History and Preservation of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep

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History of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep in Barbados

Some people accept the idea that the origin of Barbados Blackbelly sheep was West African. However, Weslie Combs, author of "A History of the Barbados Blackbelly," finds compelling historical evidence that the Barbados Blackbelly as a breed originated and evolved on the island of Barbados. He believes it evolved from crosses of African hair sheep and European wooled breeds. There were many environmental factors that naturally selected for hairiness (such as burrs that fouled the fleece of wooled breeds and high tropical temperatures) and there is evidence of early artificial selection as hairy sheep became preferred. He believes that the breed's prolificacy originated from wooled sheep that were brought to Barbados by Dutch traders.

History of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep in the U.S.

In 1904, the U.S. Department of Agriculture imported four ewes and one ram, all yearlings, to Bethesda, Maryland. There is a report that several of these sheep grew quite a bit of wool on their shoulders, perhaps in response to living in a colder climate or perhaps because they were crossbreds. In a conversation I had with Keith Laurie, former presidentof the Barbados Sheep Farmers Association, I learned that no one really knows what happened to those five sheep. It is believed that they perished in a fire.

However, offspring from those sheep, as well as Barbados Blackbelly sheep making their way into the U.S. from imports into South America and Mexico, established several "colonies" of Barbados Blackbelly sheep in the U.S. Mr. Laurie was quite adamant that no other sheep had ever been exported to the U.S. from Barbados and that any people who claimed to have sheep from a later export were wrong.

In the book "Hair Sheep of Western Africa and the Americas," a team of researchers from North Carolina State University (NCSU) led by Professor Lemuel Goode contributed a paper entitled "Research with Barbados Blackbelly Sheepin North Carolina." They describe a crossbreeding program that was begun in in 1971 using" a foundation flock of Barbados Blackbelly sheep obtained from several sources in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. They obviously were carrying varying percentages of other breeds and might not have been representative of sheep found on Barbados." However, this is the first mention of a Barbados Blackbelly flock at NCSU that I can find.

In 1996, the North Carolina State University flock was to be dispersed, but due to the mediation of The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC), Claude Hughes and his wife, Linda Sakiewicz were able to purchase the entire flock. The Hughes had a great deal of experience with the breed. In an interview I had with Linda, she said that "The ancestors of these animals had been directly imported from Barbados in about 1970 by Professor Lemuel Goode and no other stock had ever been introduced into this flock." Thus, as far as anyone involved in hair sheep breeding at universities or with ALBC knows, this is the only flock with such a certain pedigree.

You can see the discrepancy here; one source says that no exports occurred after 1904; another source says that a flock was obtained from Barbados in 1970. Unfortunately, no one knows for sure and I cannot find any living person who has direct knowledge or any records.

Various lines from the NCSU flock were created in Oklahoma and other areas of the U.S. In 1996, the Oklahoma breeders got together and formed the BBSAI. I was told by the ALBC that several other Barbados Blackbelly breed registries had tried and failed over the past 25 years or so and we have no record, and no breed registries, remaining from their efforts.

Meanwhile, the trophy market for Barbado was going strong in Texas. The Barbado breed is said to have originated in Texas, but no one knows exactly when. The breed came about by cross-breeding Barbados Blackbelly with Mouflon and Rambouillet to obtain a larger carcass and a rack of horns.

Other Color Combinations from the Cross

This cross created a wide variety of color combinations, but the one popular with hunters was the "Corsican." The term "Corsican" adds a little class to a hunter shooting a barnyard sheep).A game rancher by the name of Thompson Temple created the first record book in 1976 and the Corsican was the first category of sheep in the book. After awhile, trophy hunters (who want to kill one of everything) had bagged their Corsican and soon the entries in the trophy book for Corsicans slacked off. In addition, there was virtually no market to sell the sheep that didn't fit into the Corsican coloration.

Mr. Temple was a marketing genius, however. He bestowed several of these other color combinations with exotic names such as "Hawaiian Black," "Texas Dall," and "Painted Desert." (from correspondence from J.D. Stringer, friend of Thompson Temple; http://www.taxidermy.net/forums/GameheadArticles/02/g/0272675F46.html)

What's in a Name?

Corsican...Barbie Doll...Texas Dall...Barbado...Black Hawaiian...Barbados...Painted Desert...BBDoe...Barbados Blackbelly

The preservation of both the Barbados Blackbelly and the Barbado will be determined by our ability to know for certain which breed of sheep we are purchasing and breeding. At the moment, with the exception of the sheep in the heart of the game ranch area, breeders suffer from, and contribute to, the muddying of the genetics and the loss of breed distinction.

Here is the typical learning curve of a person who acquires a blackbelly sheep. I know this is true because it was my learning curve and I've read hundreds of emails over the past 6 years by folks experiencing the same learning curve.

Newbie Buys Sheep...Then What?

1. Newcomers to sheep purchase a beautiful, exotic sheep, perhaps with a magnificent rack of horns, that has strange badger stripes down its nose.
2. They take it home and then try to figure out what it is. They go to the Internet, to sheep associations, books, neighbors, etc., and they get a different answer everywhere they turn.
3. They discover on the BBSAI Web site that Barbados Blackbelly sheep can have horns [author note: this article was written prior to the BBSAI adopting the name American Blackbelly to designate sheep of horned bloodlines that meet breed standard and are registered with the BBSAI. Barbados Blackbelly sheep are polled.] so they happily refer to their sheep as Barbados Blackbelly.
4. They read on the Oklahoma State University site that Barbados Blackbelly sheep are polled, but everything else on that site contradicts what their neighbors told them so it must be wrong.

5. They breed their sheep and sell their offspring. On the sale board, they call their sheep Barbados Blackbelly, or Barbado, or Blackbelly Barbados, or whatever.
6. Along come two groups of dedicated breeders--those wanting to breed the polled Barbados Blackbelly sheep back to its original genetics in Barbados; and 2) Barbado breeders whose breeding plan selects for massive racks of horns on Barbado rams. They purchase the farmer's lambs.
7. The breeders introduce these new genetics into their flock. The polled breeders are distraught when their new crop of lambs have horns. The horned breeders are distraught when their new crop of lambs have short stumpy horns that never grow into a marketable rack. No longer can breeders be certain what genetics they are getting based on what an animal is called.
8. Having learned a valuable lesson, they become more discriminating in the stock that they purchase. And they learn that it is very difficult to find breeders who know the genetics of their flocks. Most breeders don't seem to keep records. Even reputable breeders seem to have questionable genetics.
9. They turn to the breed registry, the BBSAI, to try to find breeders with the sheep they desire. But they learn that only recently the BBSAI started indicating if a ram was polled, and the BBSAI has never designated if a ram had horns. And they learn that most of the "polled" breeders in the registry may have a polled ram but their ewes have mixed genetics and do not breed true with that polled ram.

Genetics in Crisis

In short, the genetics of these two breeds are in CRISIS. Because there are several thousand Barbado in south-central U.S., that breed is not endangered, and with education and the BBSAI's efforts to provide good information, Barbado breeders will be able to sort out their genetics and get back to raising beautiful horned animals. The BBSAI is developing a breed standard for the Barbado and will begin tracking horn size and other information that our members require.

The Barbados Blackbelly in the U.S. unfortunately does not have such a rosie future. There are currently only six BB breeders in the U.S. that are responsibly and reliably breeding polled stock. The original NCSU flock still remains but has some questionable genetics that are producing a lot of wool and white spots. The research flock at Virginia State University began with a donation of sheep from Claude Hughes' NCSU flock. I am uncertain how many true polled animals exist in the U.S. and one of my 2005 missions is to find this out.

And it's not just a question of horned vs polled genetics that is threatening the bloodlines. The blackbelly sheep is renowned for its prolificacy and resistance to disease and parasites. Those are the most sought-after attributes in our sheep. But because the majority of breeders are new to sheep and have not yet learned the principals of good husbandry, they are raising animals and imposing artificial selection on those animals so that as a breed, blackbellies are smaller, are becoming less resistant to disease and are having fewer babies.

Commercial farmers who are beginning to purchase blackbellies in large quantities have one goal in mind: cross their wooled sheep with these marvelous hair sheep so that they don't have to shear, they get more babies, and their vet bills decrease. All of this crossbreeding will further dilute the blackbellybreed and make it very hard to know what genetics are hiding inside a sheep.

Future of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep in Barbados

Word has it that things are not looking too good for Barbados Blackbelly sheep in Barbados, either. The government of Barbados has, over the past 10 years, introduced the Wiltshire and the Dorset as crosses to Barbados Blackbelly sheep in order to increase the carcass size. So they seem destined to suffer the same fate as the Barbados Blackbelly in the U.S.—crossbred to extinction.

Future of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep in the U.S.

I wish I could have painted a nicer picture for you today, but this is no laughing matter.

It is important for you to understand what is at stake here. It is important for you to know that you and each of these other dedicated members and breeders can play such a vital role in the survival of these breeds.

The five board members who have put together this year's Annual Meeting are indebted to Charles Beam for having the energy to create a breed registry called the BBSAI. We are indebted to a handful of people who worked hard to get the young association on its feet. We now have over 120 members and it is time for the BBSAI to mature from a social club of regional breeders to a bonafide breed registry. We have worked hard this year to reshape the Association so that it can contribute and take a leadership role in preserving both of these breeds of sheep.

Help Ensure a Future for Both Breeds in the U.S.

We invite you to help the effort

- by registering your sheep
- by keeping good records
- by practicing good sheep husbandry
- by becoming an expert and passing your expertise on to new breeders

Have Fun and Learn

As you participate in the events we have planned for you this weekend, please ask questions and share the knowledge you have with everyone around you. We want you to go home filled with new ideas and a new enthusiasm for your sheep. We want the association to be a resource for you, and we ask that you be a resource for the Association.