

PROLIFIC BREEDS OF THE WORLD-III

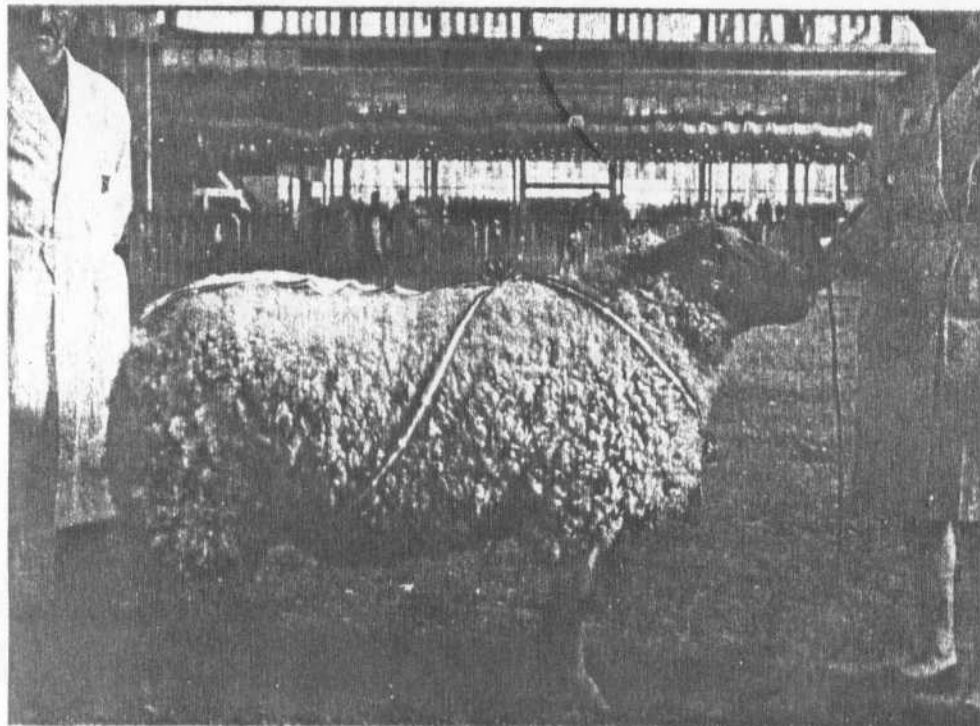
Bleu du Maine

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This is the third article in a series on the prolific breeds of the world, the two other articles were on the Romanov originated in USSR (Sheep Canada Magazine Vol. 1 No. 3) and the D'Man originated in Maroc (Vol. 5 No. 2). The other breeds which will be featured in this series include, the Finnish Landrace, Barbados Blackbelly, German East Friesian, Chinese Han-Yang, Greek Chios and Australian Booroola Merino.

As its name indicates the Bleu du Maine breed originated in the Maine-et-Loire county in North-western France. Presently the breed is found in high density in the regions of Mayenne, Sarthe deux-Sevres and Ardennes as well as in its original habitat in Maine-et-Loire.

The breed was created recently, however due to diverse explanations and lack of precise historical sources, re-establishing its history is difficult. Some sources claim that the Bleu du Maine was formed by crossing Leicester with the indigenous sheep in the district of Mayenne, other sources advance the hypothesis that only the Wensleydale breed from Britain could explain the Bleu du Maine colouring. The breed was recognized nationally in 1948 and by



1952 there were between 5,000 to 8,000 entries in the Flock Book. Presently there are about 150,000 head of Bleu du Maine in France.

The breed is large in size, mature rams weigh from 110 to 120 kg. and the ewes from 80 to 90 kg. Its distinguished head is characterized by its dark blue colour. The forehead is wide and carries no wool, the nose is wide, the ears are slim, dark blue, bricked up and placed high on the head. The shoulders are well-muscled, the chest is wide and deep, the back is straight and the pelvis long and wide, the legs are well developed. The wool is white, homogeneously tight and covers the whole body except the head, hocks and knees. Greasy fleece weight is about 5 kg. for males and 3.5 kg. for females.

The Bleu du Maine is a grazing breed, the animals are bred in France almost exclusively out in the open. Very few breeders house them during the lambing season. Because of the animals non-gregarious behaviour, they are considered an excellent grazer and very often they graze alongside cattle. In France, the lambing season is in the spring and therefore, the abundant grass favours both the ewes during the milking period and the lambs during their growing


period. The ewes are sexually mature at 7 months of age and in France 63% of the hoggets lamb before they are 1 year old. The breed is remarkably prolific, out of 7,000 births there were 15.4% singles, 63.8% twins, 19.3% triplets and 1.5% quadruplets, corresponding to an average prolificity of 1.85.

Mature ewes lambing in season (i.e. March) usually reach an average prolificity of 2.15 lambs whereas the average for the yearlings is around 1.55 lambs. The ewes have good mothering and nursing qualities. Lambs weigh 30 to 37 kg. at 3 months and dress about 52%. The Bleu du Maine breed has gained much publicity recently and has been imported to many European breeds for use in crossbreeding schemes.

A twin breed of the Bleu du Maine is the Rouge de l'ouest breed originated from the same population but due to the segregation of the genes responsible for the colours, this breed does not exhibit the same blue colour characteristics of the Bleu du Maine. However, from the production and reproduction characteristics the two breeds are almost identical.





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