Bladesmen Afoot
A Fine Day Shearing the Leyden Glen Flock

Bigger Lambs
Without Drugs & Drudgery

Dual Coat Dynamics, Part 2
A Harvest's Uses
Norwegian shepherdess has discovered lambs grow big and fat quicker on grass with far fewer “poor doers,” when routinely fed fresh colostrum as first-day newborn care.

By Patrice Lewis

Wool from Norway is justifiably famous for its fineness and beauty. But for sheep to produce wool, they must start as lambs. And lambs, as every farmer knows, often have a rough start in life. Those entrusted with raising sheep must be attentive and proactive about the issues they face.

Ellen Karin Gudmestad is one such farmer. “We live about an hour from Stavanger,” she says. “We have approximately 99 acres of land. About 17 acres is for grass production; the rest is pasture. We have 19 standard-bred race horses (most trained for customers) and 150 sheep.

Not Every Breed Has the Same Needs at Lambing Time

Gudmestad’s love for sheep is evident. “I have eight different breeds. The most common in Norway is the NKS (Norwegian White Sheep).

“I also raise Farga Spæl og Kvit Spæl, Blæsete and Fuglestadbrogte og Steiger.

“These three last ones are on a list of protected old breeds in Norway. I keep these because they are part of history. And of course, also because I like the breeds.”

Gudmestad raises other types as well: Svartfjæs and—new this year – Dorpers. “I’m interested in almost every breed and like to have diversity,” she confides.

But even among this diversity, Gudmestad has her favorites. “Closest to my heart lies the Spæl, a friendly, easy-going sheep. They have very few problems during lambing and very seldom get sick. Most are only taken out of production and slaughtered because of age.

Wool type is a consideration in Gudmestad’s choice of animals, particularly the NKS, though lambing issues can be a bigger problem with this breed. “Most of them (NKS) have nice white wool, for which we get much more money than the colored wool. They get heavier lambs with better grading categories. They bear more lambs, but also have more complications and have to go out of production too early, in my opinion.”

As with any baby mammal, lambs require colostrum – and this can be a problem with sheep if the mother rejects the lamb or the lamb has difficulty nursing. Because of the sheer number of
animals, Gudmestad raises every year, getting enough colostrum into the newborns early enough was a challenge — until she discovered the Udderly EZ Milker™.

"I started using the EZ Milker in 2013," she remembers. "There are some very good and valuable Facebook pages for sheep owners and other interested persons and it was there I saw a sheep farmer with several hundred ewes who recommended the EZ Milker. I like to try new things that can be useful in my job as a farmer, so I got hold of an EZ Milker."

The device is tailor-made for people as busy as Gudmestad. "When the lambs are newborn, I milk every sheep, except Spael and Svartfjøs ewes (which do perfectly well on their own)," she says. "I milk approximately 100 ewes and give about 200 lambs their first meal of colostrum."

The difference between now and back then can all be attributed to the hand powered tool. "Now I milk the ewes and give the lambs colostrum instantly after they're born. And problems with the lambs' immune systems have dropped to almost zero."

Ellen Karin Gudmestad has learned one must save time and effort wherever possible.

**New Routine for Newborn Lambs**

Gudmestad’s whole routine altered after she started using the new tool. "Before the EZ Milker, I had very decided opinions about giving the lambs time to search for the teat on their own. Of course, I helped those that were weak, or that couldn't find the teat, but sometimes I was too late and missed the critical window of time needed for the colostrum to get into the lamb’s stomach. This meant their immune system was poor and the lambs became weak. Some lambs got watery mouth and even diarrhea — and needed veterinary care."

Clockwise, from upper left: Special soft rubber teat fits EZ-Milker’s heavy-duty collection bottles perfectly, eliminating the need to transfer milk to baby bottles. Red, blue and green inflations in different sizes to fit any ewe. Clear plastic nipple also fits EZ-Milker bottles, but is a bit sturdier and somewhat less flexible, for nursing stronger lambs.

The inflation is designed to slide into EZ-Milker opening, then the skirt at its orifice slides over the opening's end, for sturdy stability and a strong seal.

"Now it's routine, she says: "Milk and give every newborn lamb some colostrum. And it goes quickly."

"Best of all, the ewe stands still, licking her lamb(s), while I milk. Very often these NKS ewes have more than two lambs—sometimes three or four, even five or six lambs—and each newborn needs that colostrum. If the colostrum is very sticky, then I take milk from ewes that already have their lambs and mix it in."

"Real sheep colostrum is so much better than cow colostrum, or the powdered colostrum we keep on hand for emergencies, because the animals have antibodies specific to the location as well as the species."

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Milking with the device is continuous, not in pulsations. One may hold a fraction of an ewe with one hand, milking her with the other, but most ewes don’t fight once the relief starts. (Photo by Andre Fink of University of Kentucky’s Sheep Division.)

Notes on New Fittings & Parts

Gudmestad has found the EZ Milker makes things less stressful for her barn assistants. “During lambing season, I have foreign students, who help me. Many of them have barely even been in a barn before. But I teach them how to use the EZ Milker and they rapidly learn.

“They can milk the ewes and feed colostrum to the lambs without me being there. With the EZ Milker, they know exactly how much each lamb should get. Some of them find it fun to use the milker!”

Gudmestad appreciates the way animals respond to her hand-powered milking tool’s action. “Ninety-nine percent of the ewes I milk with the EZ Milker stand still,” she observes.

“I also use it on some of the ewes with large volumes of milk, more than her own lambs can take. On these sheep, I use the half-liter or one-liter bottles and it usually takes less than a minute to fill them. And most of the time I’m working alone. Ewes with a lot of milk feel greatly satisfied as the pressure in their udders and teats is reduced after being milked. With any extra milk, I either use it on other lambs, or freeze it for later use.”

Gudmestad says she’s never, from Day One, regretted buying the lambing time tool. Now she keeps an extra in reserve, but she’s happy that spare parts are now available in Norway at Byrne Landbrukservice, the Norwegian distributor.

The manufacturer now offers three different inflation sizes (the inflations are the colored silicone tubes that fit onto the sheep’s teat) to accommodate differently sized animals. Gudmestad was quick to jump on these options when they became available. “As the new inflations came, I got hold of them right away. The teat sizes on some of my ewes were a challenge with just the original inflation. The three new sizes of silicone inflations are softer and easier to fit and ensured excellent suction pressure in the EZ Milker.”

Even though an electric version of the EZ Milker – the Ultimate EZ – is available, Gudmestad is happy to stick with her tried-and-true hand milker.

“For me, it’s a must to have a couple of EZ Milkers in the barn,” she concludes. “Milking instantly gives them the best start. I don’t use a probe unless the lambs are too weak to nurse. The newborns drink like crazy when you give them their first milk. Some people say lambs won’t search for the teat after being bottle-fed colostrum, but I assure them it’s never been a problem for me. Other people say they can hand-milk ewes quicker – and I believe them – but I can’t. And after a short while, my hands hurt too much.”

Now that she’s gotten used to mechanized hand milking, Gudmestad says she will never go back. “I know many farmers who either hold the lamb on the teat after birth, or milk out the ewe by hand. For me, that’s no longer an option, not after I started using the EZ Milker.

“As an aside, we’ve also used the EZ Milker on a horse. The foal was very weak. And the mare did not like it when we tried to hand milk her. She accepted the EZ Milker after just a couple of tries.”

One of the reasons for this ease of milking—particularly with animals that are first-time mothers—is there isn’t any friction on the teats, as happens with hand-milking. If an animal has never had a nursing newborn before, they get nervous to have their udders handled.

Gudmestad’s experience proves—regardless of breed or species—mechanically assisted hand milking is a solution for higher output, less reliance on pharmaceuticals, less daily time and effort inputs at lambing time and better quality lambs by harvest time on small farms the world over.”

Even young or inexperienced help can be quickly trained to go ahead in the pens, harvest colostrum and simply routinely feed it to all newborns, leaving the shepherd free to handle the difficult cases.
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-Buck Wheeler, inventor

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