



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Volume 3, Number 1 Winter 1999
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The Legends Have Arrived

Susan Mongold

After three years of negotiations, planning, phone calls, letter writing, emails and handwriting, Tongue River Farm in concert with Jager Farm Icelandics, have succeeded in bringing into the United States, semen from the Best Icelandic sheep sires in Iceland.

It took a cast of many to put this all together including: Dr. Thorstein olafsson, who collected, processed and froze the semen at the South Iceland Breeding Center in Iceland; Dr. Deb Gourley of Elite Genetics, who is a whiz at doing the impossible. She is responsible for the revolution going on in sheep artificial insemination by expediting the importation of semen and embryos of rare breeds and priceless breeding stock from around the world for use in the U.S. flocks.

Dr. Rodger Perkins at the USDA/APHIS who is not afraid to go anywhere the USDA has never gone before and to write reasonable protocols that address the “real” safety issues for this country.

Stefania Dignum of Yeoman Farm in Ontario, who with her fluent Icelandic and English language skills, acted as a go-between and facilitator and without whom it could not have happened. Stefania is no stranger to pioneer efforts herself, as she imported the first Icelandic sheep into Canada. All Icelandic sheep in North America are descended from these animals.

And so this is how the story unfolded....”Wouldn’t it be nice to get some semen from the best sires in Iceland?” we mused (Barbara Webb and I often plot breeding strategies over the phone).

We know that Iceland already has in place three AI stations around the country that deliver fresh semen daily, directly to the farmers during the breeding season. We knew also that most Icelanders keep scrupulous records of their sheep and lambs, including birth weights, body measurements, fleece quality, productivity and carcass grade for each lamb, to name just a few. Farmers get direct feedback as to which sires are producing the best lambs and it is from the best of these that a selection is made by the personnel at the AI stations to stand at stud and be used to improve the national flock. And why would we go to procure semen from this breed? We had discovered that the Icelandic breed is a true triple purpose breed that produces excellent meat, milk, fiber, and pelts that fill high value niche markets worldwide. Icelandic meat is known to the best chefs as having the finest flavor, texture and tenderness. Icelandic wool is used for the world famous Icelandic sweaters known for their beauty, warmth and ability to shed both water and wind. Icelandic sheep pelts lead the international market because they are used by interior decorators and the garment industry. Icelandic sheep cheese called “skyr” was made up until 40 years ago by each farmstead (there is talk about restarting the sheep cheese business in Iceland). The fleece is dual coated and comes in a wide range of natural colors and is valued by handspinners, weavers, and felters.

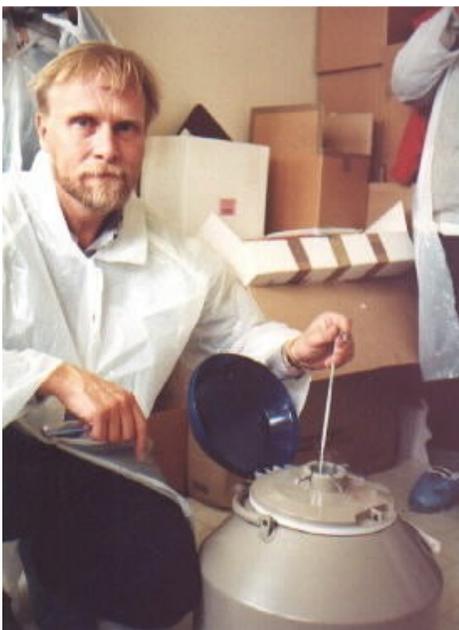
In addition to the high value products produced by this breed, the animals themselves are hardy,

relatively disease-free and low maintenance, needing no tail docking, no castration, and can be pasture lambled. The sheep are early maturing, long-lived, easy lambers, excellent mothers and good milkers. The lambs grow fast and are on hay alone. The lambs need no creep feed. This allows the farmer to keep costs low, and Icelandic sheep are reliable twinners. They are very fertile and lamb within a 20 day period. The breed comes horned or polled.

While the 88 animals that were originally imported into Canada contained an ample gene pool for the North American flock, they were selected from only one area of Iceland. We were told that some of the very best genetics were in other parts of Iceland. Why not try and bring in some semen from the best sires selected from the 450,000 sheep in Iceland? It had never been done before, but we were determined to give it our best efforts. We knew it would take time, maybe years, to accomplish this.

Government departments of agriculture are very cautious. A new protocol had to be written, rewritten, revised and fine-tuned. Rams would have to be tested for various diseases before and after being collected. Labs would have to be found to do the testing. Straws and labels would be needed to mark and store the semen.

Luckily, Dr. Olafsson at the AI station did his Ph.D. thesis in Sheep AI, so we were fortunate to have his expert help in this project. Dr. Sveinn Sigurmundsson, the AI station manager, helped to coordinate this project also.



Dr. Thorstein Olafsson

A collection made in early September produced mixed results as you might expect, as the natural breeding season for Icelandics is November through April. It was decided to make a second collection in late November at the start of the natural breeding season, and this resulted in 500 straws of high quality semen from 15 different rams. The sires included both horned and polled individuals, and one leader ram.

The semen from these excellent rams include individuals with excellent muscling, ribeye and fleece qualities, as well as being from exceptionally productive lines. They have proven that they can produce highly productive offspring that are fast-growing, have a lean meaty high quality carcass and finish in four to five months on grass and mother's milk alone.

These sheep are truly the stuff legends are made of: low maintenance, high profitability, lots of meat, milk and fiber in the widest array of lustrous natural colors. So it was, that finally, after years of work, the semen finally arrived in New York and was sent on to Elite Genetics in Iowa for storage.