

Tribute to a Shepherd, Or Lessons I have learned from a Friend

By Barb Webb

As you all must know by now, our breed community lost a true and dedicated friend on February 4th with the death of Stefania Sveinbjarnardottir Dignum, of Yeoman Farm, in Parham, Ontario. After seemingly holding her own against her cancer for months, Stef suddenly took a turn for the worst and passed away.

If you don't yet know, we all owe the presence of our beloved Icelandic sheep here in North America to the perseverance and sheer will power that Stef showed in her long campaign to bring Icelandic sheep out of her native Iceland. And even when Stef worked through all the bureaucratic stalling, and troubles, and red tape, Stef then faced the puzzle of why her Icelandics fell ill after she brought them home. After much research and consult with her vet, Stef discovered that her flock of Columbias had been riddled with OPP, (Ovine Progressive Pneumonia), and had passed it to her new flock of Icelandics. So then there was more work and more research, and plenty of heartache, and Stef was able to successfully eradicate OPP from her farm.

The next hurdle of course, was to export the breed to the U.S., and that is when I personally met Stefania Dignum. Just colleagues at first, with the shared goal of getting that all important USDA import permit, Stef and I became friends over 14 months of phone calls, faxes, emails, and laughing "plans" to get the sheep over the border disguised as hairy "dogs". And I discovered a wonderful, loyal and fun loving friend, generous with her time, her laughs and her coffee.

When I was mulling over what to possibly say in a memorial that would appropriately pay tribute to the life of Stefania, it occurred to me that the best tribute would be to pass along some of the lessons that she so generously had shared with me over the last 17 years.

First and foremost, the desperate necessity of practicing consistent measures of biosecurity to protect your farm from imported parasites or pathogens. Both from her memories as a child of the national OPP eradication program back home in Iceland, and from her own painful experience with the disease, Stef always lobbied tirelessly for the importance of keeping your farm safe from biohazards. The only boots that passed the farm gate at Yeoman Farm were Yeoman Farm boots, no sheep ever, ever came back to the farm after they had left, and any official visitors who came to the farm, whether they were Vets, shearers, or Government officials, had to wear plastic booties, or have their footwear disinfected. We owe Stef a debt of gratitude as we are in the fortunate position now of having one of the most disease-free breeds in North America.

Don't forget your white. It may sound silly now, particularly with all the white that is entering our flocks with the advent of AI breeding, but there was a time when Icelandic shepherds were in danger of losing the gene for the white pattern. Breeding for the wide variety of luscious colors and patterns in our breed, some breeders were forgetting about also hanging on to white. As Stef pointed out to me during my first visit at the farm, if you don't see white when you look out at your flock, then you don't have the gene. All the other patterns are recessive to white and so can pop up and surprise you even generations down the line, but if you don't see white in your flock, then you've lost it. In the years following, I've learned to appreciate the many colors of white, and the particularly silky texture that you can find in white fleeces.

"Pull out and down!" - The first time I realized that I had a breech birth in progress, I was panic stricken and called Stef for help. It was our first year with LAI and not knowing how the hor-

mones would affect Icelandic fertility, I had ended up over-feeding the ewes and the lambs were all too big. One set of triplets was jammed up at the gate behind a breech presentation, and so I called Stef for help. Her calm advice to an overwrought shepherd was to "pull out and down". The key with a breech birth of course is to get the lamb out as quickly as possible, before it takes a breath of amniotic fluid when the cord is pinched in the birth canal. And because the configuration in a breech birth is such that the back of the head can jam up on the pelvic bone, the lamb can get stuck and drown before you can pull it out. Hence her measured advice to pull quickly, and firmly yet gently, and to pull out and down. So I ran back to the paddock, grabbed hold of those hind hooves, and coaching myself desperately as I birthed the lamb, I found myself yelling at the top of my lungs, "Pull out and down! Pull out and down!!!" I laugh about it now whenever I think of it, but her advice certainly saved those triplets that day.

Enjoy your sheep! Even though you may be keeping a commercial flock, there's still no reason why you can't enjoy your sheep. Go down to the barn on a summer's eve, bringing your cocktail with you if you have one, and sit down on an upended bucket and enjoy their wise and gentle company. Watch the lamb-run at sunset with friends, or get up early to watch a birth just for the sheer pleasure of it. We are so fortunate to have these interesting, unusual and amusing animals, so be sure to spend some time with them.

When you have a sick animal, or a weak newborn lamb, treat them only as long as they themselves are trying to live. Use as many of your shepherd tricks as you know and can afford, but when the animal gives up, then so should we. This breed is so hardy, and has such a strong will to live, that when they decide it is time to give up, then it is. At that point, as good shepherds, we stop treatment and give them a gentle and merciful end.

Death is an unavoidable part of a farm. When you have live animals, there will be dead animals. And when you are particularly discouraged by a difficult loss, go down and enjoy the rest of the flock, and take solace from their peaceful company.

Be generous. Help other shepherds whenever you can. Someone was helpful to you as a beginner, so help someone else get a good, healthy start with their flock. Stef always had time for my questions and for the questions of lots of other folks who called or emailed, and so answering someone's question, helping them figure out a puzzle, or just commiserating with them over a difficult loss, is the best way of passing on the gift.

And lastly, sheep people are some of the kindest, most fun, and most generous and honest people that you can meet. They'll help a stranger in a pinch, and are always, always, ready and willing to swap sheep stories. And best of all, you never know when that stranger on the phone, or at your farm gate, will go on to become one of your most dear and beloved friends.

Thanks for everything Stef. Wherever you are dear friend, be happy. Know that we will carry on your legacy, and please be sure to be watching over our shoulders at lambing time.

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