



UNLOCKING THE  
PERFECT SHEEP<sup>(S)</sup>



# BLACKSTONE HILL

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**BEN AND VANESSA HORE** love farming Merino sheep as part of their family business at Blackstone Hill in Central Otago. With a desire to lift the future performance of their flock, they are making the most of opportunities to work with a range of advisors to help them reach their goals.

You get a strong sense of family at Blackstone Hill, the Hores' property near Becks in Central Otago. Ben and Vanessa are fourth generation of the family to farm here, and Ben's parents Ralph and Brenda, along with the new generation - Reuben (3) and Jessica (1) - are important members of the Blackstone Hill team.

## SETTING A NEW DIRECTION

Three years ago, Ben and Vanessa began working with the Production Science team at The New Zealand Merino Company (NZM)<sup>1</sup> to help lift the performance of their sheep farming enterprise. They identified wool weights, the number of lambs weaned, and growth rates in young stock as the three areas they most wanted to improve.

## GETTING HANDS ON

Ben and Vanessa recognised that improving body weights across their ewe flock was the first priority, particularly any ewes that were in lighter condition heading into mating or lambing.

With a sizable flock of 7,500 ewes, they needed a systematic approach for identifying ewes that needed extra feeding. Mark Ferguson (NZM's Production Science Manager) helped them implement a condition scoring system using a 1-5 scale.

Ben and Vanessa make sure they put their hands on their ewes whenever they are handling stock - scoring the body condition of at least a sample from the mob to track where the overall condition of the mob is sitting.



Ben and Vanessa Hore from Blackstone Hill in Central Otago

At strategic times of the year - weaning and shearing at Blackstone Hill - they score every sheep, and any animal scoring 2.5 or below goes into a separate mob to be put on the highest quality feed available on the farm. Ben and Vanessa have noticed that this approach is improving the performance of the whole ewe flock - not just the tail-end.

## RAMPING IT UP

Making the most of the opportunity to tap into the expertise of Graeme Ogle, Dick Arnst and George Collier, the Hores have embarked on a significant development programme. They are combining dryland development and irrigation to ensure that they have high quality feed available throughout the year.

The annual programme includes sowing 280

hectares (ha) of ryecorn, as well as 140 ha in lucerne or a lucerne / grass mix. Ryecorn is working particularly well as a green-feed option during the winter, while lucerne is their first choice for putting condition on ewes and growing out young stock during the warmer months.

While the focus is currently on the lower, flat land at Blackstone Hill, there is more development planned for their mid-altitude pastures in the future.

## GENETIC POTENTIAL

Ben and Vanessa were also keen to better understand how they could use estimated breeding values (EBVs) when selecting rams. Mark helped them set a breeding objective - identifying the traits that mattered most to



them and setting targets for achieving genetic gain.

They are focused on breeding a more robust, bigger framed ewe, and achieving faster growth in their lambs to lift the number they can finish themselves (rather than being dependent on the store lamb market).

The genetic fat and muscle EBVs are proving to be useful tools for achieving these gains, and they are already noticing significant improvements in their conception and lamb survival rates, and are also getting better growth rates in their young stock.

In addition, the Hores are keen to use genetics to improve their flock's resistance to

health challenges like footrot and worms, sourcing rams from breeders that actively challenge their rams and cull poor performers.

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Ben and Vanessa have a clear seven year plan in place. They are focused on putting themselves in a strong financial position, and making the most of the investment they are making in both forage development and new genetics.

They have set year-on-year targets for lifting the performance of their ewe flock, in particular aiming for higher weaning percentages to allow them to apply selection

pressure and only keep their best young stock as replacements.

The Hores have a real 'give it a go' attitude and seek out independent expertise to help them reach their goals. They credit Graeme and Dick with showing them that there are no short cuts to getting the results they are after.

And those results are speaking for themselves at Blackstone Hill. Heading into the future, they will expand the condition scoring programme to include all their stock, continue developing and renewing pastures, and start putting more selection pressure on their young stock to speed up genetic gain.



## BLACKSTONE HILL, CENTRAL OTAGO

- **THE PROPERTY:** Blackstone Hill is approximately 4,200 hectares (spread over multiple blocks). It is predominantly tussock country, rising to an altitude of 1,000 metres, with about 800 hectares of arable land, and includes some irrigation on the lower flats.
- **STOCK NUMBERS:** The Hores run about 12,000 Merino sheep, including 7,500 ewes, and several hundred cattle. Ewe numbers have increased by 1,000 over the last two seasons.
- **BREED CHANGE:** They are shifting from a Merino ewe base to a quarterbred, which they plan to stabilize at 22 to 24 micron. Ideally, their future ewes will be approximately 65 kilograms, producing 3.5 kilograms of clean fleece each year, and have a weaning percentage of 125%.
- **RESULTS:** Scanning percentages at Blackstone Hill have increased 20% each year for the last two seasons, while lamb survival has also improved, resulting in 2,500 more lambs being weaned compared to three years ago. They are also getting good returns from wool production, with year-on-year increases in their wool cheque.
- **FIT-FOR-MARKET:** Through The New Zealand Merino Company, Blackstone Hill supplies Icebreaker and Smartwool contracts. These contracts bring pricing stability to the wool side of their business, as well as linking them to the brands and people that buy what they produce.

<sup>1</sup> Agronomy and financial modelling work at Blackstone Hill was supported by the New Zealand Sheep Industry Transformation Project (NZSTX), a Primary Growth Partnership programme between The New Zealand Merino Company and the Ministry for Primary Industries.

For advice on maximising your returns from high-performance fine-wool sheep contact the NZM Production Science team, we would love to hear from you.

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