



'Unwooly' herd 'Adopted' sheep lose their fleece at area farm

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SUNBURY — No. 220 was notoriously feisty — wriggling and fighting, a not uncommon trait whenever this particular Coopworth sheep is sheared of her fleece.

Her uncooperativeness was an understatement on this recent Saturday at the Owens Farm atop the rolling hills midway between this Northumberland County community and Danville.

No. 220 doesn't enjoy the process one bit.

"Sheep are like people. Each one has a different personality," said Caroline Owens, who owns and operates the farm with her husband, David, and their three children.

In the thick of it is Kristen Rosser, a professional shearer whose skill combines the dexterity of a martial artist and the strength of a championship high school wrestler.

Rosser tosses No. 220 on the hardwood barn floor. Holding both the sheep's back

legs with both of her hands, she presses against the animal to gain the upper hand.

With all her might, she holds onto the sheep, which has freed one of its legs and is banging it against the floor.

"It's like karate," Owens said, or, perhaps, jujitsu. "It's a balance," she said.

Not all of the sheep are so wound up. A few roll on their sides and comply as if they know the more they fight, the worse it will go.

The tradition of shearing the adopted sheep occurs six weeks before the "lambing" season.

It is four hours of one after another sheep getting sheared of their fleece. It's a steady array, with each sheep



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Heather Molin, of Long Island, New York, above left, gathers fleece sheared seconds before into a bag for shipping to a customer. Caroline Owens, co-owner of Owens Farm near Sunbury, right, assists. The farm was shearing pregnant Coopworth sheep recently, many of them adopted by individuals and families, as part of a program at the farm.

covered in a blanket to keep the fleece clean of farm dirt.

Each awaits their turn before Rosser.

Most of the sheep are participating in the farm's Adopt-A-Sheep program. Their adopted families are on hand to help.

The adopted parents include Lin St. Clair and Nancy Wilson, of Harmony, a community near Pittsburgh.

The retired teachers are thinking about becoming shepherds. They have taken introduction courses that include visits to farm.

Heather Molin, of Long Island, New York, also adopted a sheep after falling in love with the ones she saw grazing in Ireland, her father said.

Molin's father said they looked online and discovered the Owens Farm.

While she was staying at the farm, Molin, an artist and art teacher, painted a watercolor, Owens said.

"We get a lot of adoptions from out of state," she said.

The adopted sheep actually become a part of the family.

The program allows families or individuals to be assigned a sheep which they can follow for the life of that specific sheep while it lives on the farm.

"Those who adopt sheep for a price of \$150 get to meet their sheep, receive a welcome kit, get letters updating them about their sheep's health and can visit periodically.

Throughout the year at the farm there also are sheep

camp and lambing slumber parties

Of course, one of the best benefits is adoptees get to keep their sheep's fleece and see her lambs as soon as they are born.

The fleece is bagged and tagged to ensure proper ownership.

Coopworth fleece is known for its silkiness and lustrous appearance. It comes in white and natural color.

"It's not uncommon to see repeat customers to our adopt-a-sheep program," Caroline said. "We've had three generations of families adopt our sheep."

Among the busiest times is the birthing or lambing season in March. Animals at the farm are raised with no chemicals, no growth hormones and are grass-fed.

The shearing day has become a multi-generational activity.

A boy anxiously awaited a shearing. His grandmother bought the adopted sheep for him. He planned to use the fleece to have a wool blanket knitted for his mother for a Valentine's Day gift.

Blankets are possible because Rosser carefully shears each sheep so the fleece isn't chopped to bits. Some of the fleece is taken to Lazy Acres Farm near Muncy, where blankets are woven and yarn is created for spinning needs, Caroline said.

Smaller mills will process the wool whereas larger mills don't guarantee they will separate the fleece, she said.

