

# On The Farm

## Joker who thinks outside square

The New Zealand Ewe Hogget Competition has gone from strength to strength in its 20-year history and has become the benchmark by which the sheep industry can measure its progress. **Rob Tipa** talks to one of the founders.

**G**eorge Fletcher has had a grandstand view of the evolution of the New Zealand sheep industry from a lifetime of involvement as a West Otago sheep breeder, international show judge and a national and international sheep industry leader.

As one of the founders of the New Zealand Ewe Hogget Competition and national convener for 15 years, he has also had a hand in shaping the future of the industry.

Fletcher believes the competition has raised the bar for sheep farmers nationally and has led to a steady improvement in sheep production and ewe efficiency in the last 20 years.

On a personal level, the contest appealed to him because it helped the industry pick up quickly on new trends in sheep breeding.

"I've always been a joker that thinks a little bit outside the square," he says. While he had always focused on production, he changed the type of sheep he bred based on what he had seen judging stock around the country.

He says successive winners of the contest were all exceptional farmers, innovators and industry leaders in the top 10 or 20 per cent of their business.

"Competition is very tight and we often get a lot of entries that are very close," he says. "Unless your lambing percentage is quite reasonable you haven't got a show of winning it."

"Usually the winner is clear-cut and stands out for some particular reason."

A Gisborne farmer, one of only four North Island winners of the contest, is one winner who stood out as a game-changer during Fletcher's term as national convener.

"He lambed 170 per cent, his



West Otago sheep breeder George Fletcher checks a mob of coopworth stud ewes at Ashaig Farm near Heriot against a backdrop of the Blue Mountains.

average lamb carcassweight was 17.5kg and he shored 7kg of wool," he recalls. "Those figures really stood out in my mind because it was a great benchmark for the industry at that time."

Other ewe hogget competition winners found their success was a great marketing tool for selling rams and they often fetched a premium for their stock.

When the national ewe hogget competition started in 1996, lambing percentages were commonly around 120 to 130 per cent for breeds other than fine wool sheep.

Fletcher says the industry has made huge progress in the last 20 years with lambing percentages now commonly between 140 and 180 per cent.

Similarly, lamb carcassweights averaging between 14 and 15kg in 1996 have improved to between 17 and 20kg today.

Although the national sheep flock has dropped steadily in recent years, the increase in the average carcassweights of lambs over the years has partly offset the drop in total lamb exports.

The biggest changes Fletcher has witnessed are the move away from traditional sheep breeds to composite breeds and a decline in the value of the wool clip.

"With the advent of exotic sheep breeds in New Zealand, wool quality has slipped, but in the last year or two with wool prices picking up, wool quality has come back a little bit."

"It costs you the same to take off a 7kg fleece as it does to shear a sheep with a 3kg fleece," he says.

George Fletcher has sheep farming in his blood and knew the direction his career would take from an early age.

"I remember when I was a kid the day of a big stock sale in Heriot," he says. "My father said I could have the day off school to help the truck drivers load up all the sheep. Someone gave me half a crown and I thought I was made."

His father originally came out to New Zealand from the Isle of Skye in Scotland when he was 19 and bought a small dairy farm near Wyndham milking about 40 cows.

He progressed to a larger sheep farm on rolling hill country at Heriot, which George took over and has farmed all his life. The family farm is now run by his son Fraser.

Although George is now living in Cromwell in Central Otago, he still looks after a coopworth stud

ewe flock on an 80ha Heriot property next to his daughter and son-in-law's farm.

Regional ewe hogget competitions had been running successfully in West Otago, Southland and the Taieri for several years when Fletcher first floated the idea for a national competition at a Royal Agriculture Society meeting in the mid 1990s.

Society chairman Willy Mitchell, of Wyndham, backed the concept but support from the society's annual meeting was "half-hearted" as some members preferred a two-tooth ewe competition. Fletcher thought that a two-tooth ewe contest would reward the best-fed flocks whereas a ewe hogget competition offered a better gauge of the genetic potential of a flock and would reward consistency of breeding.

So Fletcher, Mitchell and a prospective sponsor of the event sat down at the Canterbury A and P Show one afternoon and came up with a plan to launch a national ewe hogget competition.

"We decided it was all go so we wrote the rules on a serviette and those rules are still in place today," Fletcher says. "They haven't changed."

He admits in its first year it was a "simple, South Island-

based seat-of-the-pants competition", initially run under the auspices of the New Zealand Sheep Breeders' Association.

Judges started in Southland and travelled north through Otago, Canterbury, Nelson and back to Christchurch, accompanied by competitors who tagged along to compare their flocks with those of other entrants.

"Sometimes they arrived before us and they were scoring sheep too, which was a good education for them," Fletcher says. "It got them off their own patch and looking at what others were doing."

The contest took off, video clips of every flock were shown at the annual prize-giving and the Royal Agriculture Society eventually got in behind it. Since then, the competition has steadily evolved into a benchmark for sheep breeders to gauge their progress and standing on a national stage.

Fletcher was national convener of the New Zealand Ewe Hogget Competition for 15 years, has judged sheep all over the world and served a term as president of the New Zealand Sheep Breeders' Association and was chairman of the World Sheep and Wool Congress in Quebec in 2002.

## Wanted: Modest unsung heroes of the north

By **ROB TIPPA**

Kiwi farmers are famous for hiding their achievements under their hats.

Organisers of the annual New Zealand Ewe Hogget Competition are keen to entice some of these unsung heroes of the sheep industry out of the shadows by entering their flocks in the 2016 awards.

National convener Stephen Rabbidge said the competition's greatest potential for growth was

in the North Island and organisers would like to see more entries from the top half of the country.

"There are many unsung heroes doing an outstanding job and we'd like to see a lot more of these modest, high-achieving farmers, who deserve recognition for their efforts," he said.

The annual competition started in Southland and West Otago and traditionally has attracted strong regional support from this area. The

national contest attracts between 250 and 300 flocks throughout the country every year.

North Island sheep breeders have won the national final on several occasions and organisers would welcome a better balance of entries between North and South Islands.

Ideally they would like to see enough entries to run regional finals throughout the country with regional winners going on to the national final, a similar

structure to the Young Farmer of the Year contest.

Rabbidge says the success of the competition is based on the organisers' basic philosophy of encouraging all farmers to enter.

"Fundamentally, it's still a hogget competition so we're judging sheep that are the result of good feeding and good breeding. We want to keep the competition simple so anyone can enter," he said.

The standard of competition

has improved every year, reflecting the rapid progression of the sheep industry generally and the diverse range of new breeds now competing in the crossbred section and composite sections.

"The level is very high and by and large the winner usually picks themselves because of their exceptional productivity and the systems they have in place," he said.

Farmers have till the end of March to enter.