

YARRAWONGA'S 'UBER EATS' SOLUTION DELIVERS RAMS BOUGHT ONLINE



Image supplied by Yarrowonga Merino and Rachael Lenehan

THE PHILLIPS family has made a concerted effort to look beyond the paddock and to prioritise what the consumer demands to inform the direction of both their stud and commercial sheep and beef operations.

Based from “Cunningham Plains” in the Hilltops region of NSW near Harden, the Phillips’ operations span more than 30,000 sheep and 1,500 head of Angus cattle run over 9,000 hectares on seven properties at Gundagai, Yass, Cooma, and Baldry.

Steve Phillips, whose parents founded the business, including establishment of the Yarrowonga Merino and Poll Merino Stud in 1971, has worked alongside wife Liz to sure-footedly expand over the last three decades. Today, the couple’s children, Georgia and Sam, have also come into the fold to help continue the growth and commitment to quality put in place by their parents.

While it is commercial livestock that are the ‘blood’ of the operation, Yarrowonga is considered one of the most progressive and productive Merino Studs in Australia. For the last 30 years, its flagship on-property Ram Sale has been a highlight of the sales calendar.

“Our main objective is to produce more dollars per head and to generate increased farm profits,” Steve said.

“Yarrowonga Merinos have the unique ability to increase fleece weights while decreasing microns - very few studs can successfully achieve this.”

Steve cites the stud’s success as the result of relentless wether trials spanning three decades, with stud ewes now averaging fleeces of eight kilograms and 18.5 microns.

This development has led to the launch of the family's own stud sheep — Yarrowonga Plus. The line doesn't require mulesing and breeds high-growth, high fat and well-muscled animals, driven by the Phillips' recognition of consumer and industry expectations around animal welfare and quality product.

"This family of sheep is bred for high performing, quality animals, without losing sight of the importance of fleece value," he said.

"They have been founded on a Leahcim ewe base and are bred to perform well in high rainfall areas."

Demand for Yarrowonga genetics has been reflected in the stud's sale results over a number of years, with the Phillips regularly achieving Australia's top ram price average. However, this same success also motivated a rethink of how the stud could ensure it is accessible and relevant to a greater pool of buyers.

"For a few years in a row, we were achieving the top average ram price in the country, so about four years ago we started offering more rams, we now sell around the 270 mark, so we could try to cater to everyone's budget," Steve said.

"We did not want them all averaging a lot of money, so they became unaffordable to our customers."

Ensuring greater access to buyers also led the Phillips to engage Elite Livestock Auctions in 2020 to simulcast the Ram Sale and provide an online auction platform. In part, the innovative move was also inspired by COVID-19.

"COVID did really start this for us but there have been a lot of advantages," Steve said.

"Elite is very user friendly, so people have had no problem using the platform and they have been very happy with it.

"They've also not had to leave their home and most of the time we deliver our rams, so it's kind of like Uber Eats."

Steve said buyer response to the Ram Sale going online had also shown many had a preference for remote bidding.

"We even had some feedback from buyers saying they preferred watching online because they were able to see the rams better, thanks to the video quality, than what they would have if they attended the auction in person," he said.

"In fact, we had a lot of local buyers opt for the online option instead of attending themselves."

Of the total 268 lots offered, 43% were sold online, clearing \$1,105,000 to average \$4,123/head.

There were 957 bids made during the auction, 23% of them online, with Ernie Constance, Burraunga, Peakview, taking home the top for \$13,000.

Looking to next year, Steve said he was excited to expand both the sale and the new Yarrowonga Plus concept.

"We will look to offer more like 300 rams next year and will have around 50 Yarrowonga Plus on offer, which will be a dual-purpose sheep," he said.

"There has been a lot of interest so we are looking forward to next year."