



# Succession in farming and breeding

Are the next generation of the Howden clan going to produce better sheep in West Otago? If they keep up their formula combining genetics, land and stock management, the odds are they will.

BY TIM BREWSTER

The Waikoikoi family is in their fourth generation of farming sheep on their Donald Road property and over the decades have consistently raised the standard of their breeding stock to ensure a successful, ongoing stud operation.

Brian and his wife Nola have been farming the property since 1981, after Brian's father left the property. A former truck-driver, an activity he still has a passion for, Brian was asked to come aboard the company that had been formed for the farm which has now been in the family for 80 years.

But it's not just the successful continuation of their stock they've been working on, family succession planning for the farm is key as well.

Brian and Nola's son Nathan and his wife Charlotte joined forces in 2008 and with the expansion of the farming operation; the combination of family co-operation and consistent stock improvement appears to be a winning formula.

"We need to be one step ahead with the fertility programme. Knowing what they (purchasers) want in the future and trying to have it available. You never know if you're getting the same client back the year after, but we've been pretty lucky, most of them have," Brian said.

Since getting back on the land, he and Nola have experienced substantial success in their farming, winning Romney Farmer of the Year and being runners-up in the AC Cameron South Island Farmer of the Year in 1991 and Clutha Farmer of the Year in 1995. In 2005, they were runners up in the Lincoln University Lamb Producer/Finisher Awards and both have undertaken judging roles for hogget competitions at district and national levels.

Long time Romney farmers, the Howden's attention had been drawn to the Texel breed which had been introduced in the early 1990's. Early adopters of the breed in New Zealand praised their resilience and strong growth rates and Brian and Nola started breeding Texel's along with their other rams after buying the MEBA Texel Stud from Errol Holgate in 2005.

In 2008 they sold their first crop of two-tooth rams. Following Nathan's return the same year the decision was made to make a bigger commitment to the breed.

"Probably my pushing it when I came back. They run off the smell of an oily rag," Nathan said.

Other attributes were their ability to maintain condition during lean times, a high confirmation rate and their high quality meat, he said.

The Texels were bred with the existing Romneys with good results.

"They went that well, all our commercial stock is now half Texel and half Romney. We were doing very well out of them [Romneys]. It's pretty hard to change sometimes but we gave it a go and it's working pretty well. I was a Romney man through and through, a former Romney Farmer of the Year. To keep it simple we had to do all or none," Brian said.

The return of Nathan also coincided with the opportunity to expand an already successful operation.

The Howden's bought the Blythburn Genetex stud from the Wishart family in 2009 and an additional 121 nearby hectares to bring the farm's total working size up to 387 hectares.

Last year the farm produced 142,755kgs of meat with an 18.5kg average lamb weight for a yield of 368kgs of meat /hectare along with 30,000kg of wool.

With an estimated 30% of their work allocated to the stud, the Howden's sell between 100 to 110 two-tooth rams a year and between 30 and 35 Genetex (Romney and Texel) ram lambs.

The stud stock units this year totalled 600 stud ewes, 180 stud hoggets and 160 stud ram hoggets.

**"The combination of family co-operation and consistent stock improvement appears to be a winning formula."**



ABOVE: Nathan and Brian Howden  
OPPOSITE PAGE: The sheep that are the farms backbone

"All stock are treated the same, when our studs leave our gate we want them to maintain their condition. It's a false economy fattening the studs for view on our premises, only for them to go backward once they have left," Nathan said.

Of the 3,720 commercial ewes this year, 24% were allocated to the 'B' mob and all their offspring are sent to the works.

"The B mob are still good sheep but we're not going to breed from them because they've got faults."

"They're pretty hard cullers," Nola says of her husband and son. Strong quality control for stock

and their stud is a crucial aspect of their success, Brian said.

The reputation of the stud and the commercial stock has been a big factor in securing a valuable supply contract with the Waitrose supermarket chain in the UK, a contract the Howden's have had for 15 years.

The security of the contract enables them to buy additional stock when numbers drop and helps with their reputation to potential purchasers.

"We just seem to have people coming to buy our rams. Word of mouth is the best advertising.

One of the problems in ram breeding is you struggle to find better rams than yours," Brian said.

Managing customer expectations with breeding stock can also be a bit tricky.

"Some people will change their ram breed and expect changes overnight but it takes five generations," Nola said.

Brian and Nola are equal shareholders with Nathan and Charlotte who now have two small children, which means a good working relationship is vital.

"We seem to work very well. We have a policy where we talk on Sunday nights. We see each other most days. We plan our week. We have goals and objectives that have to be met and we know what has to be done for the rest of the week. We don't get up in the morning and wonder what we are going to do," Brian said.

"Best bit probably was I didn't come home straight away and learnt from other people as well. I didn't get set in Dad's ways," Nathan said.

After completing a diploma in Farm Management at Lincoln University in 2002, Nathan worked on a sheep, beef and cropping farm in Mid Canterbury. That was followed by a stint playing rugby and working on a high country sheep farm in Wales.

Following his return, he notes the changes in the area due to dairy farming has brought financial benefits to the area, but the traditionally tight-knit social values of the area have suffered.

"I think the community's probably not as close as it used to be. There's a lot more turnover. I don't think it's their fault completely. It's just that they're only around two, three or four years."

Like most parts of rural New Zealand, farming families traditionally have always been strongly involved in their local community. Brian is a Life Member of the local cricket club, chairman of the Cemetery board, committee member on the local Hall Board and Domain Board and a member of the Glenkenich Area Waterboard. Nathan is now chair of the cricket club and also helps Brian with his numerous duties.

Both men take part in a local discussion groups and are committee members of the West Otago Beef and Lamb Monitor Farm Programme.

Nola is strongly involved in the Women's Lion's Club in Gore as well as cooking at a rest home there. Charlotte is kept busy juggling a seven-month old and a three year-old, while working as a Landscape Architect for her own private





ABOVE: Nola and Brian Howden

BELOW: The beautiful landscape of the Howden farm

practise, and acts as both the treasurer and secretary for the Waikoikoi Playgroup.

"It's extremely important to be involved in the community, more so now, with the increased number of dairy farms being developed around us, and the transient nature of the industry. It means that our involvement, plus that of

the other permanent locals ensures that the community still operates at its best," Nathan said.

As a former member of the school trustees when Nathan was growing up, Brian notices he is no longer so aware of what's going on in the area. "Once your children leave school you lose touch with the district."

Apart from the increase in the dairying industry, some of the biggest changes he has noticed during his tenure since the 1980's has been the

amount of information for stock management.

"Genetics has changed and availability of information. So many things you can blood test for. Electric fencing and break feeding is unreal. Scanning is a terrific tool. You can feed your stock accordingly. Ram harnesses are very important for managing feed, you put them out for a certain period of time and draft that colour off."

Being able to measure pasture cover accurately for feed budgeting as a result has been a big improvement, especially at lambing time.

Costs for supplies and services have risen, but things are still better than the early days, Brian said.

"When I started farming interest rates were 21% and we paid back 2% of principle on top of it. People say it's hard today, the figures are bigger but I reckon things were harder then. What we were getting for our produce wasn't much.

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The future is looking strong for the operation with plans for increased stock numbers and some cattle. The farm is well set up for cattle with plans for some bulls, plus growing whole crop of barley for a nearby dairy farmer Nathan said.

"The set up is pretty good. We're trying to have a bit more diversification rather than all our eggs in one basket."

An ongoing part of their improvement is to increase the survival rate between scanning and tailing. This year they had a scanning success of 190% with 153% survival rate and would like to reduce the 16–17% difference down to 12%. Weather events and illnesses such as Salmonella Brandenburg can also affect mortality rates.

One of their more recent ventures is dabbling with the new breed on the block, Charollais. Early results have shown superior growth rates up to 5kg better than the other lambs on the property so this year they will be offering half Texel and half Charollais two-tooth rams for sale.







Despite the big changes in the area, the Howden's are intent on staying with their sheep farming as the benefits outweigh the other options. Nathan says, "being able to work with family, being able to breed new breeds (Texel and Charollais), trying different things within breeds [such as] crossing different breeds and playing with the percentage composition in each breed, to see which works best. Watching the stock develop over the years such as hoggets progressing through to two-tooth and on into mixed aged ewes, meeting new farmers or ram buyers, seeing how they run their operation.

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We are always looking for new ideas [and its good] seeing the same buyers coming back year after year."

He says a big attraction is the lifestyle. "It's not the same thing every day, you're always trying to improve from year to year such as scanning and lambing percentages, weaning drafts and lamb weights, and you really can't beat a beautiful day out on the lambing beat. Texel is still going to play an extremely important role in the sheep industry, due to its high meat yield, confirmation and fertility."

**ABOVE:** The three generations of Howdens from left Brian and Nola, their son Nathan with his wife Charlotte and their children

But the challenges are there as well, "trying to be one step ahead of the purchasers, and trying to source sires, better than what we have ourselves. Try to keep improving the breed while seeing the numbers of purchases decline as they head into other industries such as dairy, dairy support and cropping."

## Information from the NZ and Australian Sheepbreeders associations

Texel sheep were reported to have been on the North Sea coast of Europe for many centuries. The breed takes its name from the Isle of Texel in the Province of North Holland.

They were selected from Denmark and Finland to suit New Zealand and Australian conditions. In addition to their natural attributes of heavy muscling and leanness, they had to be mobile sheep capable of travelling distances, free lambing and easy care. A select Australian flock began quarantine in New Zealand in 1988 and an objective genetic selection program was implemented.

The Texels imported into New Zealand were sourced from Denmark and Finland because of their scrapie-free status. They were released from quarantine in 1990.