

Blackbelly Sheep—Why... or Why Not?

Carol J. Elkins



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God morning! My name is Carol Elkins and I live in Pueblo, Colorado. I've been raising Barbados Blackbelly sheep since 1998, and I'm a board member and Webmistress for the Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association (BBSAI). I host an email group for blackbelly folks and we're up to about 350 members now. This group, and my involvement with the BBSAI, helps me keep in touch with what's going on in the blackbelly world.

Topics to Cover

- History of blackbelly sheep in the U.S.
- Merits of blackbelly sheep
- What blackbelly sheep are not
- Why you *should* raise blackbelly sheep
- Why you *should not* raise blackbelly sheep
- 10 years from now

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Today, I want to tell you about the Barbados Blackbelly and the American Blackbelly, and how each breed came to be.

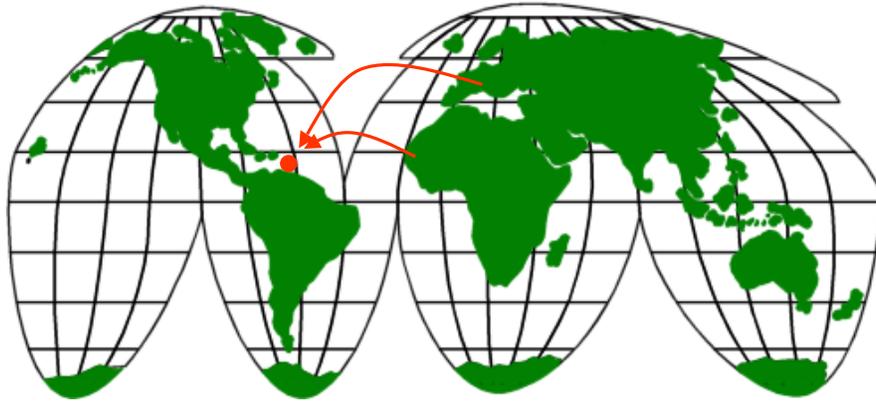
We're going to look at the particular merits of blackbelly sheep and discuss their shortcomings, as well.

I'm going to give you some reasons to get involved with blackbelly sheep, and I'm also going to be upfront with you about why you shouldn't.

We'll finish up in about 20 minutes by having a quick look at where we want our sheep to be in 10 years.

Let's start by gaining an understanding of the difference between these two breeds and how each came about.

History of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep in Barbados



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There is compelling historical evidence that the BB as a breed originated and evolved on the island of Barbados from crosses of African hair sheep and European woolled breeds. There were many environmental factors that naturally selected for hairiness (such as burrs that fouled the fleece of woolled breeds and high tropical temperatures) and there is evidence of early artificial selection as hairy sheep became preferred.

History of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep in the U.S.



In 1904, the U.S. Department of Agriculture imported four ewes and one ram, all yearlings, to Bethesda, Maryland. From that original importation, research flocks were established at North Carolina State University, Texas A&M, and Dixon Ranch in California.

History of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep in the U.S.



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Various lines from the NCSU flock were created in Oklahoma and other areas of the U.S. In 1996, the Oklahoma breeders got together and formed the BBSAI. When I put the BBSAI on the Internet, a lot more breeders were able to find us. Today, the registry has 131 members from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, and over 970 blackbelly sheep registered.

History of American Blackbelly Sheep in the U.S.



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Meanwhile, the trophy market for Barbado was going strong in Texas. The Barbado breed is said to have originated in Texas, but no one knows exactly when. The breed came about by cross-breeding Barbados Blackbelly with Mouflon and Rambouillet to obtain a larger carcass and a rack of horns.

This cross created a wide variety of color combinations, but the one popular with hunters was the "Corsican." The term "Corsican" adds a little class to a hunter shooting a barnyard sheep).

Other Color Combinations from the Cross



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A game rancher by the name of Thompson Temple created the first record book in 1976 and the Corsican was the first category of sheep in the book. After awhile, trophy hunters (who want to kill one of everything) had bagged their Corsican, and soon the entries in the trophy book for Corsicans slacked off. In addition, there was virtually no market to sell the sheep that didn't fit into the Corsican coloration.

Mr. Temple was a marketing genius, however. He bestowed several of these other color combinations with exotic names such as "Hawaiian Black," "Texas Dall," and "Painted Desert." (from correspondence from J.D. Stringer, friend of Thompson Temple;
<http://www.taxidermy.net/forums/GameheadArticles/02/g/0272675F46.html>)

Out of one cross-breeding, Temple was able to add three more breeds to his trophy book.

What's In a Name?

Painted Desert

Black Hawaiian Texas Dall

Corsican

Barbie Doll Barbado BB Doe

Barbados

American Blackbelly

Barbados Blackbelly

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The Painted Desert, Black Hawaiian, and Texas Dall have gone on to become breeds in their own right.

But the main difference between the Barbados Blackbelly and the Corsican cross was the rack of horns on the ram. Some crossbred ewes occasionally had horns, but for the most part the ewes carried their genetics hidden inside, like a ticking time bomb. Within a few years, everyone had their own pet name for these crosses and it became very very difficult to know what kind of sheep would result from any breeding effort. Some had horns; some did not; some had black bellies; some did not. But a breeder looking for a sheep that he could be sure would produce offspring with the horn and color combination he desired was in for a miserable ride.

Two Separate Breeds



Barbados Blackbelly



American Blackbelly

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In 2004, the BBSAI developed the breed standards and the name for the crossbreed—giving it official recognition as the American Blackbelly. Owners of these sheep can now take pride in all of the hard work they've gone through to develop the impressive horns and coloring of their beautiful sheep. It is the first step in a breed improvement program for both breeds. I will talk more about that later.

Why have I spent this time telling you about the differences between these sheep?

Because I want you to know what you are buying. And I want you to become part of the solution, not part of the problem. I want to help ensure that you get the breed you want and that your sheep produce consistently for you across generations. I am not trying to disparage any crossbreed you might take a fancy to—it might not have a black belly; it might have little elf ears, it might not have the facial barbs. But when you leave here today I want you to be clear that those crossbreeds are NOT American Blackbelly sheep or Barbados Blackbelly sheep. The information that I'm going to give you in the remainder of this presentation pertains only to American and Barbados Blackbelly sheep.

Merits of Blackbelly Sheep

- Very prolific
- Parasite tolerant
- Disease resistant
- Excellent mothers
- No shearing or docking
- Versatile eaters
- Mild flavored, lean meat

“It is their ability to trim trees, mow the lawn, eat thistles, clean out brush and weeds around my salvage machinery, not to mention that they are **just tougher than boot leather.**”

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Grouping the two breeds of blackbelly sheep now, let's talk about the merits of these breeds. They are very similar to the other hair sheep breeds you've learned about this week.

Probably the most important thing is that they have a scientifically proven track record for being very prolific and for being very tolerant to parasites.

In addition, they are disease resistant; low maintenance; excellent mothers; two litters of twins every 18 months (more if you want to push them harder); easy care; no shearing or docking; versatile eaters; mild flavored, lean meat. It's day three of this conference and I doubt if I have to sell any of you on the merits of hair sheep as compared to wool sheep. You've learned why hair sheep are an intelligent choice. And there is no need to make this a competition between hair sheep breeds. There is a breed of hair sheep suitable for every available market (except the wool market!).

So why would you want to
get involved in raising
blackbelly sheep?

...or maybe why not?

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Why would you want to get involved in raising blackbelly sheep?

Well, I'm going to surprise you here and tell you right up front what these sheep ARE NOT and why you shouldn't get involved with them.

Blackbelly Sheep ARE NOT...

...big, meaty sheep



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They are not a big, meaty sheep that is going to make money for you in a commercial market. They take 8-12 months to grow out to butchering weight (90-100 lb) and unless you live in an area with year-round pasture, you will spend more on feed because you'll be feeding them longer.

We have one BB breeder, however, who is building a commercial flock in Kansas. He is selecting for size and is striving for a 90-lb lamb at 8 months. He's pretty sure that with good timing on the breeding combined with the fecundity of the BB, he will show a profit.

Blackbelly sheep ARE NOT...

...show sheep



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They are not the best candidate for a show market. Although we have several 4-H kids showing these sheep, and although they often take grand champion ribbons with their blackbellies, these kids and their parents have worked really hard to get their fair boards to accept blackbelly sheep. The BBSAI is in the process of developing an outreach program to encourage 4-H and FHA kids to raise blackbelly sheep, but it is important that you understand the potential resistance before your kid gets his heart set on a blue-ribbon blackbelly.

Blackbelly sheep ARE NOT...

...huggy, kissy sheep

“Some folks consider the ABs too nervous and not docile enough. They wouldn't like having this breed, if that's the case. I consider them highly alert, not nervous.”

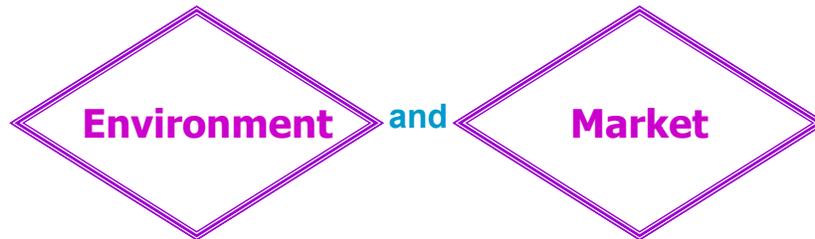


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They are not an in-your-face-huggable kind of sheep. These sheep have not been domesticated for 4000 years and they retain the alertness and fight-or-flight responsiveness that you would expect from a wild animal. With persistent, gentle handling they will willingly eat out of your hand, come when called, and allow you to work around them. But they will remain flighty around strangers and resist their owners' efforts to make pets out of them.

You **SHOULD** choose to raise
blackbelly sheep based on your



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Not a week goes by without someone calling me to ask about blackbelly sheep as they compare to the other hair sheep breeds. My stock answer boils down to this: where do you live and what do you want to do with your sheep? Environment and market are, of course, the two major factors that one must consider when making any livestock purchase.

Environment—Climate and Parasites



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From an environmental perspective, blackbelly sheep do very well in the hot, humid south, the dry desert, and the northern cold. In Colorado where our summers are hot and dry and our winters well below zero, we can raise blackbelly sheep without chemical intervention. This means that many of us do not vaccinate or deworm prophylactically. This picture shows a Barbados Blackbelly that has never been dewormed running alongside a white dorper on the right that has been regularly dewormed his entire life. These sheep live in British Columbia.

As a breed blackbelly sheep are parasite tolerant. However, most people are not willing to let nature cull animals that are less tolerant than others. As a result, the breed's overall tolerance is decreasing in the U.S. So if you live in an area with a high parasite load, and if you determine that your sheep will not thrive without chemical intervention, then I would recommend that you evaluate the economics and merit of trying to raise an animal in an environment not ideally suited for the breed. You shouldn't have to deworm blackbelly sheep. If you do, then why raise them?

Environment—Cost-Effective Maintenance

Responsible shepherd...

Yet may not need a lot of expensive equipment, feed, and supplies



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“Easy care” and “low maintenance” are not an excuse for poor husbandry. However, this is a good breed for novice shepherds because frankly there just isn’t as much to worry about as there is with other breeds of sheep. Depending on where you live, you may not need to worry about all the diseases that sheep are prone to and must be vaccinated against. You will rarely need to worry about lambing problems. These girls are quite capable of having their lambs unassisted out on pasture. Even if you don’t have top-quality forage available, the blackbelly will do well where other breeds of sheep will starve.

{Note that responsible shepherds probably have many of these things on hand but they don’t necessary need to use a lot of them.}

Pre-Market—Low Capital Outlay

Katahdin—\$200-\$500
St. Croix—\$250-\$300
Dorper—\$250-\$1000
Blackbelly—\$75-\$150

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Most people get into blackbelly sheep without even thinking about an eventual market for them. They might spot them at a local auction or know someone down the road who raises them, and when they discover how inexpensive they are, they become instant shepherds.

Although blackbelly are not a “poor man’s sheep,” they certainly are less expensive than any of the other hair breeds. Right now purebred BB sheep sell for \$150; the average selling price for AB sheep is \$75-\$100. The BBSAI is working to remedy that, however, by setting high breed standards that will encourage breeders to select for more desirable traits and cull the less desirable ones. So you may be able to buy low right now, but with careful breeding and cooperation with BBSAI’s efforts to set a “premium” standard for superior blackbellies, you will be able to sell much higher very soon.

Niche Markets for Blackbelly Sheep

- Ethnic meat market

Holiday	Religion	2006	Type of Lamb Wanted
Eid al Adha begins (Festival of Sacrifice)	Muslim	Jan 10	60–80 lb
Passover begins	Jewish	Apr 13	30–55 lb
Western/Roman Easter	Christian	Apr 16	30–45 lb
Eastern/Greek Easter	Orthodox	Apr 23	40–55 lb
Rosh Hashanah begins	Jewish	Sep 22	60–110 lb
Ramadan begins (Month of Fasting)	Muslim	Sep 24	60–80 lb
Eid al Fitr (Ramadan ends)	Muslim	Oct 24	60–80 lb
Christmas	Christian	Dec 25	milk fed



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From a market perspective, blackbelly sheep are ideal for many of the same markets as other hair sheep breeds. I'm going to introduce you to some markets in which I believe the blackbelly can excel in or is already excelling in.

The first is the ethnic meat market. This is particularly lucrative if you live near a large city that has a significant immigrant population. Blackbelly breeders can time their lambings so that they can grow out their lamb to the desired weights for sale at specific holiday events.

Niche Markets for Blackbelly Sheep

- Ethnic meat market
- Grass-fed meat market



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The grass-fed meat market caters to organic food, and our blackbellies are custom made for this market. As with the ethnic market, the blackbelly's ability to conceive at odd times of the year enables one to finish the lambs at the peak of the grass season. You can time your lambs to be born in fall, so you can harvest in late June/early July, when the grass has peaked and before it declines. Grazing the highest quality grass produces the highest possible gains, which produces the tastiest, lean meat.

Blackbellies have proven themselves to be very easily adaptable to small scale grass-finishing. This system relies on a rigid rotational schedule, moving the sheep every day or two. With sensible fence designs and a little training to the routine, the sheep are completely docile toward the flimsy electric fences and relish their daily shift. Despite their flightiness, they are utterly manageable in a well thought out rotational grazing program.

Niche Markets for Blackbelly Sheep

- Ethnic meat market
- Grass-fed meat market
- Cedar eradication



Cedar trees
girdled



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Cedar trees are more than a little nuisance in pastures in the Southwest and other parts of the country. They suck valuable moisture and nutrients from the soil and smother grass with a thick shade. In some pastures and development properties, they become so thick that they present a fire hazard. Cedar pollen is a serious health problem. Chemicals are useless for controlling cedar. Blackbellies are ideal cedar eradication experts!

The sheep begin by eating most of the needles within easy reach. Then they stand on their hind legs, and clear all the greenery within 5 feet or so of the ground. Then they will chew the bark off the trunk until the trees are completely girdled. The trees are dry dead within three years. The sheep will continue to rub on the larger lower branches and trunk after the tree is dead until it is broken off just beneath the soil.

Niche Markets for Blackbelly Sheep

- Ethnic meat market
- Grass-fed meat market
- Cedar eradication
- Stock dog training



Herding dog trainers love blackbelly sheep for the very qualities that annoy us as humans. Blackbelly sheep are “light” sheep meaning that they respond quickly to the pressure of the dog and they are fairly unpredictable. Therefore, a herding dog that is trained on blackbelly sheep is more than a match for the less flighty wool sheep, which are primarily the type of sheep used in herding trials. Dog trainers like using blackbelly sheep because their dogs perform better and they win more often.

Niche Markets for Blackbelly Sheep

- Ethnic meat market
- Grass-fed meat market
- Cedar eradication
- Stock dog training
- Trophy rams



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Trophy hunting, or more formally called “agri-tourism,” is probably the most lucrative and well-known market for American Blackbelly sheep. The beautiful rack of horns and the facial barbs on the rams make it extremely popular with hunters. I recently interviewed Thompson Temple, the man I spoke about earlier who is responsible for naming many of the blackbelly crossbreeds. He estimates that 15,000 to 20,000 rams of the four crosses he developed from the Barbados Blackbelly are bagged each year. Each ram commands on average a \$500 price tag, making the revenue for these rams \$5M to \$10M each year.

This market is particularly well-developed in Texas and neighboring states. If you have a good-sized chunk of land, a Web site, and some ambition, you can do well in this market. If you don’t have enough land to have your own hunting ranch, there is a good market for suppliers who can provide rams at least 4 years old with large racks of horns.

Niche Markets for Blackbelly Sheep

- Ethnic meat market
- Grass-fed meat market
- Cedar eradication
- Stock dog training
- Trophy rams
- Hobby livestock



The blackbelly is an ideal sheep for the backyard hobby farmer. They are a multi-purpose sheep, providing weed control, meat for the table, and endless hours of entertainment.

Elegant and Gorgeous



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When I surveyed my email group, by far the biggest reason for purchasing blackbelly sheep is simply because they are hands-down the most gorgeous, exotic-looking sheep anyone has ever seen. People see them in a field and think they might be a wild deer.

Have I convinced you yet?

Don't buy blackbelly sheep if...

...they're the only sheep you can afford.



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I'm going to do another about face on you, now, and I'm going to tell you why I don't WANT you to buy blackbelly sheep.

1. I don't want you to buy these sheep because they're the only thing you can afford. If you can't afford a good sheep, then you probably can't afford to be a good shepherd. You need to provide minimal housing for them, or grain during lactation, or an occasional vet visit when they do have a problem. If you can't afford to spend \$150 on a good sheep, then you can't afford to keep them.

Don't buy blackbelly sheep if...

...you think you won't have to know too much about sheep.



**IDIOT
ZONE**

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I don't want you to buy these sheep if you think that they're idiot-proof. You still need to learn good animal husbandry. These sheep will be very forgiving of your ignorance, but that's the worst reason for buying them.

Don't buy blackbelly sheep if...

...you want to treat 'em the same way
you'd treat a woolie.



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I don't want you to buy these sheep if you think the only way to raise a sheep is to fatten them with grain, pump them full of chemicals to keep them healthy, and baby-sit them while lambing because the lambs are too large or there are too many of them.

Don't buy blackbelly sheep if...

...you don't know the difference between the two breeds.



Barbados Blackbelly



American Blackbelly

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I don't want you to buy these sheep if you don't understand the difference between a Barbados Blackbelly and an American Blackbelly and you're not willing to be up front with your customers about which breed you raise.

A. *A Barbados Blackbelly does not have horns.* If you think it does, then you are contributing to the destruction of a breed of sheep in the U.S.

B. *An American Blackbelly ram has beautiful, massive horns.* If you don't want the hassle of having a horned sheep tearing things up around the farm, then don't buy an American Blackbelly.

C. *If the person selling you a sheep doesn't know what breed it is and can't prove it one way or the other, don't buy the sheep.* Their ignorance about the breed may not be the only thing they don't know. You may be getting a diseased animal, a poor performer, poor genetics, or a host of other problems you don't want. Purchase your sheep from a reliable breeder. And don't assume that just because they register their sheep or belong to the BBSAI that they are a reliable breeder. The BBSAI doesn't register the breeder, it registers the sheep. And the only thing the BBSAI knows about a sheep is learned from the photo and whatever pedigree information the breeder provides. *The BBSAI does not know what's under the hood of that sheep.*

10 years from now we need...

- larger, hardy, disease-resistant American Blackbellies...



...with consistently big horns

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Where do we want these breeds to be in 10 years?

There is a critical need in this breed for conscientious, knowledgeable breeders who are willing to dedicate themselves to the preservation and improvement of both breeds of blackbellies.

The American Blackbelly needs a great deal of work to restore the attributes that its reputation rests on. The breed as a whole is much smaller in size than the Barbados Blackbelly, with some rams topping out at 80-90 lb. Based on what I read on the email list that I host for over 350 blackbelly breeders in the U.S., the American Blackbelly is much less parasite tolerant and disease resistant than we'd like to believe, as well. No formal studies have been conducted using American Blackbelly sheep, and I believe it is misleading to generalize data obtained from Barbados Blackbelly sheep to include the American Blackbelly. The BBSAI is hoping that with the establishment of a formal breed standard, and the recruitment of qualified breeders, the American Blackbelly will begin to display a consistent phenotype.

10 years from now we need...

- a larger gene pool for Barbados Blackbellies; thriving diversity of bloodlines



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There are only a half dozen Barbados Blackbelly breeders in the U.S. There are fewer than 200 Barbados Blackbelly sheep in the U.S., and half of these are located in research flocks. Our genetics are in crisis. Our breeders live great distances from each other, making it expensive and difficult to rotate rams or ship ewes. We have formed a consortium and we work cooperatively to manage our flocks at a more global level. We desperately need new breeders willing to buy a starter flock and grow it into a body of sheep that will significantly contribute to the available genetics in the U.S.

10 years from now...

...we hope you will have played a vital role in the preservation and restoration of the blackbelly breeds.



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On behalf of the BBSAI and Critterhaven, I hope I have given you lots of reasons to purchase Barbados Blackbelly or American Blackbelly sheep. And I hope that I've also given you reason to stop and think to make sure that these sheep fit your needs. Both breeds need your help and involvement. And both breeds can perhaps provide you with a good income. But most certainly, you will never tire of seeing these beautiful sheep in your pasture.

Thank you for letting me bend your ear!