always consider the basics of animal food, water, and shelter. Calculate the amount of feed required while traveling and at the show. Use a container that is easily transported and will keep the feed clean and dry. Be sure to carry a little extra. Collect measuring devices, buckets, and feed troughs that will be needed at the show.

Take water from home. Animals can detect differences in water, just as humans can, and could refuse to drink. This will cause the animal to become dehydrated, and it will hurt its performance. Some exhibitors use a flavor additive to attempt to mask the differences in water. If you try this method, begin adding the flavoring to the water at home at least two weeks before the show. Teach lambs to drink from a bucket, and use that bucket at the show. Sheep are creatures of habit, and they begin to stress when habits are broken. Try to maintain stability in their routine by using the same water buckets and feed troughs used at home.

After arriving at the show, allow lambs to drink. Halter and walk them for 10 to 15 minutes to familiarize them with the environment and help them relax. Some shows have restrictions where animals are permitted, so be aware and follow rules that designate restricted areas. After walking the lambs, put them in their pen, and allow them to lie down and relax. When possible, try to minimize traffic through the area to ensure the animals' comfort. Feed lambs at the same time they would have been fed at home. Walk them 10 to 15 minutes every three to four hours to keep them healthy and energetic. This schedule may be altered according to the weight and condition of the lamb. If they are kept in a barn, take them outside – or at least to the doorway, if rules restrict leaving the building – so they are exposed to fresh air. If lambs are kept in their trailer during a show, be sure to keep them cool in hot conditions.

Credit:

Brian R. Faris, *Market Lamb Showmanship from Start to Finish*, Kansas State University, July 2008.

Additional resources related to 4-H Sheep Projects:

<https://pubs.wsu.edu/ListItems.aspx?CategoryID=288>

<http://www.4-hmall.org/Category/sheep.aspx>

Randy Williams

Lincoln/Adams 4-H Program Coordinator, Washington State University Extension

Office: (509)725-4171 Ext. 19 fax: (509)725-4104 randy.williams@wsu.edu

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