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The sheep shed:

Using a stanchion to feed a rejected lamb



BY CAROL ELKINS

When a ewe rejects her newborn lamb, there are several things that you can do to “persuade” her to change her mind before you opt to start bottle-feeding the lamb with expensive milk replacer. One of the most successful solutions is to use a head gate (stanchion) to hold the ewe’s head while her lamb nurses.

Benefits of using a stanchion

It is critical that a newborn lamb receives colostrum during the first 24 hours of life to ensure that it has sufficient antibodies to resist infection. At birth, the lamb does not carry any antibodies, and the colostrum provides the antibodies until the lamb is able to manufacture its own. A rejected lamb can be allowed to nurse that “first milk” if you restrain the ewe in a stanchion.

For the first few days after lambing, a ewe recognizes her lamb by sense of smell. Amniotic fluids stimulate the ewe to lick and clean the lamb. As the lamb begins to digest the ewe’s milk, the lamb’s feces and urine will take on what the ewe perceives to be “her lamb” smell. The sooner you can get a ewe’s milk into her lamb, the sooner she will be tempted to accept him as her own. Restraining the ewe in a stanchion prevents the ewe from butting the lamb or moving away from him to prevent him from nursing.

Stanchion options

You can purchase a metal stanchion for around \$150 from companies that sell goat and sheep supplies. Avoid a stanchion built on a stand (a milking stanchion) because it prevents the ewe from lying down. The ewe may need to be restrained in a stanchion for long periods of time, even days, so it is important that the stanchion be constructed to allow her to lie down and comfortably eat. Alternatively, you can build a quick stanchion out of a few pieces of scrap 2 x 4 and a couple of bolts.

Before you use a stanchion

One reason the ewe may be rejecting her lamb (other than the fact that she is young or can’t count) is that her teats may be tender or sore. Be sure to check them; milk both sides to be sure there is good milk and no signs of mastitis, sores, or infections that could be causing her pain. Also check the lamb’s teeth. If they are pointed or overly sharp, nursing may hurt the ewe’s teats. If necessary, file down the top edges of the lamb’s front teeth with a small file.



Parts of the stanchion



The swivel arm allows room for various neck sizes.

convenient to house the ewe and lamb(s).

When I decided to construct a couple of lambing jugs inside my sheep shed, I took the opportunity to build a stanchion into the wooden 2 × 6 slats of one of the jugs.

The design is simple: a top casing and bottom casing hold a stationary vertical slat on the right and left sides. A middle slat with a convenient handle (optional) pivots on a bolt extending through both sides of the bottom casing. Drill as many locking holes as required to adjust the width of the opening between the stationary slat and the pivoting slat, and insert an eye bolt or long nail through a hole to provide the

outer stop for the pivoting slat.

Building a stanchion

A stanchion works by having one stationary vertical slat and a second vertical slat that opens and closes around

the sheep's neck, pivoting on a bolt at the base and locking with another bolt at the top.

Look around your barn and corral to see if you can build a stanchion *into* an existing pen or wooden stable divider. This will provide stability and make it more

Using the stanchion

Put the ewe's head through the stanchion and lock it in place. Place a tub of hay and a bucket of water just under her head so she can always eat and drink. The stanchion bars should be tight enough so that she cannot pull her head out, but she should be able to move her head upwards and downwards to eat, drink, and (if needed) change to a lying down position. Keep a watch on whether the lambs are getting milk from her. She will try to kick them at first with her back legs, and they may be discouraged at first.

Don't let her out of the stanchion unless her lambs are fully nursing and she is not trying to prevent them from nursing. This may take three to five days or sometimes as long as two weeks. Don't feel sorry for her and let her out too soon. More time, rather than less time, is better. Provide fresh bedding under where she is standing so that she has a clean place to lie down if she chooses. When you finally release the ewe from the stanchion, keep her and the lambs in a lambing jug for a few more days to make sure she has really bonded with them.

Bottle feeding lambs to weaning is a huge task that I try to avoid if possible. The stanchion gate has worked for me many times, turning "psycho" mothers into dedicated moms who support and nurse their lambs fully up to weaning age. 🌸

Carol Elkins has raised Barbados Blackbelly sheep since 1998, is secretary of the BBSAI, and founder of the Consortium for Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Breeders. Her farm's website contains the largest compendium of information about Blackbelly sheep on the internet. Visit it at www.critterhaven.biz.



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