

Obstetrics In The Sheep Barn

Prepared by: L. J. Kortan, and first appeared in "Shepherd" magazine in March 1971, and in the BC Sheep Production Handbook.

Losing a lamb means 12 months of ewe costs wasted. If you realize what is happening and know what to do when a ewe shows signs of giving birth to her lamb, you can save a good percentage of the lambs and even ewes in some cases.

Most herders or lambers do not believe in letting a ewe strain for hours before investigating her to determine the position of the lamb. If she has passed the first "water bag" and does not within a half hour or less give birth to her young, she should be caught, thrown, and examined.

There are two or three basic situations in lamb delivery. If you know how to handle these situations, you'll be successful in most variations of lamb birth. Here are the main variations and how to handle them.

CASE 1: TIGHT DELIVERY – this is a normal birth, but owing to lamb size or the tightness of the ewe, the lamb probably would die before delivery.

Stand over the ewe, facing the tail. Draw one leg of the lamb to an extended position. Then, while drawing lightly on this leg with the left hand, work the ewe's skin back over the crown (forehead) of the lamb's head with the right hand. Next, span the neck with the right hand and draw the lamb forward an inch or two, still pulling the foreleg with the left hand. Now it's safe to extend the second leg. Complete delivery by drawing both legs and neck.

You'll be tempted to extend both legs at first. However, in this position, the thicker parts of the legs come opposite the crown of the head. Delivery then is more difficult and unnecessarily hard on the ewe.

CASE 2: FORELEG TURNED BACK – This position is like a normal birth except one foreleg is turned back. If it is the right leg, lay the ewe on her right side. Now the backward leg is uppermost. Take the same position as in Case 1. Extend the one foreleg, work skin back over the head, and draw the lamb an inch or so.

FACTSHEET



**BRITISH
COLUMBIA**

**Ministry of Agriculture,
Food & Fisheries**
Abbotsford Agriculture
Centre
1767 Angus Campbell
Road
Abbotsford, BC V3G 2M3
Phone: (604) 556-3001
Fax: (604) 556-3030

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Now the shoulder of the backward leg will be caught behind the upper side of the V-shaped bones (pelvic bones) of the ewe. Twist the lamb and pull at the same time. This is done by drawing the leg out and upward and the head out and downward. After a jerk is felt as the shoulder slips past the pelvic bones, only straight pull is necessary.

If the lamb's left leg is turned back, lay the ewe on her left side. Always keep the backward leg uppermost. It is important to learn this method, as it can simplify other cases.

It sometimes happens that the lamb is pushed back into the ewe in order to catch the other leg and the head drops out of the pelvic girdle and getting it started right again becomes very difficult. Getting the head started into the pelvis again is very difficult (see Case 5).

CASE 3: NO FEET SHOWING – If only the head is out, feel to see if one or both legs are doubled back at the knee. It's easy to hook them with the finger. When no legs are felt, both must be doubled back from the shoulder. If the head is of normal size, push it back again through the bones. Slip the fingers along the neck and over the shoulder, hook the leg and draw it forward.

Now straighten the leg at the knee joint, pressing the fingers and thumb. The leg should now be drawn a little to bring the foot through the bones. Straighten the head and work it carefully through the bones.

Now that the head is out, draw the leg and proceed as in Case 2.

CASE 4: THE BIG LAMB – If the ewe can't deliver a big lamb because of construction at the pelvic bones, it is often because the lamb's head is not lying with its crown against the ewe's spine. It is difficult to straighten if the ewe is on her side with the lamb's head twisted upwards.

Remedy: Turn ewe over with the lamb's head down. If both legs are through, turn one leg back and the lamb now should come easily. Proceed in Case 2.

Often a big-headed and big-shouldered lamb presented properly (front feet alongside his nose) cannot be ejected easily but the ewe, even by a strong fat one. Thin, old and weak ewes many times will need help. In this case, one leg at a time should be stretched out and then both pulled together by one hand, while the first two fingers of the other hand are slipped up the lamb's forehead and in back of its ears, stretching the lips of the vulva. This method may require considerable strength but usually will slip the lamb out. It is a good practice to let the ewe expel the lamb once its shoulders are out, or at least to pull it out slowly and then place it immediately at her head where she can clean it. If she is not inclined immediately to clean and recognize it, forcing her muzzle into the warm lamb will start her.

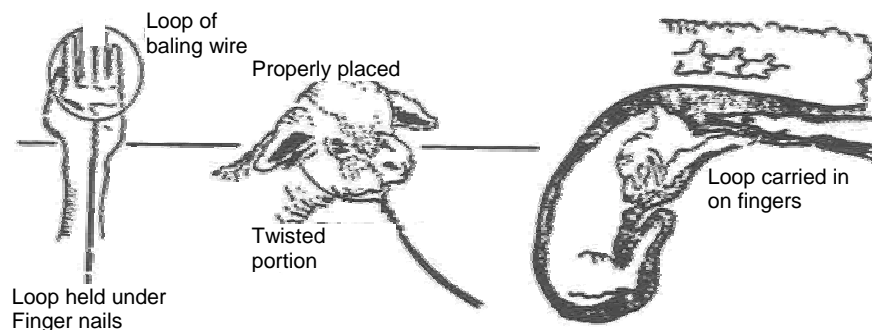
In pulling a big-shouldered lamb it will be found much easier to pull to the left or right of a straight pull. A straight pull places the two shoulder blades exactly opposite each other and at their widest, so that they must be squeezed severely to allow them to enter

and pass through the pelvic girdle. By bending and twisting the lamb, as the pull is made, the shoulder-blade positions will be altered so that they can pass through more easily.

CASE 5: NO HEAD SHOWING – The head often is turned along the ribs if only forefeet are showing. Lay ewe on her side so the lamb's head is uppermost. Push lamb back far enough to straighten the neck and get the head lined up with the ewe's backbone. It is now like Case1.

This can be a most difficult operation, though, and you might want some other ideas. With the legs extended through the pelvic girdle, it is next to impossible many times to straighten out the neck and get the head to pass through. If it starts through and a pull is made on the legs, the usual occurrence is that the head slips back into its original position (or down toward the ewe's udder), and persistent but unsuccessful attempts get more and more irksome. In this case, string nooses should be slipped over each ankle and the leg should be folded back into the womb – of course, making sure enough string protrudes. Then, with the lamb's shoulders no longer in the way at the inner mouth of the pelvic girdle, it is possible to draw the head up into the pelvis within the palm of the hand and to bring the front legs along by pulling on the string.

To assist in drawing the head out, if it cannot be guided in the palm of the hand, a piece of baling wire will be very useful. This wire should preferably be rather heavy and of course unrusted. Bend a length of wire at its middle and form a noose a little bigger than will slip over the head of the fetus, twisting the wire to form such a loop. This loop may then be carried into the uterus (in the palm) and fitted over the lamb's head with the twisted part under the lamb's chin and the loop in back of the lamb's ears. Then, when the front legs are pulled by the strings, the head will be guided, chin up, into the pelvis by pulling on the wire. Care should be taken in fitting the noose over the lamb's head. Be sure, before pulling, that it has not caught a fold of the uterine wall, for this might cause rupture of the uterus and loss of the ewe. The wire should be resorted to immediately if it is found at all difficult to guide the head into the pelvis.



Baling wire noose used to assist the birth of a lamb

Some lambs are so large in relation to the pelvic passageway that even this method of guiding the forepart of the lamb cannot affect a birth. The combination of the large chest, the large head and the straightened-out front legs of the lamb is too much. It is then necessary to turn the lamb around inside the uterus and to remove it, tail first (or

hind legs first). This is usually quite possible, although it is sometimes difficult to turn the lamb. Assistants may raise the rear of the ewe to allow the operator to find and secure the hind legs.

The removal of a lamb by such an operation should be followed by an injection of penicillin for the ewe unless the operator is sure that no serious abrasion or tearing of the uterine wall has occurred.

It is most important that an early decision be made about the probable eventual removal of the lamb, and that entering of the vaginal tract, which destroys natural lubrication and tears the uterine wall, be held to a minimum.

CASE 6: HIND FEET FIRST – It's easy to draw the hind legs out, but then the lamb usually sticks. Avoid breaking ribs. Swing legs from side to side while pulling. After the lamb's ribs are exposed, it is easy to get the lamb away. Clear fluid quickly from lamb's nose to avoid drowning.

CASE 7: TAIL SHOWS – Push lamb back through pelvic bones until you feel the hock joint of the hind leg. Hook fingers over the leg and straighten it with the thumb. Draw the foot up through the bones. Do the same with the other leg. Proceed as in Case 6.

CASE 8: LYING ACROSS – Sometimes the lamb is lying across the entrance to the pelvic bones. Only the back can be felt. Push lamb back to enable you to feel which way the lamb is lying. If head and forelegs are nearest the bones, push lamb back and deliver as in Case 4. Otherwise, deliver hind feet first as in Case 6.

CASE 9: TWINS COMING TOGETHER – Two to four feet may be coming together. Only feet will be beyond pelvic bones, a complication usually resulting from the first lamb being sideways.

First, locate legs and head belonging to one lamb. Do this by pushing lambs back far enough to allow the hand to track out a leg. Put a string on the leg to avoid mix-up.

Push the second lamb back and deliver the first. In some cases it may be safer to push the second leg back and deliver as in Case 2.

Deliver lambs quickly. Deliver easiest lamb first.

CASE 10: TWINS WITH ONE COMING HIND FEET FIRST – Once you are sure of the hind feet, it's usually easier to lamb the reversed one first. Hold hind feet and push back the head and forefeet.

In twin cases, the sheepman must judge which lamb will be the easiest to get first. Much depends on the lamb's position.

Natural birth is still best. Do not pull any lamb unless the ewe is in distress. If the ewe has strained for an hour and no part of the lamb appears or if a problem is evident, enter and assist the ewe.

When pulling, always pull outward and slightly downward. Time your pull to coincide with the ewe's efforts, which occur at intervals.

Before entering a ewe's reproductive tract, trim your fingernails short and wash your hands in a disinfectant. Lubricate your hands with raw linseed oil or light mineral oil.

Some abnormal presentations described in text

