

Quick guide

Merino Sheep Judging



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Young judging provides young people with the opportunity to develop lifelong skills in visually assessing livestock and public speaking through comparing animals against each other. These skills not only develop a better understanding of the Merino sheep, they also enable young people to make a valuable contribution to the industry.



Stakeholders in the livestock industry invest time and money into continually improving their stock, which is crucial as Australia is the world's largest exporter of sheepmeat and produces about half of the world's Merino wool. Australia's Merino history dates back to 1797. The industry has had its share of ups and downs from when it was said "Australia was riding on the sheep's back" in the 1950s to when the industry took a dive in the early 1970s following the mass introduction of synthetic fibres. The industry has since rebuilt and Australia's reputation as a strong player continues to grow.

The best way to continue to develop and grow the industry is to evaluate – or judge - the characteristics of the animals. It's important to be able to identify and understand why certain traits have significant commercial value. Not only animals featuring these qualities will have higher value at sale, but breeders will want to pass these desirable traits onto the next generation to improve the overall flock.

Being able to understand and identify these characteristics and orally present to an audience are skills that can be learnt and require practice. However, they are skills that will develop confidence, decision making and attention to detail, potentially translating into future careers.

While many young people become involved in young judging and other agricultural show competitions through their school, tertiary education institution or from a farming background, there are other ways to become involved. By approaching a local show society, members can provide guidance and support to anyone interested in participating. Many shows now hold education days and there are opportunities to connect with farms, studs, saleyards and other local shows to learn more.

Generally, young judges compete at a local show first. Winners then go on to compete at their royal show and from there one competitor will be selected to represent each state or territory at the National Merino Sheep Judging Championship. Young judging is for entrants aged 15 and under 25 years old on May 1 in the year of the competition.

This is intended to be a general guide and there may be some variations in rules and expectations between shows. Individual shows will provide further advice and clarification.

Further reading

To find out more about local shows near you visit: agshowsaustralia.org.au/shows

The Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders provide an industry overview: agshowsaustralia.org.au/educational-resources/further-reading

The National Merino Sheep Judging Championship rules and regulations can be found here: agshowsaustralia.org.au/member-resources/national-competitions-guidelines



Where to start

This category focuses on just one breed of sheep, but the classes are divided into ewes (females) and rams (breeding males). Merinos are a dual-purpose sheep, bred for their meat and wool (fleece). However, this category of judging focuses on the animal as a merino sheep, as there is a separate category for judging the fleece.

There are different strains of the Merino sheep in Australia and breeders will talk about bloodlines. These determine wool types and are usually broken down into fine wool, medium wool and strong wool. It's also important to understand Merinos can be horned or poll (no horns).

Top tip

Develop a basic understanding of bloodlines, but the main purpose of this judging category is to assess the form.

Form and function

When judging it is important to consider the "form" and "function" of the animal as this determines what it has been grown for. In the case of Merino sheep, these have all been grown for the function of producing meat and wool. Both ewes and rams are kept for breeding.

Their function will influence their form and characteristics. The reason we focus on these through judging is to identify their best qualities as sheep producers want to pass on these superior traits to the next generation to continually improve their flock. It's important to examine the animal's form for producing and reproducing as well as its carcass, as high-quality meat fetches a higher price on the market. Remember, a good structure enables an animal to walk, feed and breed to its optimal ability.

Top tip

Good practice is to quickly let the handler of the animal know you are going to touch or assess their animal.

What to look for

You will need to get to know the different parts of the animal and be able to name these correctly, as these will be the judging points. Remember these will differ between the animal's purpose.

When judging rams look for:

- A robust and masculine appearance.
- Adequate height and length with balanced proportions.
- Sufficient frame size.
- Strong and level structure (these traits are extremely heritable), noting undesirable characteristics.
- Even (consistent) wool that is uniform in length, soft, dense and bright and is representative of its class classification.
- Assess the wool to ensure it is even, has no black fibres and is growing on soft, pink skin.
- Ample muscling and adequate fat cover.
- Highly fertile.
- When the sheep are walked, check for smooth and straight movement.

When judging ewes look for:

- A feminine appearance.
- Adequate height and length with balanced proportions.
- Sufficient frame and capacity for carrying meat and producing lambs.
- Strong and level structure, noting undesirable characteristics.

- Even wool that is uniform in length, soft, dense and bright and is representative of its class classification.
- Assess the wool to ensure it is even, has no black fibres and is growing on soft, pink skin.
- An udder with two even teats.
- When the sheep are walked, check for smooth and straight movement.

Top tips

- Stand back and examine the whole class, taking note of balanced proportions.
- Start with the head area before moving to neck, brisket, shoulders and feet.
- Gently and quietly feel the animal's shoulders, neck, spine, pin bones, hips and ribs, checking for shape, strength and size and noting any structural problems.

Further reading

For a comprehensive visual guide to all the judging points, what an ideal animal looks like and the correct terminology:

agshowsaustralia.org.au/member-resources/national-competitions-guidelines

For diagrams to help score a sheep's conformation: **agshowsaustralia.org.au/educational-resources/further-reading**



How judging works

The animals are divided into two classes of four animals of either all ewes or all rams. Animals in each class will be labelled with a number, one to four.

Visual judging will take place first, where the animals will be paraded and lined up in front of the competitors for 12 minutes. During this time, competitors will complete a visual judging card. These cards are simple, with competitors ranking the animals in order from first to fourth place.

Before oral judging starts, each competitor will ask the Ring Steward to line up the sheep in the competitor's placing order: first, second, third and fourth. They are allowed one minute to place the animals in order of merit.

Competitors will be judged on their handling and ranking, compared to the findings of an experienced judge.

Competitors who score high enough in the visual section will go on to compete in the oral section where they choose one class for their presentation.

Competitors speak for two minutes to explain their reasoning behind how they've placed the animals. It's important to stick to the allocated time – for every 10 seconds a competitor goes over their time, they will be penalised one point.

Young Judging speech

Competitors in the oral section are scored on their accuracy of observation, their ability to compare animals, speaking skills and their own presentation.

Have a start, middle and end: begin with an introduction (for example, acknowledging those involved and provide a short overview of characteristics an ideal animal would have in that class), then go into the comparisons of pairs, and finish with a conclusion (for example, thank people for listening). The speech only goes for two minutes, so keep to the point.

The main goal is to explain to the judge why you have placed the animals in the order you have chosen by comparing the animals in pairs – first place with second, second against third, and finally third against fourth. Rather than describing each animal individually, competitors draw comparisons against the attributes of each pair.

For example: *"In the top pair, I placed animal numbered [eg four] ahead of [eg one] because ... [highlight the strengths then weaknesses, if any are present]."*

Remember to prioritise the most important reasons first and pick only two or three differences.

Judging is objective, while there are characteristics about an animal to look for, what the judges will be paying close attention to is how clearly competitors express their decision and how they validate it.

It's not all about the animals – a competitor's appearance is also important and judges can mark down for poor presentation. Competitors must wear closed in shoes and a long-sleeved

shirt or jacket. Long hair must be tied back, and only minimal jewellery is allowed. Male competitors must wear a tie and long pants. Chewing gum and shorts are definitely not permitted. Female competitors may consider wearing a tie or neck scarf or necklace.

Top tips

- Speak clearly and concisely – show you believe in what you are saying and pack a punch with your words.
- Deliver your speech to the championship judge – remember eye contact.
- Don't call the final animal "last", as this can be insulting to the owner. Instead refer to it being fourth placed.
- Get to know the terminology and don't be afraid to implement it – the judges will be looking out for it.
- Choose one end of the animal to begin speaking on and move to the other end, from front to rear or vice versa. This will help organise your presentation and make it easier for people to follow what you are saying.
- Be as descriptive and explanatory as possible. For example, use gender terms rather than "it" and go beyond saying explain one characteristic is "better" when comparing a pair by highlighting why the characteristic is superior.



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