

A GUIDE FOR THE OWNER PRESENTING RAMS FOR INSPECTION

Aim :

The aim of ram inspection is to select rams that have the constitution for breeding and features that will maintain and fix the breed characteristics in their offspring.

It is not the aim to select show rams although some will obviously be so.

Constitution:

The inspectors will look for:

sound mouth - over and under shot jaws that prevent a proper bite.

legs - 'one at each corner', rams that walk narrow, have cow hocks or weak pasterns will be rejected

body - a thick neck and deep brisket, broad back with some length is needed. Narrow, pipe gutted rams will be rejected.

size - remember that the Dartmoor is classed a medium sized longwool. At the time of assessment as a lamb it is more a question of deciding on 'proportion' of bone rather than actual size - some lambs are born late, some are twins or even triplets. One needs to envisage the eventual muscling that the lamb's frame will support and the way the legs will mature.

Long legged, thin fine boned rams are not wanted.

condition - a ram will be rejected that is in poor condition; below condition score 2. The poor condition may indicate a genetic problem or be the result of a mineral deficiency, parasites or ill health. Whatever, the cause, if a ram is this poor, at the time of studding, it is unlikely to grow to full potential and make a breeding ram.

testicles - two large even sized testicles are needed. Small testicles will cause lower fertility.

tail - if docked too short it contravenes the law and will be rejected.

If a ram does not pass these criteria it will be rejected, no matter how good the Dartmoor breed points are.

NB ram still in coat - the Association rules state a lamb should be shorn by 1st July.

Only in exceptional circumstances will a ram in coat be considered by inspectors

Breed points

It is important to see the breed points as contributing to the sheep as a whole.

Rejecting a ram that is very good for most points because of one fault is not acceptable practice.

It is the job of the inspector to assess all the breed points and, in the light of experience, make a judgement as to the breeding potential of the ram.

Such a judgement can be difficult to explain - several minor faults might add up and tip the balance for rejection. Because of this inspectors, when pressed to give reasons for their decision, may quote the most obvious fault such as 'too much black' or 'poor wool' when the reality is that their judgement is based on an overall picture drawn from many years of breeding Dartmoor sheep.

The scale of points for Dartmoor sheep is not negotiable.

The numbers of points serve to indicate the importance of a feature within the sheep - thus fleece at 20 points is 20% of the total, equal with the back. Both these features are double the important of ears or legs. The face is weighted at 15%. When making an overall judgement it is important that these weightings are taken into account.

Horns - most Dartmoor sheep are polled. Many do show the presence of stubs / scurs which are allowed. Large, growing horns would not disqualify a ram for breeding alone. However, currently, such horns would not find favour in the show ring.

Depth and distribution of black markings.

Extensive black on nose, eye rings and knees is seen in present day crosses especially Dartmoor x Down breeds.

It is probable that the black markings in Greyface came from crossing with Southham Notts.

The early Dartmoor sheep (1908) showed grey mottles on the nose but the improved sheep has defined black or spotted noses.

Fashion can dictate places in the show ring but it has no place at inspection.

A slight black mark on a knee, a black spot on the eye or a few black hairs on a horn bud does not disqualify an other wise good ram. If, however there were black in all three places it might be rejected, for evidence shows that such rams will concentrate the black in offspring and so move too far from the breed description.

The breed standard does not penalise a plain black muzzle or black on the lower jaw nor does it comment on the intensity of the colour. If there were areas of intense black on the upper and lower jaw it would be rejected for the reasons stated above.

Some sheep have very little black - a spot or two, again this would be acceptable if other features are good. However such markings are often associated with a narrow face and lack of head wool - a 'plain' sheep, which on balance would be rejected.

Ears

'Thick, medium length and **in proportion** to the body'. Photographs from the 1960's show the ears to be shorter than they generally are today. If the ears are big and lack thickness it suggests Devon and Cornwall blood and so rejection then is valid particularly if the wool is fine.

Wool.

Any black in fleece wool or signs of the wool being other than a lustre longwool fleece would cause rejection

The description of the wool in the standard is clearly stated except for the subjective phrases 'curly lustre' and 'good quality'. Thus the requirement that the coat has to be of even quality throughout is easy to assess although difficult to achieve, as the rear thighs tend to have more kemp fibre. Similarly the need for the staple to be wide with good density of fibres at the skin can be accurately determined

However, the degree of curl is a problem as it is variable. It does increase as the coat gets longer and it does increase with age. A tight curl could indicate Whiteface crossing, as could a high lustre. When assessing the fleece it is important that the curl and lustre are linked to the density and quality of fibre. Some curly lustre fleeces lack density and have thin fibres - not what is required for the Dartmoor fleece which evolved to keep the water out.

In Dartmoors' 'good quality' includes strength of fibre; it is thicker and coarser than the Devon and Cornwall fleece. A fine fleece therefore could indicate crossing and would be reason for rejection. (It would not however be rejected by the wool board as they only recognise an overall 'Devon' wool classification.)

The decision on quality is further complicated by

- the timing of inspection - many fleeces are not grown sufficiently, and
- the environment of the sheep - fleeces do differ markedly, especially away from Devon. Here one has to rely on the experience of the inspectors to make a judgement.

At inspection it is important that the inspectors are allowed to carry out their inspection without distractions, so please do not offer your own opinions on the sheep.

Once the inspection is done the inspectors will discuss with you the qualities of the sheep as they see them and give reasons for their decisions.