



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Volume 7 No.3 Summer 2003
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Milking My Icelandic Sheep

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Before I purchased my Icelandic Sheep I did quite a bit of research. I looked into many different breeds but kept going back to the Icelandics. My interest were mainly with the wool aspects but all the advertisements I was reading "THE TRIPLE PURPOSE BREED" kept catching my attention.

I knew that the other breeds in my area had very poor quality wool (most farms in the area raise Suffolks) which had little value. In addition to wanting a versatile wool to work with, I was attracted also to the many claims of the "triple purpose breed" so I did more research and thought this breed would be a good investment for these three selling points, Meat, Milk and Fleece. Although at that time I had no intentions of milking my sheep, I thought it was an attractive aspect of the breed - after all, the Vikings used them for milking and Cheesemaking.

Well, like so many other things I've learned in life, never say NEVER.

These are some of my (unexpected) and humorous milking experiences from a NEW and inexperienced Shepherdess.



It all started with a ewe who had lost her baby. I was told I should try and milk her colostrum and freeze it for future use. I had a little trouble at first. The ewe was very patient with me and stood still

even though she had never been milked before. I just couldn't get any milk out, it was very awkward. Her udder was large but I just didn't know what I was doing wrong.

My husband, who was raised on a farm milking cows had to show me what to do. As I found it very frustrating, he found it quite amusing to watch me. Seeing those little lambs hitting their mothers udders before they nursed all made sense now!

I only planned to milk this ewe until her colostrum turned to milk. No one told me when this would be. So after about 2 1/2 days of milking a thick yellow colostrum, I had a very unusual situation come up with one of my other favorite ewes.

She was due to lamb any day and I noticed her udder was getting HUGE. This was my first lambing season so I wasn't quite sure what I was seeing. My shepherd friends kept saying that is normal just before lambing. Well my gut instincts told me something was wrong with this udder.

She had two healthy lambs, but I noticed that the babies were only nursing on one side. I didn't know if this was normal or not, but when I looked at the ewe from behind, I could see there was a definite problem.

One side of the udder was the size of a basketball and veins were popping out (it was not red and hot). She couldn't lay down. I called around to some more experienced shepherds and every one told me it was mastitis and to milk her.

But this udder was rock hard and nothing like the other sheep's udder that I was presently milking. I had called the vet about three times. He kept saying "It's mastitis and you need to squeeze as hard as you can and if you can't get anything out of it, wait and have your husband try because he's much stronger."

In waiting for my husband to get home, I read in my herb books about the healing effects of dandelions on mastitis in humans. So I made a tea for this ewe to drink and hot compresses for her udder until someone could come to help me.

I also consulted my neighbors who own an all natural cow dairy farm down the road (they have used natural treatments in their cows for 20 years). They told me to get 3 T. of cayenne pepper down her in a drench paste with water.) This was to help with inflammation.

I could feel a lump right where the teat (left side in photo) is attached to the udder. I called the vet again. He told me it was curdled milk and to keep squeezing and he would try to come out in the morning.

My husband got home that evening and took one look at her and said "Oh My, this isn't mastitis." He felt the lump and said NOT to squeeze it. He called his Dad who told us from his many years of experience with raising cows and race horses, that this was a tumor or scar tissue, and we would need to insert something up the teat (like a dairy teat dilator (in the "olden days" the farmers used a sterilized chicken feather) to go through the scar tissue.

Well this was just too much for me. I called the vet again and asked him to please come out. He got there the next day and said "Oh MY, This isn't mastitis" He used a teat dilator for cows and finally got it through the blockage (also to my amazement this ewe stood pretty still for this procedure). It was not a tumor because the vet said it would be bleeding. It was indeed scar tissue like my Father-In-Law had said.

"What would cause this scar tissue in a teat?" I asked, (even the most experienced shepherds found

this unusual...) First he asked me the ewe's history. She had several sets of twins and a couple of singles (she is 6 years old). He asked if she had a lamb last year? I said "Yes, in fact, I bought her with her lamb at side." He asked when I weaned that lamb.

Well this is what happened. She was a very large ewe lamb and I decided to breed her and her mother to the same ram, so actually I never did separate them. But I told him she never really stopped trying to nurse her mother. In fact, this ewe lamb was due to lamb herself any day, and was still trying to nurse her mother. The ewe would kick her away when she came up to her udder from the side, but then the ewe lamb would come up and hit her hard between the legs from behind. I never really thought much of it.

My vet asked which one was the ewe lamb. When I showed him he said "On my word, That is WAY TOO BIG A EWE to be trying to nurse, she is 100 lbs and a blow like that to an udder certainly would cause this scar tissue. You need to separate her right away. He said "Don't ever let a lamb stay on it's mother if you see this happening.

We continued working and drained 3 lbs. of milk out of that side of her udder. It was not mastitis and was NOT infected, but clean white milk. The scar tissue had kept the babies from being able to nurse that side. The Vet told me I needed to make sure this side kept flowing and didn't close over again.

So here I was, milking another ewe 3 times a day. She was not a real friendly ewe but stood patiently to be milked almost as if she knew it was helping her.

In the meantime, the first ewe's colostrum finally turned to milk, but by this time she was so used to the routine that I went out to find her waiting for me, so I continued milking her. I was still milking the 2nd ewe because her udder was so lopsided and distorted; I was trying to help get it back to normal and also I had to make sure it didn't get blocked again.

My Leader ewe lost her baby during this time. It was very sad seeing this ewe who was so full of energy, acting so depressed. I decided to try to at least milk out the colostrum. (I read this will keep in the freezer for a year.) This was going to be quite a challenge. My leader ewe was "wild as a march wind" as my husband would say and this would take some thought. I soon learned a trick with her, If I keep my eyes CLOSED and don't look at her, I could coax her in a stall and slip a collar around her neck, tie her to the side and slowly crouch down and milk her. To our surprise, she also took to this like it was nothing. When I would finish one side, I slowly stood up and moved to her other side. Still keeping my eyes CLOSED! (ISBONA should have a milking contest, bet I could do it with my eyes closed!) This was quite an experience for me just to know this ewe was letting me get this close to her. Again, I was going to quit when her milk came in.

Something else I learned, My leader ewe's colostrum turned to milk after about 36 hours. My first ewe had colostrum for about 72 hours. This was interesting to me, I didn't know each sheep was different. With the second ewe who had the problem udder, there was no yellow colostrum come out of the distorted udder. It was all white milk. Her colostrum was coming out of the side the babies were using.

So here I was (only in this for the WOOL) and I was milking 3 ewes!

Having started out not really knowing what I was doing, I learned so much about these sheep - their personalities and the different udders all in one breed.

By this time I had a goat stantion given to me that worked perfect for the first ewe. I didn't know how in the world I was going to get that ewe up there. A little corn of course and she jumped right into

place. We had to make a few adjustments because of the her horns, but after only one day this ewe would run to the station and jump in. I was amazed at how quick they learn and how willing. SO I decided to keep milking her.

As for the second ewe, I milked the problem udder long enough to make sure it was going to work correctly but I did have to teach the new babies to use it from behind. They were so used to using the good side from the front that they didn't know how to use the other side. It will not work from the front because of the scar tissue and how it was damaged from behind.

The 3rd ewe (my leader ewe) - well, I was going to stop milking her, but the second day when I went in the barn to do chores, I found her standing quietly against the wall as if she was tied. So I just approached her quietly (with eyes closed) and she let me milk her (she was not tied). When I stood up, to my amazement, she turned around for the other side to be done. When I was done she took off like lightning. Now every morning and evening I find her waiting for me in the barn. I milk her one side, she turns around, I milk the other side and then she bolts away on out of the barn. She is NOT restrained at all! I am amazed at how smart she is and even though she is still "wild as the wind," she is not a problem to milk.

As far as the udders go I have learned quite lot. Icelandic sheep have many different udder shapes. The ones I found the most easy for me to milk by hand are the large bags with the teats hanging down.

My leader ewe has teats that stick straight out from the bag. This is great for a baby lamb to nurse but very difficult to milk by hand (although it can be done, I found this type of udder is harder to milk. The angle tends to cramp my hand and is very awkward). I kept at it because I was getting so much milk. At least 1 3/4 lbs a day from each ewe.

Another interesting thing I learned about my milking experience is when it was colder and rainy (40 degrees) I get less milk. When it is sunny and warm I get quite a bit more, and when we were able to turn our sheep out on grass pasture this spring, in one day I noticed the milk production went way up per ewe, well over 2 lbs. of milk a day. I have been keeping a chart and it's amazing the little things each day that can make a difference in milk production.

I have learned so much from this experience and so much about these sheep. I'm thankful for the chance to learn this and for the patience my sheep have had with me.

I have always wanted to try cheese making. Now with all this milk, I'm able to experiment with a lot of different recipes. We also make fresh butter regularly, as well as all the soap products I had previously been making with goats milk. I'm now able to use fresh Icelandic milk.

I guess I would have to say to anyone interested in milking their sheep, just jump in and do it! They are the best teachers. I can't believe there could be anyone less knowledgeable about milking than I was when I started. You can't really hurt them like I first thought. They will let you know if you're doing something wrong by giving a little kick.

The biggest concern would be cleanliness. As long as you have clean milking equipment and use clean milking practices you and your sheep will be fine. And by "EQUIPMENT" I don't mean you have to necessarily go out and purchase expensive milking equipment.

When my milking adventures started, it hit me all at once. I really didn't have time to prepare. I had a small stainless steel kitchen bowl and a large 3 lb. cottage cheese container for my wash water and a pair of rubber "Yellow Grandma Kitchen gloves."

I had talked to a woman who milked goats for years and was making cheese. She said in her early years she had many mastitis problems with her dairy flock but by the advice from an older farmer friend who told her to stop using those expensive teat dips and go to regular "Clorox bleach" (not some off brand of bleach and not scented) with a drop of "Dawn dish soap" and she never had one case of mastitis in 15 years.

So this is what I use. One Tablespoon Clorox to a tall 3lb. cottage cheese container that I fill with warm water and add the drop of Dawn dish soap when the container is almost full of water, or there will be too much suds to put the lid on.

I have started using mason jars and milk right into the jar. I do a lot of canning and some of my jars have the measurements right on the side so this makes it easy to know how much each ewe is giving. I like to use glass because I can see the milk and, like the stainless steel, you can clean with bleach water to make sure everything is disinfected when your through.

I use the cottage cheese container because it holds enough water and the opening seems just right for the udders. I can put the lid on easily and not have it spill. The bleach water doesn't seem to bother the plastic container and after a while I just use a new one.

I use the rubber gloves for cleanliness and also to protect my hands from the bleach. I was at first concerned about this bleach on the udders so I kept a close watch to make sure they are ok, and they are very healthy looking.

I hope anyone interested in milking their sheep will get some encouragement from our story and give it a try. The best teacher is experience and there really is nothing like fresh healthy clean milk and knowing that you produced it yourself.