

‘Profitable Perendale Performance’

By Jane Smith

“An environment that can test both man and beast” is how the Williams family describes the challenging climatic conditions in the hills of Kuriwao, South Otago.

Sean and Belinda Williams along with their children Madi (16), Lucy (15) and Sam (13) farm ‘Garton Downs’ – 8,000 stock units on 820 hectares, with 60% of the farm being rolling to steep tussock country at 520 metres above sea level – the perfect target for snow during lambing time coupled with cold south westerly winds.



“We need a breed that can perform, year in year out, that will bounce back and produce well no matter what” says Sean – with Belinda adding that Winter at Garton Downs often arrives at the start of April with Spring growth often not until the end of October.

This family state that their Perendales are incredibly forgiving when it comes to ‘climatic stress and any unforeseen management mishaps’ - “just like our Angus beef cows, they can be used as an efficient tool to harvest pasture and be profitable at the same time”.

A passion for farming and pride in their stock are obvious traits of the Williams family. “This is genuine Perendale country, and has been since day one” is how Sean and Belinda describe their choice of breed. Garton Downs has been in the Williams family since 1965 – Sean’s grandfather Herbert originally settled this land, and this is where Sean’s late father, Richard grew up alongside brother Morgan and siblings. Sean attributes the impressive level of development and a passion for “doing things right” to his uncle Morgan and wife Barbara – whom Sean and Belinda took over the reins of Garton Downs from in 2012, after initially leasing a portion of the farm in 2007.



“Morgan and Barbara wanted a reliable, productive breed and the Perendale was chosen as the ideal fit”. Sean and Belinda have continued to drive the farming operation forward with Perendales at the helm. “We want sheep that are efficient, have good conformation and are the whole package” says Sean.

This efficiency is demonstrated in their productivity under a low input system “we want to keep our 4,300 Perendale ewes at 70-75kg LW with a good condition score on them throughout the year. No lambing beat is carried out on this hill country, and we expect them to lamb down well after scanning at 180% and produce a good set of lambs by weaning in the first week of January.”



Sean and Belinda select Perendale rams that are ‘true to type’ – with a focus on both conformation and high indexes on all maternal traits – with an emphasis on early growth.

They run their Perendales alongside 170 Angus beef cows, calving down as rising two year olds.

Focusing on doing the basics well at the same time as having attention to detail are key ingredients at Garton Downs. Sean and Belinda emphasise that lambing percentage is only half of the equation “we expect a low ewe death rate, good lambs out the gate quickly and profitably and we always place importance on looking after our ewes with a focus on the next year’s production –safeguarding the following year’s profitability is essential”.

This ‘no-nonsense’ recipe for farming includes low animal health inputs, no silage or baleage fed and ewes on swedes for 90 days – followed by a two week set stocking period before lambing. “We don’t kill them with kindness in Spring – we are not in the business of chasing bearings or cast ewes – the Perendales come to the fore at this time of year - they do their own thing, and do it bloody well”.

Spring is the time for catching up on fencing and maintenance jobs rather than having to be locked into a lambing beat on this 8,000 stock unit property, with Jacob Beal- Harris recently employed in his first sheep and beef farming role. Sean and Belinda are enjoying mentoring a young person in a wide variety of jobs on the property.

With a solid base of fertiliser history in Morgan and Barbara’s reign along with Sean and Belinda’s recent ‘all paddock’ soil testing regime , importance is placed on trace elements and magnesium in their fertiliser regime.

Sean views the fact that too many farmers that have been encouraged to put terminal sires out with a large number of their ewes as a disservice to the industry. “Why would you keep poorer ewes and produce a high proportion of terminal lambs - if you are using good maternal genetics that have the ability to match the weights and yields of a terminal, this allows you a good selection pressure to pick your replacements. The industry needs good breeding stock to drive production”. At Garton farm, they are practicing what they preach with 1100 Perendale ewe hoggets going into their flock this year.

“The industry needs to make sure that in times of good returns from the lamb schedule, that we don’t take our eye off the ball in terms of making sure that every animal is a productive stock unit – we want our sheep to be well structured, be a pure Perendale, have clean points and robust feet” says Sean. Belinda states that they remain passionate about producing good wool – they take pride in the overall package of their stock, and believe that quality cross bred wool will be valued by savvy consumers in the next decade as consumer backlash against synthetic fibres increases.

Abraham Lincoln once said “The best way to predict the future is to create it” – and this is exactly what the Williams family are doing. They relish the opportunity to run a productive farming property that has a strong family history, they take pride in producing quality stock and they believe that the future is very bright for the sheep and beef industry if we relish the opportunity to continuously improve and innovate.

