

# Sheep: ‘This has been a social phenomenon’

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## ‘In my blood’

Martin is a third-generation rancher whose father and grandfather raised sheep near Dixon, Calif.

“So, I had to do it, too,” he said, adding that it’s “in my blood.”

He recalls, as a boy, eyeing a silver trophy at a California sheep show.

“I always wanted to win that thing,” he said.

He set out to breed the best sheep.

He was always interested in genetics, and once attempted to AI rats for an undergraduate project.

After college, Dally got a job at the University of California-Davis directing the sheep research programs at the Hopland Research and Extension Center.

While at UC-Davis, Dally heard about a major research breakthrough. It was 1982, and Australian researchers had developed a laparoscopic insemination procedure that would revolutionize the sheep AI technique.

For many years, breeders had considered AI of sheep impractical for three reasons.

First, it was hard to detect the ewe’s estrus cycle, or “heat.”

Second, it was impossible to freeze ram semen.

Finally, a sheep’s anatomical structure makes penetration of the cervix nearly impossible.

A series of research breakthroughs made it possible to synchronize a ewe’s estrus cycle, freeze ram semen and use a laparoscope, a tiny instrument that is inserted directly into the uterus. AI in sheep suddenly became practical, opening a world of genetic opportunity.

Dally was eager to learn from the Australians, and in 1986, he became one of the earliest pioneers of sheep LAI in the U.S. Through the years, he further improved the technique.

After a 25-year career at UC-Davis, he settled in Lebanon, Ore.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

## Close-up of a Valais Blacknose purebred lamb.

### Joining forces

Joy and Martin met in 2005 at the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival. She was looking for Wensleydale genetics to improve her flock’s fiber; he was selling ram semen.

“Wensleydales brought us together,” said Joy Dally.

She had been raised on a cow dairy in New York state, but had devoted her life to sheep.

The two married in 2007.

From their Oregon base, the couple raised sheep, established relationships with breeders and import-export officials across Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and performed AI procedures.

Joy Dally says they traveled the U.S. regularly, making stops from the West Coast to the East Coast and back — “an AI job here, delivering sheep there.”

Martin Dally said he matches genetics not only to flocks but also to the environment. For a farmer in a dry climate, for example, he recommends breeds that originate from desert regions.

Breeders nationwide say the Dallys have boosted their flocks’ genetics and the overall industry.

### A wide impact

Vogler, the Nevada sheep rancher, raises Merinos, a fine-wooled breed. When he wanted to improve his flock’s genetics, his state veterinarian suggested he contact the Dallys.

“I couldn’t do big, cross-bred lambs,” said Vogler.

“I had to have hardy, medium-sized sheep so the desert won’t eat ‘em like popcorn.”

Merinos, originating from Spain and developed in Australia, fit that niche. With the Dallys’ help, Vogler brought high-quality Australian Merino genetics into his flock.

His sheep now produce about 120,000 pounds of soft, fine wool annually, and Vogler estimates because of the improved genetics, he gets about \$1.50 more per pound than his competitors.

Another couple that has benefited from the Dallys’ work is Paul and Kathy Lewis, who raise about 700 breeding ewes near Bonanza, Ore.

Like Vogler, the Lewises needed a breed suited to their dry environment. They chose White Dorpers, originating in South Africa, and Dally did their AI work.

“(Martin and Joy) have done so much for us,” said Paul Lewis, 79. “There’s a huge need for the work they do.”

Rebecca King, widely considered one of the breeders leading genetics improvement in the sheep dairy industry, has recently improved her California flock with imported Lacaune semen, a milk breed originating from France. Martin Dally helped her get started.

Barb and Geof Ruppert, Pennsylvania sheep ranchers, say the Dallys helped them improve the wool quality of their American Corridales with Australian genetics.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

## Joy Dally holds a box of wool. The fiber side of the sheep business is called Shepherds Lane of Oregon.

“We certainly are grateful to them for helping us with our breeding program,” said Barb Ruppert.

Mindy Mayer, an Idaho rancher, secured Kerry Hill semen from the Dallys. Kerry Hills are a heritage breed from the United Kingdom, white with distinct black markings around the eyes and mouth.

Mayer now runs Kerry Hill Winery in Wilder, a popular agritourism destination where visitors drink wine while watching wool events, herding demonstrations and “sip and shear” events.

“I couldn’t have done this without Martin and Joy,” Mayer said. “They’ve helped me, guided me — you know, really shared their knowledge.” Breeders say most heritage and specialty breeds in the U.S. today can be traced to Dally.

### Big shoes to fill

There are few laparoscopic artificial insemination specialists in the U.S. sheep industry today.

Breeders say it takes a special kind of person: someone with intelligence, good hand-eye coordination, a love for sheep and vision for the work.

LAI isn’t easy.

“A lot of times, people think you can just pick up semen, put them in a suitcase overseas and come back. It’s a lot more complicated than that,” said Martin Dally.

His work, he said, has sometimes been “frustrating” — long travels, navigating complex import protocols, catching the ewes in their estrus cycle and performing

the LAI procedure.

Many farm-side factors also influence success rates, including animal health, the environment and how the ewes were managed prior to the procedure.

“The AI technician is only one spoke in a big wheel,” said Martin Dally.

Dally said he has attempted to train several veterinary students and others in LAI work, but few caught the vision.

Several breeders said they wonder who will fill Dally’s shoes when he moves toward retirement.

Although the Dallys no longer travel as often for AI work, they’re not slowing down. The two seem happily chin-deep in their latest venture with Valais Blacknose genetics.

### ‘A social phenomenon’

The Dallys saw Swiss Valais Blacknose sheep for the first time in 2014.

“It was love at first sight,” said Joy Dally.

The Dallys visited flocks across the United Kingdom, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark and Germany in 2015 and finally selected Valais rams from the UK in 2016. They imported their first semen in 2017.

Martin implanted the Valais Blacknose semen into Gotland, Teeswater and Scottish Blackface ewes as “foundation” breeds. The first 50% cross-bred lambs were born in the U.S. in 2018. In 2019, 75% Valais lambs were born, and in 2020, 87.5% — a process called upgrading.

Last summer, the couple imported their first batch

of frozen embryos. Embryos are harder than semen to implant and cost \$3,500 each, not counting importation and insurance expenses.

But it was worth it, the Dallys say. Last month, their first-ever Valais Blacknose purebred lambs were born in the U.S.

Demand has been overwhelming, they say. Most buyers have not come from the commercial sheep community. That’s because Valais Blacknose don’t have top-notch wool, milk or meat. They’re just really cute.

“If someone wants to buy cuteness, I’ll set it to them,” said Martin Dally.

He grinned. Dally calls the Valais “pasture puppies” and “lawn ornaments.”

Joy Dally now spearheads an organization called the Valais Blacknose Sheep Society. The group, she said, already has more than 100 members, including two Oregon breeders who already have purebreds.

“This has been a social phenomenon,” she said.

### Long-term vision

In the future, the Dallys plan to focus on three areas: getting the Valais Blacknose well-established in the U.S., opening their farm to agritourism and expanding their wool business.

Joy Dally said she’s always wanted more agritourism — to invite the community on educational tours of a working sheep farm.

“I’d love to get people out here,” she said.

At this, Martin shook his head.

“Don’t mind Martin. He’s curmudgeonly,” she said.

“She’s so outgoing,” he returned, shrugging.

They both laughed.

The farm certainly looks a welcoming place for tourism. The property lies snug between rolling green hills in Lebanon. Approaching the farmhouse, which stands at the end of a long driveway, sheep graze on the right and a row of white birches flanks the left.

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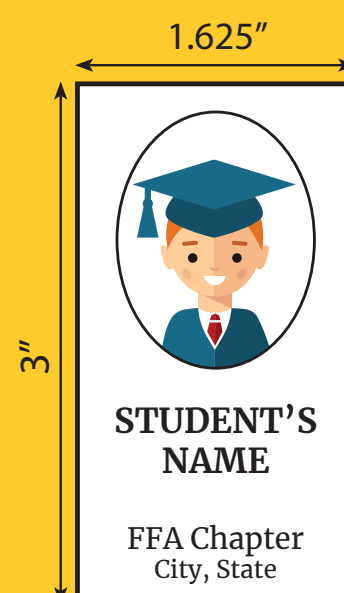
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