

## A fresh new attitude to farming

BY JON MORGAN



**HEALTHY ANIMALS:** Whanganui hill country farmer Lindsay Johnstone has been reaping the benefits of a new farming system

There was a time when Whanganui hill country farmer Lindsay Johnstone didn't think much of his sheep.

"What did you hear some blokes calling them - maggot taxis and paddock lice?" he says with a laugh. "Well, I was a lot like that."

But not any more. "I'm a different guy now. Rather than just going through the motions, I've become a lot more enthusiastic. I leap out of bed every morning eager to get into the day."

This turnaround has come since he and wife Maria switched to the farming system Sheep For Profit advocated by Te Awamutu-based farming consultant AgriNetworks.

The system teaches farmers how to tell if their sheep are in sound condition by putting their hands on their backs.

Called condition scoring, it involves placing a palm on a ewe's spine, feeling the ridges, then using the fingers to feel the fat covering the top of the ribs.

Mr Johnstone explains how to score what he finds. He makes a loose fist and runs his finger along the back of his knuckles. That is a four.

Then he moves down to the first row of knuckles on the fingers - three. Then he spreads the knuckles apart and runs his fingers across them - two.

A score of three or slightly better is the aim and shows the sheep is healthy.

Physically laying hands on his sheep has brought him in closer touch with individuals rather than treating them as part of a flock.

Animal health problems have been picked up early enough to be acted on and overall flock health has improved.

Along with the system's emphasis on grazing lambs on only the most nutritious part of a pasture plant - known by the AgriNetworks consultants as the "marshmallow" - it has changed his way of thinking. "I've now got my finger on the farm's pulse," he says.

It has also brought his farming life into balance. Previously, he was more concerned with his cattle than his sheep, although that was hardly surprising.

His family's 60-year-old Ranui angus stud is held in high regard internationally and he and Maria are justifiably proud of their own achievements with the big black cattle.

Their offshoot - Ranui W - was a winner in this year's Steak of Origin contest to find New Zealand's tastiest and tenderest steaks, and they cleaned up the Future Beef Hoof and Hook competition at Beef Expo.

Originally from Te Puke, the couple gave way to the Bay of Plenty dairy boom 20 years ago and followed Mr Johnstone's father, who had been forced out of the same area by kiwifruit 10 years earlier, to the remote hill country behind Kai Iwi, north of Whanganui.

Humans and animals are pushed to their limits on their highly exposed 630-hectare farm, 500 metres above sea level.

It is at the top of a range of jagged hills, and although the paddocks are too uneven for hay to be made, the hollows allow shelter.

The Johnstones have drawn up an environmental plan with the regional council and are planting trees for shade and shelter and to protect erosion-prone hillsides.

On a clear day, the South Island can be seen, and on either side mountains Ruapehu and Taranaki loom large.

Winds can be expected from all directions and are so regular and fierce that electricity generator and retailer TrustPower has installed a monitoring tower to see if a wind-power farm is viable.

Snow is also a regular hazard and the winters are wet and cold. The annual rainfall is 1650 millimetres and Mr Johnstone's soundest investment is American-made wet-weather gear.

In contrast, the farm is summer-safe, with grass growth from October to May, and lambing and calving dates play to this strength.

The couple arrived from Te Puke with their own cattle but took over the farm's 2300 perendale ewes. After three years they decided to change to the bigger romney breed to improve their income.

But that didn't work and after five years they were contemplating a shift back to perendales when they heard that a new farming system was about to be launched.

It was Sheep For Profit, founded by veterinarians Chris Mulvaney and Don MacColl. Mr Johnstone attended a meeting, liked what he heard and signed up.

After looking over the farm, the vets advised the Johnstones to reduce competition for feed by lowering ewe numbers by 130. The flock went into mating in good condition and that year they docked an extra 300 lambs.

"That was pretty impressive," Mr Johnstone says. "My enthusiasm for sheep suddenly changed and I wanted to learn more."

He went to AgriNetworks workshops and studied hard. "I had gone straight on to the farm from school, so this was my university training. I'd come home exhausted from such concentrated learning but all the same it was very enjoyable."

He learnt from the consultants and their retail partners how to get the best from fertiliser and agrichemicals, about animal and plant health and the importance of blood tests and liver biopsies.

He found out how to tell the causes of lamb deaths from autopsies and discovered that the disease toxoplasmosis, treatable by vaccination, was causing abortions.

Maria also became involved in the financial management of their business, learning to use computer programs and planning tools.

The lambing date was put back a month to October to match grass growth and pregnancy scanning instituted. Knowing how many lambs were due enabled them to plan ahead and set their budget.

The results were soon evident.

Lambing percentage jumped from 90 per cent to 103 per cent in the first year and then to 116 per cent a year later. Steady improvement has been made since and now the flock, which has grown to 3000 romneys, is stable at 130 per cent from a scanning of 160 per cent.

Target weights for mating are 60 kilograms for the two-tooths and 65kg for the mixed-aged ewes.

Condition scoring has become an important tool. Ewes are mated at a score of three to four and set-stocked when nearing lambing. If they score under three they get preferential treatment.

He aims to wean lambs at 30-32kg and can count on getting 10 per cent away to the works at 100 days. The remainder go to store sales.

This year, after heavy losses from a vicious storm at lambing, the weather improved markedly and many lambs were weaned at 85 days and all lambs, apart from 800 replacements, were off the farm six weeks early.

The farm's fertility has improved over the years, going from an Olsen P of six to 16, and mobs of sheep and cattle are rotated daily for effective use of the pastures.

The lambs go first to get the "marshmallow" grass, followed by the ewes, which eat the lesser quality. The cattle are used to clean up any browntop and seed heads.

"By the time they all go around a second time the pastures are in such good nick there's more grass for everyone."

The improved grass quality has had the added benefit of reducing drenching for internal parasites.

Lambs get only one drench, in mid-December when they are prepared for shearing, and faecal egg counts determine if they need another.

Apart from that, the ewes have only needed drenching twice in the past eight years. "I have learnt that the best drench is green grass," Mr Johnstone says.

AS HE was coming to appreciate his sheep more, his attention turned away from his stud cattle. However, some successes were still chalked up.

Ranui W Impact was champion of champions at the 1999 Beef Expo and was later sold for \$34,000. In 2002, the stud sold embryos to leading Scottish breeder Netherton Angus that were to provide the genetics for champion bulls at national shows.

At Kai Iwi, the 300 stud cows are farmed under tougher conditions than are likely to be found on any other stud farm, and to keep them at top performance new blood is brought in from throughout the country.

He breeds for fertility, longevity, survivability, temperament and carcass structure, and looks for bulls to buy that will have the constitution to handle his farming conditions.

The cattle might be expected to thrive in extreme conditions but they're not tough to eat. The Johnstones sell into both the AngusPure, for quality cuts, and the McDonalds, for hamburgers, programmes.

They put in eight entries to the Steak of Origin and had four chosen for the semifinals, with one, supplied to Whanganui retailer Chef's Choice, going on to win the best of brand for wholesale and food service.

A recent move to give Mr Johnstone more flexibility has been to sell all his commercial cows and replace them with more saleable steers. Stud weaner bulls that aren't performing are castrated and added to these.

From these were selected steers for the Future Beef Hoof and Hook competition and Mr Johnstone is particularly proud of his success.

It stemmed from an idea of his four years ago to have a competition that judged entrants on their ability to handle the animals and also judged steers from the time they were led around the show ring to when they were slaughtered.

This year, he asked students at Ag Challenge, a Whanganui training centre, to take part. "They didn't have an opportunity to have hands-on contact with beef cattle so I thought it would be a great experience for them."

The students jumped at the chance and spent time leading, preparing, washing and brushing the cattle over eight weeks. While on the farm they helped with pregnancy testing, yarding, drafting and also worked with the sheep.

In the hoof section the eight students won the team competition and Ranui W steers were champion and reserve champion heavyweight steer and champion lightweight steer.

When the points from the hook competition were added, Ranui W steers were supreme champion and supreme reserve champion.

"We really made a clean sweep of that competition, but more important was seeing what the students got out of it," Mr Johnstone says.

"These students had never worked with cattle and were terrified of steers in the beginning. It was a pleasure to see how far they had come."

With the focus now firmly back on cattle, he sees himself as a genuine sheep and beef farmer. He has an appreciation for both animals, although he has to admit the angus cattle have a special place in his heart.

"For me, farming is a passion, but it also has to be a business. On this country, that is most important of all. The animals are bred to survive the weather conditions and having got them through that we then have to survive the business conditions, or it will all have been in vain."

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