

Woolaroo Merino Stud

by James Walker

Our property is "Yass Plains"; it's where we run the Woolaroo Merino Stud. My father, Peter Walker, my brothers, Charlie and Jack, and I work as a team classing, selecting, preparing, showing, shearing and selling our Merinos. Progressively my brothers and I have taken over the responsibilities of Stud Classer from Dad. Today we boys class the stud and our clients' sheep whether they're at Yass, Young, Goulburn, Bathurst, Temora, or in Victoria. We also have John Williams of Cooma as an adviser.

Classing our clients' sheep allows us to determine what each client needs in the way of rams. This feedback helps us to keep breeders' individual needs in mind when we class our own sheep. And to that end we have developed two Woolaroo families, Ringmasters, and The Purples which complement each other. The Purples give us the wool cut and size, while Ringmasters give us low micron and softness.

The Woolaroo Ringmasters are essentially a fine/ superfine family based on Merryville and daughter stud, Auchen Dhu. Auchen Dhu, now dispersed, had the Australian Ram of the Year in 1995. The average micron of our mature age Ringmaster ewes is between 17 and 18. We use Merryville fine and superfine rams over the ewes to produce a superfine sheep. Our aim with this family is to breed sheep as big as possible and as fine as possible, keeping to a traditional wool.

Our Woolaroo Purples, averaging 18 to 19.5 microns, are based on a Manderlay / Merryville infusion heavily culled to a fine woolled, large framed, heavy cutting sheep with a soft supple skin. The sort of skin that pushes out more wool. Our family has been developing these sheep since 1979 when Dad and Granddad bought part of the Merryville infused Manderlay Stud from John Williams at its dispersal. As a result The Purples are a very stable family.

Our Purples are very easy to manage. They have great constitutions, good frame, cut a lot of wool and are still fine. Growing a sheep like that gives you plenty of options. With size and frame the ewes can always produce a good sized crossbred lamb, and there's a market for our wethers. We haven't gone into crossbreds. Realistically, if you can get enough size and wool weight in that 17 to 19.5 micron into your Merinos you can get just as much for your Merinos as you can for meat sheep. In January, for example, we sold one and a half year old ewes for \$80.50, December shorn. We'd basically had two shearings from them: in February 2005 they had 62 mm on them, and again in December 2005 they cut an average 4.5 kilos of 16.6 micron wool. So when you look at the money you can get from restockers, plus the wool value, you're basically getting the same as from a crossbred. That's the way we're looking at it.

The market is one test for our breeding ideas. Our family believe it is important to use Sheep Shows, Sire Evaluation Benchmarking and Wether Trials to push our breeding strategies. In the National Merino Bloodlines Comparison '94 to '05 Woolaroo ranked in the top quarter of the 71 high to medium accuracy bloodlines for fibre diameter, clean fleece weight and gross margin per DSE. In the Yass Wether Trial we were ranked first for wool value this year and last year. We had the heaviest wool team, averaging 5.9 kilos, with an average of 17.7 micron. In the 2004 Hamilton, Sydney and Dubbo show rings Stud Sire Woolaroo 52 proved a champion. and his fleece won Grand Champion Fine Wool Ram Fleece at the 2005 Royal Sydney Show with 19.5 microns and 14.5 kg. In the Armidale Sire Evaluation in the 90s Stud Sire Woolaroo 203 was trait leader for worm resistance.

While price for wool is currently a poor indicator of value, Dad is optimistic about Merino Wool. Last year he visited Schneiders' new woollen mill near Shanghai in China and spent the day with Giovanni Schneider. According to Giovanni there is an excellent market for wool in that 17 to 19.5 micron in men's and women's suiting. Why? Because it's light weight, it drapes well and it has a long life. We know this is a fact because we followed two of our clips through to the men's suiting stage and Toabo and Wool Tech sent us samples of the cloth made from our wool.

Giovanni also pointed out that the growers increased the fine and superfine wool clip threefold but have not adequately promoted it to take up the increased output. We need to tell the rest of the world that our fine wools are a premier product for an environmentally concerned world. Wool is a renewable, natural energy source. And it beats wearing converted compressed chicken feathers and waste rice straw - current environmental research projects in USA. Surely we can innovatively market our stunning wool fibre.