



South Wairarapa romney breeder Richard Warren and stockman Alan Jones with 708/11, the 4th #1 ram for New Zealand, bred at Rawahi.

‘I F it’s not alive you’ve got a serious problem,” says romney breeder Richard Warren in typical understated fashion.

As one of New Zealand’s top romney breeders, Warren sets paramount store on the ability of his lambs to survive.

On that score, he has been rated twice as good as any breeder in the country – no mean feat considering his south Wairarapa stud farm is located in what he describes as “the sixth windiest place in the world”.

On top of that, the region is often drought-prone, as in this year’s summer when the lack of rain “hit us hard”, with four consecutive months of 15 per cent average and less.

Warren jokes that animal health marketers do not like him because he spends so little with them, but says he does not have to because his livestock boast superior immune systems.

The lowest-cost producer always wins, he maintains, and his 25-year average animal health spend is below \$2 per sheep stock unit.

Recently at Beef+Lamb NZ’s 2015 sheep industry awards for genetics he was a recipient of the

The tough climate of south Wairarapa helps breed some of the best sheep in the country, **Gerard Hutching** discovers.

SIL-ACE dual purpose for meat yield award.

It meant his flock achieved an unprecedented treble, being number one for meat yield, wool quality, and survival, in the same year. He has also won the golden fleece six times and was a winner of the romney section at this year’s event.

Martin Coop, who was a judge for a different set of sheep industry awards, said the prize Warren received was “as good as it gets”.

“He’s at the top of his game. These breeders have got to be congratulated for the time and effort they put in for the wider industry. It’s a tough road being a ram breeder, they don’t always get rewarded as well as they should at times. I think farmers never want to pay as much as the rams are worth,” Coop says.

The Warren philosophy can be summed up by the conviction that the highest genetic merit belongs to sheep that best cope with competition and adversity.

Sheep farming began on the

Rawahi property in 1907, with ram breeding beginning in 1924 and the flock now comprising 2000 stud ewes, and 1300 commercial ewes over 600 hectares.

Although he has links through family to the property, Warren’s first choice of career was as an equity analyst before becoming a market maker in swaps and bonds. He and his wife, Nicky, had similar jobs in high finance for 10 years, including stints overseas, before they decided to earn a living off the land.

For Richard, the switch was made because of the lack of satisfaction working with “intangible” financial products compared with the fulfilment that comes from a hands-on job that actually produces something.

Nevertheless, when Warren speaks, it is evident that his background in the pressured world of commerce has played a part in his farming success.

“There is devil in the detail and you have to be ruthless with the way you manage sheep. The integrity of genetics will be always

revealed in time,” he says.

With no advertising, Rawahi rams have sold out the past three years.

Warren has chosen to work with romneys partly for historical reasons, in that the farm has had a long tradition of romney breeding, but also for production-related reasons. When it comes to the combination of wool, meat, and survival characteristics, the romney is the most competitive, he maintains.

Beef+Lamb NZ’s genetics specialist, Dr Mark Young, describes genetics as a “long-term game”. About 60 per cent of flocks use the sheep improvement (SIL) system.

He explains that if a flock is isolated and uses only its own rams, it is impossible to assess how good the sheep are against other flocks, and to separate the genetic effects from the farm effect.

But that is not the way Warren works. He has always followed best practice by linking in well with numerous other flocks.

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Richard Warren
romney breeder



“He’s had sheep that have been very highly rated, some people thought they were so highly rated it was too good to be true. We’ve had a look at the data and we can’t find any obvious thing and the figures have been high for a number of years,” Young says.

He suggests Warren’s lambs survive because of, not in spite of, the gruelling conditions they are exposed to.

“If you want an animal that’s resistant to disease or very tough at surviving in harsh conditions, the only way you can genetically select for it is to have the animals

subject to those conditions.”

Warren says the structure of his sheep allows them to move on to a huge range of country, nationwide.

One South Island high country client is achieving a lambing percentage of 155 at 450 metres height. He is one of about a dozen tussock country clients Rawahi has.

A “short grass” grazing policy means all classes of stock are subjected to pressure and testing each year with the tail always removed. Contour allows Warren to create 40 hectares of new grass annually and there is a strong emphasis on clover maintenance, with the cornerstone of the grazing policy being “short, fresh and palatable”.

Warren uses professional stock judge Ian Walsh of Falkirk Genetics to grade his replacement animals for “structure and physiology”, and contends he has proof of correlation between form and function. He goes so far as to say his association with Walsh represents “an integral part of a

solution to the problem of declining standards of meat and wool production in New Zealand”.

For wool, Warren uses another outside expert – David McPherson from Masterton.

He credits much of Rawahi’s success to stockman Alan Jones, who brings with him 40 years’ experience and is a vital part of the operation. He is “passionate” about the stud and his knowledge is encyclopaedic.

Computer-generated knowledge is what sets present-day farmers apart from their grandparents and parents, says Warren. Armed with that, breeders are obligated to provide commercially-directed leadership, because farmers are relying on them for their livelihoods.

Beef+Lamb NZ is also filling the leadership vacuum by raising the profile of the industry.

Warren applies rigorous standards to his operation.

“In any business people can be their own worst enemy, regrettably this is often learnt in hindsight. At Rawahi we analyse, compare, contrast and test. You then have to apply all that to average commercial sheep farming reality, always aiming at a better future,” he says.

And apply it he has, testified by his breeding achievements.

The elephant’s trumpeting is getting louder

Doug Edmeades hears dairy farmers’ rage and urges them to take heart from the lessons of the ill wind.

A N ill wind is blowing across the dairy industry at present. I can only imagine the feeling. Slogging through another day of mud, calves and the cold weather, knowing that all that effort equates to going backwards financially – for this season at least.

I can hear you muttering: “Why are the salaries of those Fonterra fat cats in HQ and abroad not linked to commodity prices?”

I can hear your expletives: “They convinced us that China would take every ounce of product. Double-ewes – that’s all they are!”

I can hear your rage: “Even the effing tanker driver will do better than me!”

I can hear you screaming: “All those menacing vultures in the marketplace conniving to peck profits from my financial skeleton. Bloody snake-oil merchants greasing me up with the patsy patter about their product being just as effective as the real deal!”

And you rave on: “I see the PR department of the collective seed merchants – the so-called Pasture Renewable Trust (why ‘trust’?) –

greasing up to the MPI about how important pasture renewal is in tough times. BS. I’ve already wasted heaps of dollars on pasture renewal – expensive waste of time, if you ask me.

“And now we have DairyNZ running around as if it is some modern incarnation of the Social Welfare Department, treating us like moronic dole bludgers. Levy this, levy that – I didn’t pay a levy to have my hand held like a day-one school kid. And now they are muttering Farm Systems 1 and 2 are the way forward, after years of being non-committal. Hypocrites!”

“And where are all those self-proclaimed analysts with their forward-looking wisdom: ‘China, China, China, Asia, Asia, Asia, India, India, India!’ Parading ponies!”

“And what about all those pricks who said Fonterra is the future. The meat industry should restructure in its image! You’re silent now, you dickheads!”

It is of course a human failing. When the goldrush is on – and the gold takes many, many forms, from the sharemarket, Fanny Mae, kiwifruit to rugby world cups – we just cannot contemplate the possibility that the gold will



“Even the effing tanker driver will do better than me!”

one day stop. Myopia sets in. Good times are an anaesthetic to reflection, contemplation and wise analysis.

But it is an ill wind that blows no good.

Listen closely. Remember the

elephant in the room I spoke to you about? His trumpeting is getting louder and louder.

Do you remember what he was saying? He was repeating a truth from our past. Our pastoral sector was globally competitive because

of our low-cost, clover-based, all-weather, in situ grassland system.

You cannot avoid hearing him now. Take heart and learn from the ill wind.

And we all have our own personal ill wind story. This is

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mine, or at least one that fits the current theme. My father told us – yes, 10 children – his story. He was compelled by life’s circumstances to leave school in the early Depression years and work on the farm so that his father, a qualified plumber, could return to the trade to keep the farm from the bankers – a 100-acre dairy farm then milking about 20 cows. The butterfat price had fallen suddenly from 2/6d to 6d.

This experience cast a shadow over his whole life. He was greatly interested in farming, agriculture, crops, soils and plants and read very widely, but I think that being a farmer was not stimulating enough for him.

Thus Dad was adamant in his advice to us – “secure your future first”, he would say, “get a trade or an education”.

Most of us did. For me, being

the youngest of six boys and being coded with an intelligence gene, I had no option. University was for me. My father’s ill wind became my good fortune.

So take heart. It is possible that the current situation will teach this generation of dairy farmers the basic biological and economic truth about pastoral farming in New Zealand.

While the dairy industry remains largely commodity-based we are only competitive internationally, year-in and year-out, up and down, cycle upon cycle, if we stick to our proven low-cost system.

Actually, one of my brothers did not follow Dad’s advice. He left school, ironically to take over the farm because Dad fell seriously ill.

We joke about it now. He has just retired and cashed up. I still have to work. His financial assets are worth many, many times more than mine.

So thanks Dad. Get an education and secure your future? I guess he would respond with: “Depends on how you count your assets, son.”

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