

Johnston Carmichael Trophy



Neil Steven of Johnston Carmichael presents the trophy to Malcolm Stewart. Also in the picture, Rod McKenzie (left) and Alistair Stewart.

A Borders farming family who pioneered performance recording in sheep breeding have been recognised at the Royal Highland Winter Fair today (23 November 2011).

The Stewart family from Sandyknowe, just outside Kelso, were presented with the Johnston Carmichael Trophy by Neil Steven, Director Edinburgh Office, Johnston Carmichael and Rod McKenzie, Scottish Sheep Strategy Manager at the event at the Royal Highland Centre, Ingliston.

Father Tom Stewart established a flock of pedigree Suffolk Sheep in 1957 and in 1968 and then took the bold step of performance recording it. This makes the Sandyknowe Flock one of the longest established performance recorded flocks in the UK.

There can now be few people in Scotland, who are serious about making a living out of producing commercial lambs, who have not heard of the Sandyknowe flock of Suffolks.

The Stewarts have always been keen to embrace technology to help them maintain their extremely high standards of efficiency and in 1980 the flock was split into a "Five Family System". Although this system is seen as the norm for many serious commercial breeders nowadays, it was an extremely radical step more than 30 years ago.

One of the main reasons for doing this was that the Stewarts were finding it difficult to source rams with good enough figures of the type and style they wanted. Using the five family system ensured that they did not run the risk of inbreeding and by using tup lambs every year it accelerated the rate of genetic progress.

Their aim has always been to produce sheep for the commercial market and they have steadfastly refused to be seduced by the perceived glamour of producing a record priced tup.

The flock was moved to the neighbouring farm of Brotherstone in 1999 and is now run by Tom's son Malcolm. Lambing has gradually been moved to a later date and now the flock of over 300

ewes lamb under commercial conditions in mid-April.

After lambing the ewes receive no supplementary feeding, nor do the lambs have access to creep whilst they are with their mothers.

On many farms, sheep production is seen as a labour intensive business, so Malcolm decided in 2005 to adopt an even stricter culling policy. Detailed records are kept for both lambing ease and lamb vigour. Only lambs that pass this strict test are kept as replacement ewes or stock tups. Similarly the tup lambs which are used in the flock must be out of ewes which have a proven record of production.

Rod McKenzie said: “The philosophy is simple; produce sheep with fine bones, smooth hair, deep loins, broad backs and meaty gigots that want to live and thrive wherever they go, and people will want your product. The perfect mix of the use of performance figures, first class stockmanship, attention to detail and customer care has proved its worth for the Sandyknowe flock over the years. The consistency of the annual consignment at Kelso Ram Sale is testament to the policy working exceptionally well.”

In the 2011 consignments at Kelso, all 131 rams were in the top 25% of the National Suffolk Breeding Evaluation Index, with the majority actually in at least the top 10%. The fact that the flock has been recording for so long means that the accuracies quoted for each recorded trait are very high, so people can buy with even more confidence.

Malcolm is confident that if somebody purchases one of his tups, and identifies the progeny, to ensure they know how the lambs are doing, he has a customer for life. His enthusiasm for his chosen profession, his commitment to improvement and his belief in the science of evaluation is legendary.

Malcolm says himself: “It is easy to be enthusiastic about something when it makes money for you, and using figures certainly helps me to make a decent margin and sell my tups with confidence”

Rod added: “Malcolm has followed in the pioneering footsteps of his father so well and has moved the use and understanding of figures to a new level. The example he sets us all with his clarity of vision and understanding of the next set of potential challenges makes my job so much easier.

“When you mention Sandyknowe Suffolks, people immediately realise that you are going to talk about profitable livestock farming, not necessarily fashionable livestock farming. I am truly delighted that Tom and Malcolm are the winners of this year's award.”

For more information about the Scottish sheep strategy and performance recording, visit www.scottishsheepstrategy.org.uk