



Partnering for Shear Perfection

by Madeline Rosenberg

Shearing is the highlight, the veritable prom of the wool year. We scramble each spring to lock in a date – no small feat with our ever-changing weather! We watch in grateful awe as the shearer sweats over our flock, feet moving imperceptibly beneath the cascading fleece as each sheep spins, bends, and slips through their legs. Shearing is a dance and, like any partnered activity, it never hurts to review the steps.

The Shearer Samba

Be Honest About Your Needs: When I set up an appointment, I will ask you questions such as: the number of sheep to be shorn, the breed, how many rams/lambs/ewes, the last time they were sheared, whether or not they are pregnant or sick, how many need hoof trimming, and if there are any other requirements. This gives me a good idea of the amount of time I need to safely and efficiently manage your flock. I frequently

show up to farms where some of the sheep are still running loose, there are more sheep than expected, some goats need foot trimming, etc. I try my best to accommodate those needs, but if each sheep takes 10 minutes, and you miscounted by four head, I'll be nearly an hour late to my next client!

Have Appropriate Facilities: I cannot shear a wet sheep, nor can I shear in the rain. We may have to reschedule, and that's fine. I always touch base with clients 24-48 hours prior to our appointment to make sure they have everything they need and to discuss any potential weather issues. You need to provide appropriate cover and ventilation, a non-slip surface such as a sheet of plywood, appropriate electric outlets or access, and **light!** Have your animals caught up and penned appropriately; this means an area that can be closed and securely latched! Access to water is helpful (as is somewhere for your shearer to use the restroom).

Maintain Your Fleeces the Other 364 Days: It's true, a shearer can wreck a year's worth of work in five minutes. However, I can only shear as good a fleece as you grow. Keep your animals out of the burrs and away from pine needles; in addition to wrecking a fleece they can damage shearing blades and my hands! Try to limit your use of tarps around fiber animals. Those poly fibers wreck the value of a fleece. Similarly, minimize your use of paint or other markers (ie ram raddles); often the paint doesn't wash out and you will have to remove that portion of the fleece prior to sale. Evaluate feeders and loafing areas to keep dung and vegetable matter out of the animal's neck and belly wool. If you coat your sheep, check for felting frequently and remove coats before the shearer arrives to minimize the time per animal.

If You Love Them, Don't Feed Them: Obesity is a huge problem in very small flocks. Sheep will lie all day long to get more cookies,

like children begging for candy! Obese sheep are more difficult to shear because they're uncomfortable, so they fight the shearer. Obesity also shortens the staple and increases the diameter of the fiber (both undesirable).

All sheep absolutely must be fasted 6-12 hours prior to shearing! *An empty sheep is a happy sheep.* This means *no hay, no grain, no grass, NO food or water of any kind.* The rumen holds up to 6 gallons (roughly 30 lbs); this weight presses on the sheep's lungs when in the shearing positions. The full sheep struggles for air, creating a dangerous situation for the shearer as well as itself. Sheep with heavy parasite loads or pneumonia will truly suffer and may die during shearing. Be kind to your shearer and your flock, and fast them – just like we fast prior to a medical procedure. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that fasting for shearing negatively impacts lamb growth or pregnancy, and ideally shearing will occur one month prior to or after lambing.

Provide Appropriate Help: They're your sheep, even if the physical labor falls to me. Working with animals is unpredictable and you need to be there just in case. Provide appropriate bags or sheets to collect your fleeces as they come off the board. Have a broom on hand to sweep away the undesirable bits. Bonus points if you have someone to catch sheep so I can focus on shearing!

Combine Farms if Possible: It's much easier to book a shearer with a greater number of head. Try to coordinate with other fiber folk; to mitigate biosecurity risks you might have everyone leave their animals on the trailer until it's their turn, or bring their own pens to set up. You can split the cost of the set-up fee, and many hands make light work!

The Producer Pas de Deux

Show Up: We all know the saying 'Dance with the one that brung ya'...but there's a limit. If you book an appointment and the shearer fails to show up, start looking for someone else. Every summer I get the same desperate phone calls: "I booked someone in March/April/May, he didn't come, he hasn't returned my phone calls, now it's July and my sheep are panting." Don't wait. In fact, if you don't get that 24 to 48 hour check in prior to your appointment, start calling to confirm... and possibly find a back-up.

Have Your Equipment Ready: A lot of people take time off work to accommodate

*Shearing is a dance
and, like any partnered
activity, it never hurts to
review the steps.*

a shearing appointment. Shearers should show up on time (or call if they're running late), ready to go, with equipment that they've already tested. They should tell you in advance if there's something they need, such as a specific outlet or size of plywood.

Know How to Shear: The biggest hurdle for new shearers is finding bodies on which to practice. If you have meat sheep or hair crosses, or pet animals that simply need the fiber removed, I urge you to consider allowing people who have been to shearing school to get some experience on your farm! Please notify Kelley Yates or Sharon Koontz, kyates@kysheepandgoat.org or sharon@kysheepandgoat.org, so we can start a directory alongside the available shearers on the KSGDO website. Kathy Meyer, Final Frontier Farm 1tkmeyer@bellsouth.net, has been fantastic about offering such opportunity.

Nicks happen. Before you criticize an experienced shearer for nicks or second cuts, please ask them what happened. Often they are fighting something that you can't see. 95% of struggles stem from full sheep; the other 5% could be anything from worn blades to a very dirty fleece, foreign matter in the wool, an extra wrinkly sheep, obesity or being too thin, bad lighting, or something as innocuous as the sheep coughing at the wrong time. Your shearer is doing the best job (s)he can and communication is key. Just as you might be apt to throw that person under the bus, they may be vowing never to return to your flock! Let's give one another the benefit of the doubt. That said, any significant abrasions or lacerations should be treated appropriately and immediately.

Charge Fairly: You should be able to get a rough estimate prior to the big day. You should also have read the shearer's website or asked when you booked if they charge extra for things like hoof trimming, worming, obesity, catching loose sheep, or shearing rams. Some shearers accept payment online, where they can provide an itemized invoice for

tax records. Ask if you can schedule and/or pay online – and book your next date while you've got them in front of you!

Dance Classes

- UK Shearing School, April 14-15, contact Dr. Don Ely: dely@uky.edu
- TN Shearing School, mid-April contact Mark Powell: shepherdboy1@yahoo.com or call 615-519-7796
- Ballyhoo Shearapalooza, April 24-26 contact Madeline Rosenberg ballyhoofiberemporium@gmail.com; includes a fleece evaluation workshop
- Kentucky Sheep and Fiber Festival (May 15-17) offers fleece prep workshops; visit <https://www.kentuckysheepandfiber.com/workshops>
- Kentucky Wool Pool, July: <https://www.kysheepandgoat.org/wool-pool> Excellent opportunity to sell your wool; stay for experience and networking!

Respect Your Partner: Shearers need to respect what each client is trying to produce, whether it's breed or fleece type. They also need to work with each shepherd's quirks about their flock and set up. This is especially true when working with new producers or those who keep a few sheep as pets. Often wool producers got into raising sheep so they could have a ready supply of the kind of fiber they like to use. Even if it's not your cup of tea, it's valuable to somebody!

Producers need to respect their shearer's generosity with energy, time, and their body. It's not hard to learn how to shear, but there's a lot of pressure in the work and it takes a toll. A sheep can ruin thousands of dollars of equipment with one kick, shearers have no guarantee as flocks can change from year to year, and the job doesn't come with a health plan. Keep an open mind as well when your shearer gives you advice. We have our hands on hundreds of sheep per season; experience makes us a valuable resource.

Whether you're a shearer or producer, I wish you a smooth, safe, and profitable partnership. Seeing your fiber at festivals, online, or at the wool pool makes me even more Kentucky Proud!

Madeline Rosenberg has been raising and shearing wool sheep for over a decade. She specializes in traditional blade shearing and is committed to sharing alternative methods for producers with physical limitations.