

When Are They Too Old???

By Stefania Sveinbjanardottir Dignum

Just like all of you out there in ISBONA land, I love my sheep. When they reach what I would call an old age for sheep but are still in good health and appear to have some quality of life, they retire. That is, they just hang around not having to do what is expected from their younger flock-mates – to breed. In the winter they stay in a group pen that we usually call “The Senior Pen”. And if they have been exceptionally productive and are in good health they can retire early, say about the age of 10.

Last fall I had five ewes that qualified for a Senior Pen accommodation. Three were 14 ½ years old, one was 11 ½ years and the third was 10 ½ - she had lost all her front teeth after a long and productive career but was healthy and in fair condition.

In December when we were sorting the ewes into breeding groups, the two rams that were designated breeders got in with the ewes that we were working with. I did not think that it would do any harm since we were there and the job only took about an hour. At the end of that we had three groups, two breeding groups and the Senior Pen group.

Once during the breeding season someone did not latch the gate to the seniors group properly (everyone questioned swore that it could not be them) and some of the seniors got in with the group of 602N. I squarely blamed that on old Grey Pet sr. (STS 140Z) who has always been exceptionally clever in opening gates. But it was discovered and soon everyone was in their allotted places and no harm done (I thought).

Sometime in April I discovered that Grey Pet jr. (STS 119C) was nicely bagging up (that is the term used when the udder starts to fill out). So I kept a close eye on her as the first day of planned lambing approached. She was the second of all to lamb. And not only that, she had triplets – two girls and a boy! No problems or complications in spite of her 12 years. The lambs were quite lively and the other old girls were curiously sniffing the babies. As one of the triplets turned to her grandmother to try to find something to eat since mom was busy lambing I put my hand under Grey Pet sr. to deflect the lamb to her mother. To my amazement I found that my old Grey Pet sr. had a good size bag! Of course I kept extra watch on the old girl and when she did go into labour on the 15th of May I stayed



right with her. It took her about two hours to deliver a little grey mouflon girl. I did a little pulling but nothing drastic. I did felt into the old girl to see if there was more coming and found that there was another one.

Well, I waited for about three hours. Last year old Golsa (at 14) had taken a long time delivering her (unplanned) baby and I had not intervened and the lamb was born very weak and died soon after birth. I blamed myself for not intervening in time. As to not repeat my mistake I dived into Old Grey Pet (she was not pushing at all) and pulled the second lamb out. He was dead and I don't know if he was already dead in utero or if I killed him by

pulling. I think it is terrific when a 15 year old ewe has a live lamb at all so I did not feel too bad Grey Pet sr. was so busy cleaning her little girl off that she hardly noticed when the second one came out. Unfortunately the old girl did not have any milk to speak of so I stole some colostrum from other moms and fed the baby.



I also had decide to supplement the triplets. So as soon as they were born I stole colostrums from the only ewe that had lambed before even though she was nursing twins. I did not need much since Grey Pet jr. did have milk for her triplets, but since she is so old (12) I figured that I should help. In cases of triplets I

usually feed them all colostrum from a bottle when they are just born since I have found that if they get the taste of a bottle they will usually take it later if need arises.

All these lambs are doing very well now. Old Grey Pet sr. did eventually produce enough milk, but her little one still comes for a little extra from the bottle. Of the triplets only the runt has got milk consistently from the bottle, but all of them come for a social drink when we come out with the bottles. We did have another set of triplets from an old ewe, a nine year old, so we took these into the seniors group and two of these triplets also come for a little social drink. So all these old mommas have milk but not only do I feel I should help momma a little I also really like bottle babies. It would not feel right not to have a bottle baby around.

As I said before, these were accidental breedings. I do not recommend breeding ewes that are more than 11 years old unless they are in excellent condition and get exceptional care. But obviously these sheep do not agree with me. So now we know that they can still give birth when they are 15 years old – and with a little help can raise a lamb. And I am grateful that I was feeding the seniors exceptionally well last winter. Otherwise the story might have sadder ending.

2005 Board of Directors Election Results

- 1) Tom McDowell with 41 votes
- 2) Doug Duprey with 38 votes
- 3) Nina Dent with 26 votes

- 4 & 5) Natalie Chartier with 25 votes
- 4 & 5) Bonnie Swenson with 25 votes

- 6) Keith Erny with 24 votes
- 7) Lillian LeVeque with 22 votes
- 8) Micheal DesPlaines with 10 votes

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