

Building on a solid foundation - sometimes old is new again!

When highlighting excellence in wool production, often the expectation is to be introduced to something completely new. However, 'tried and true' can be an equally important story. That is certainly the case with the Dalla family's Orrie Cowie flock based at Warooka on Yorke Peninsula.

Their story is compelling and one of great productivity built on a lot of traditional aims, but with a ready acceptance of change that can assist in reaching their breeding objectives. Recent enquiry suggests their consistent formula for maximising commercial wool productivity is again reaching more ears.



The story at Orrie Cowie extends right back to 1937 when Mr T A Murdoch started the Orrie Cowie flock with Kalabity ewes. Selection was for open faces, sound backs and well-nourished heavy cutting fleeces.

Blade shearing at Orrie Cowie in the early part of the 20th century.

The key descriptive word there for the current owners, Dennis and Heather Dalla and their son John, that holds as much importance as it ever did is nourishment.



Heather, John & Dennis Dalla are pictured in front of a group of their hogget rams that will be on offer at this year's annual sale, their 49th and second longest running sale in SA, with a dominance of Poll Merinos.

Despite the reliability of Warooka's climate, it may surprise many that the average rainfall is only a very winter dominant 425mm. This raises two potential wool quality issues; fleece rot in wet winters and dust penetration lowering yields in the seven months of dry weather. Nourishment and the right wax to suint ratio is the key protection agent and a point of difference in the Orrie Cowie wools when compared with many being grown today.

The Dalla family has built their flock qualities around the slogan of, "The right wools from the right genetics on the right bodies." They run 5000 Merino breeding ewes, on their six blocks totalling 1950 hectares, giving a peak stocking total of 10,000 head including lambs, coinciding with peak pasture production, thus limiting supplementary feeding requirements. They have a 60/40 split in production

focus between commercial and stud flocks. Their stud component also includes Redwood White Suffolk and Poll Dorset flocks producing prime lamb sires; using some of these over their commercial Merino ewes. They also put over 2000 crossbred and Merino wether lambs through an on-property feedlot to finish at heavy carcass weights. This mix gives them first-hand experience on what their Merino and prime lamb sheep are genetically capable of in the important meat side of the industry.

Heather Dalla is the granddaughter of Mr T A Murdoch and it was her father, Vic Murdoch who really put the Orrie Cowie stud on the map with the stamping of the Orrie Cowie type of large framed sheep with superior wool quality and cut. Throughout the Orrie Cowie stud's history the Murdoch and Dalla families have not been afraid to seek out the best genetics they can find to enhance their breeding objectives. This has included some purchases that have raised eyebrows questioning their wisdom, through to sheep that have been recognised industry wide for their elite qualities. This includes a Coddington Poll ram that was purchased for \$28,000 at last year's Bendigo ASBA, a ram that very much fits Orrie Cowie's objectives of soft; white, long stapled, well defined and nourished wool on a big and extremely well structured body.



The Coddington Poll ram purchased by Orrie Cowie at Bendigo in 2013 for \$28,000 fits in very well with the established Orrie Cowie type and is expected to have a big impact in the stud.

“We are paid on a dollars per kilo basis for both meat and wool. So we are aiming to produce more of both, but it has to be quality to be worth something,” John Dalla said.

“You can't lose production in pursuit of better quality, for production pays the bills. However the sheep also have to be manageable,” he added.

Orrie Cowie has always been open to new ideas and options. They commenced objective measurements in 1972, being one of the first flocks to use this extra information. They hold the second oldest auction sale in the state, their 49th auction scheduled this August. They believe schemes like Merino Select are good overall, but without a long history of involvement, or a lot of linkages the breeding values can often be greatly undervalued.

“It is a useful tool, but not the prayer book,” John Dalla said.

“Also, quality isn't always measurable. While there are now a lot of measurable single selection traits breeders can focus on, I believe we not only need to be breeding sheep that are the best for all measurable production traits including fertility, but also for things like sound structure, maternal instincts, temperament and of course wool qualities like nourishment. These don't have breeding values, yet they are so important in defining each sheep's overall performance and genetic quality and the repeatability of those qualities,” Heather Dalla said.

“Because we include all these points in our selections and to get genetic repeatability for our clients, we focus on small increments in our genetic gain with each generation. We use breeding families for

both our Merinos and Poll Merinos and any introduced ram needs to show consistent genetic improvement over a couple of lambings before we will use them widely,” Dennis Dalla said.

“Successful breeding is taking something good and doing something good with it, each generation being a refinement of the previous one,” he added.

To demonstrate this, the Dallas gave the example of the ram Orrie Cowie 116, sold for \$17,500 in 2003. A son, OC Prince 534 was retained and bred exceptionally well. His son is OC Prince 603, a ram sold for \$12,000 in 2011 to the Radnor stud that sired the Adelaide Champion March shorn medium wool ram for Radnor last year.

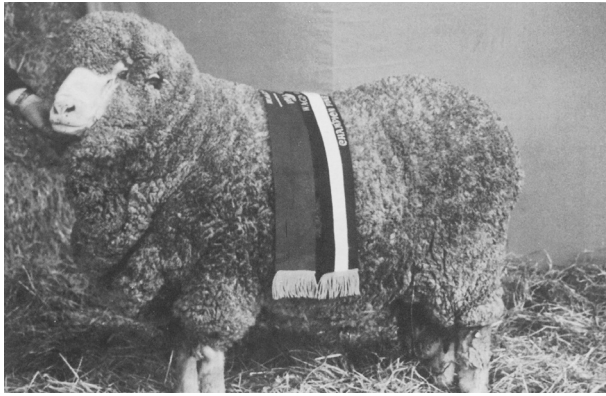
“Prince 603 has also bred exceptionally well in our stud. Considered by many to be too nourished, he cut over 20kg of 20micron wool and that fleece is on display at the National Wool Selling Centre and is still pearly white. This year’s we attended the Sydney Royal Show for the first time and the results are an example of how well he is breeding. We won the Otway Falkiner Perpetual Cup for a poll group of two rams and three ewes and one of the rams, OC 122591 that will be in our sale this year, and two of the ewes were his progeny,” Dennis said.



Orrie Cowie’s Poll Merino team of 2 rams and 3 ewes that won the Otway Falkiner Perpetual Cup at this year’s Sydney Royal Show. The group was headed by OC Titan that was also the grand champion August shorn Poll Merino ram.

“That is genetic predictability with improvement over four generations, but it goes back further, all the way to ‘Earl,” Heather Dalla said.

She explained that Belmont Park ‘Earl’ was the Grand Champion Poll Merino ram at the Wagin Woolorama in 1990 and after Orrie Cowie purchased him he proved to be a top ram in their flock and the foundation of many of their family lines. His progeny include the inaugural SA Merino Capital Ram and Pair of the Year in 1994 for Orrie Cowie.



(Left): ‘Earl’, the WA ram that was so successful in the Orrie Cowie breeding program over two decades ago and has recently been used again to benchmark the stud’s genetic progress over that period of time.

(Right): Heather and Dennis Dalla with their Orrie Cowie ewe and ram in 1994 that won the inaugural SA Merino Capital Ram and Merino Capital Pair of the Year awards.

“He had a major positive influence, especially on our wool quality,” Heather said.

John Dalla said that Orrie Cowie’s genetic predictability has been maintained while achieving significant improvement in productivity.

“We used Earl again recently as a benchmarking measure on our progress. As good as he has been the results were like chalk and cheese. His progeny still had good wool qualities, but structure, purity, size and the performance levels of growth, body weight and fleece weight were well behind. Only one of the top 100 rams was his progeny,” John said.

Dennis Dalla explained that they also won the Grand Champion August shorn Poll Merino ram with OC Titan 122523 and Junior Champion August shorn Poll Merino ewe with OC122549, both these sheep being in that winning Sydney group and coming from other successful family lines in the flock.

“Titan has that pearly white and long stapled wool we have always strived to breed, and lots of it. With measurements of 21.4 microns, 3.4 SD, 15.9 CV, and 99.6 for comfort factor while weighing 150kg at 23 months of age, he is an impressive sire, having that big South Australian size and high quality wools so admired in the eastern states. We will offer him at Dubbo this year as he has created a lot of interest at Sydney, plus at Dubbo last year when he was the champion ram lamb,” Dennis Dalla said.



(Left): John Dalla holds Orrie Cowie 'Titan', the grand champion August shorn Poll Merino ram at the 2014 Sydney Royal Easter Show. He will be offered in Dubbo this year in August.

(Right): John Dalla with Orrie Cowie 122549, the junior champion August shorn Poll Merino ewe at the 2014 Sydney Royal Easter Show.

Many breeders today dismiss the relevance of show results and while Orrie Cowie's showing these days is very limited as they put their sheep to work earlier for quicker generation turnover, they have displayed at Bendigo, plus shown at Dubbo, Hay and this year at Sydney to demonstrate the type and quality they are breeding directly to breeders from the eastern states. "It is an awareness thing which is important in a stud breeding enterprise. In fact our trip to Sydney this year completed a long term circle. Heather's great grandfather, Arthur Murdoch used to attend Sydney, often to



judge the horses, going all that way by horse and buggy and later motorbike and sidecar with his daughter Matilda. Fortunately it was a little easier and quicker for us to get there," Dennis said.

Heather Dalla's grandfather TA Murdoch and sisters, Elizabeth Ann at the back, and Matilda (Tilly) in the side car. She often accompanied her father Arthur to Sydney Royal Easter Show where he judged horses.

While showing is somewhat subjective, the progress of the Orrie Cowie flock over the last 20 years is very measurable, showing great improvement. Average microns are down from an average of 23 to today's 20 to 21 microns; comfort factors are up on all sheep, including those with the broadest microns, while significantly increasing fleece weight, body weight, fertility and maintaining their renowned constitution.

"Average fleece weights have risen from 6.1kg to 9kg (up 47%) with the tops over 11kg in the ewe flock. Our hoggets are averaging 75kg and up to 90kg. Lamb weaning percentages are consistently

over 100% and were 123% in the last lambing. We have achieved this without sacrificing any of the qualities that are important to us, including wool nourishment,” Dennis said.

John Dalla added, “We are seeing no bodystrike or fleece rot problems in our flock, or those of our clients, but I have seen a lot in other flocks when shearing. I feel the long dry period we experienced across the country masked many of these issues, but now that seasons have greatly improved they are arising again.”

“Our long term aim is perfection. Trying to constantly improve has never changed and while we may never reach that, we’ve got closer. You’re not trying hard enough if you’re not trying to improve,” John added.

Skins are another area where the Orrie Cowie flock has been refined, but again not at the expense of production.

“Obviously as a shearer I appreciate the need to have plainer and easier care sheep and we have certainly done that, but you have to still have productive skins. If they are too thick you get tightness and short staple length, but if they are too thin you lose too much wool cut. We aim for a loose medium skin on a plainer bodied sheep and think that is the ideal balance,” John said.

Along with most of South Australia’s stud breeders and to cater for client demand, they have increased the Poll Merino component of their flock with just 15 of their 104 allotted auction sale rams this year being horned.

“However, the quality is still there in the horns and especially the Excellor 108 line that display all the attributes we’ve been aiming for,” Dennis Dalla said.

It is clear that all members of the Dalla family have a great passion as sheep and wool producers and as hard as that can be at times they don’t see it that way.

“We don’t see our work as real work. Overall it’s an enjoyable challenge and a lot of fun,” John concluded.