

Interview with Charles Ross

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Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

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Ross: I've been here for about twenty-five, twenty-six years, so

Maniscalco: Oh my God.

Ross: This is a third generation, me, my son and now my granddaughter.

Maniscalco: Wow. Chuck, would you mind telling us what you're doing?

Ross: Ok, well right now we're combin' the wool out, makin' it, pullin' it out straight so when we trim it, it looks uh, fresh and uh, clean and everything. The wool has been laying there on the sheep. It gets curly. So you have to pull it out. And uh, it makes the fibers straight out then when we clip it off, it will stand up for a real pretty coat and everything.

Maniscalco: Great. Show us, well, go ahead.

Ross: [Humming]

Maniscalco: So how long will it take you usually to get them all set up and prepared for?

Ross: Well, this is the second time over, it takes about an hour and a half the first time over, it will take about thirty-five minutes now to uh, just to freshen them up, and uh, get them ready for the show tomorrow afternoon.

Maniscalco: Great.

Ross: They have been lying in these blankets for about three days now. So you just have to freshen them up a little bit. So when they go into the show ring they look fresh. The judge likes them to look fresh and doesn't look like they have been on the show circuit for the last three or four months, even though a lot of them have, but we have to make them look like they haven't been there for a while.

Maniscalco: So you show quit a few sheep then?

Ross: Uh, right now we are just showing four. Uh, thirty-five years ago we started in the breed, I did, we had about forty-five to fifty ewes we showed all over Illinois and about seven or eight, er--seven or eight state fairs.

Maniscalco: Wow.

Ross: Then my son came and long and uh, he showed with me for about uh, sixteen years. And we showed from L.A. to uh, Indiana, Ohio. And then he joined the service and he left and we had a production sale about ten years ago and we sold out of the breed. And then his daughter came along now since he is in Iraq, it will be the third tour he has had over there. And he has been in the Army for about sixteen years, so his daughter is at home with us now. So she is thirteen, so about when she was ten, she decided she wanted to show sheep too.—

Maniscalco: --Oh great!

Ross: -- So we bought back in and we got her about twelve ewes and we're going to show them for the next hopefully five or six years or for as long as she is interested in showing sheep.

Maniscalco: [laughs] Oh really!

Ross: It's a great what to keep the kids occupied. It gives them something, responsibility. And uh, as you can see out here all the young people we have, it's a way teaching responsibility and keeping them off the streets, and a just way of life for them and something they really enjoy. 'Cause it's getting further and further away to have, being a part of agriculture anymore. There just aren't many people that's in agriculture anymore.

Maniscalco: Now what, is there a certain breed you've always worked with?

Ross: We've always had Montadales. There's probably, in this show barn and the other show barn there are probably sixteen, fifteen or sixteen different breeds of sheep. Probably eight or ten breeds of black face sheep. Probably six to eight breeds of white face sheep. Probably about twelve of these breeds of sheep are meat sheep; the other six or seven are probably wool sheep. They all have a little bit of different characteristics, but they all are about the same size and weight. Some of them have longer legs than others, but they are about the same length and weight and everything.

Maniscalco: Is there, what's the reason why you do this breed?

Ross: The reason I do what?

Maniscalco: Why you work with this breed specifically, is there any reason?—

Ross: Well the biggest reason, I mean, this breed right here, when I started out when I was twenty-three, or four years old we had two big Montadales breeds around Waverly Illinois, that is where I was born and raised, Jim Hanady? and Jim Donset? both lived in the same area. They two of the best flocks in the United States, they were getting a little older. They talked me into getting into the Montadales, which I'm glad I did because it's really a great family of people that's into Montadales, but that's the main reason. They were available and I knew the people who were already showing them and everything.

Maniscalco: Good. Great. What are some of the characteristics that you are, you know, trying to create in a show—

Ross: Well, in a show sheep, you try to create a length of loin in a sheep, a width of loin in a sheep, straightness of the back, you like to have a good lamb, leg of lamb on it and everything, plenty of muscle, a good extension coming out of the neck and everything. And maybe the most important thing you like to have a good four sound legs where they can walk and have no trouble showing themselves off. There is no difference in sheep or cattle or anything else the good ones have a way of showing themselves off when they walk across the pasture or the show ring. They have a way of saying 'Hey, look at me, I'm good looking'.

Maniscalco: Laughs

Ross: It makes no difference if it's a young lady or a good animal they all have the same characteristics and everything.

Maniscalco: Well if you could show us some more of what you are doing.

Ross: Well, we'll go ahead, we'll are going to comb out this little part right here and we will put a little bit of hairspray on it. And we'll cut it out and hopefully it will look a lot better then when we started.

Maniscalco: Great. Now why do some of them wear blankets?

Ross: Well, we put the blankets on them. When I get done with this we'll put a blanket on them to get them from getting dirty until we run them through the show. After the show's over we'll take the blankets off of them, we'll take them back home, turn them back out in their national, natural habitat and they'll get dirty again, but this is just a way to make them look pretty.

Maniscalco: Okay.

Ross: Look like they're going to the prom. Now all this is, is a form of hairspray. It just sets the wool so when you cut it off it holds it natural straightness for a few days. [sound of cutting wool] And all we are trying to do is make her smooth and easy. And really outline and er, show the strong points of the sheep.

Maniscalco: And that must have taken little bit time to learn how to cut with those scissors [inaudible]

Ross: Two things, it takes time to learn and it got to get strength in your hands up. The first couple of times you trim during the spring makes your hands pretty tired but after you do it for quite a few years it ain't. But the biggest this is like what you just said it's getting adjusted to how to cut them out make each part of the sheep strength show up and make it look good. [sound of cutting]

Maniscalco: Now do some people use electric trimmers?

Ross: Well we use electric trimmers to cut them out. But what I'm saying is when we bring them in they probably got an inch of wool all over their bodies, so to speed everything up we comb them out, take the electric trimmers, cut them out to how ever we want them. And then whenever we get them cut out and everything, we wash them, and then we go ahead and like I say, cart them out the trim them to beautify them then. But the electric trimmers, if you didn't do that you would have to cut them with these things three or four times. The electric trimmers just speed everything up about two hours, so.

Maniscalco: Laughs

[sounds of cutting wool]

Ross: The nice thing about this is it doesn't hurt the sheep a bit, and even though it looks like it probably makes him cooler it doesn't affect him any. The fat that's on the sheep is what controls the heat and the coolness of them. The wool is just a product I guess the Lord just put on 'em so we can use. But as far as the wool goes, it doesn't pull on them, and it doesn't hurt them a bit, so. Lot of people probably thinks it hurts them a little but when you cut them, but truthfully cutting all the wool and everything doesn't affect them a bit.

Maniscalco: Now are their certain categories for sheep where they would be graded on how much wool they can produce?

Ross: Only on uh, wool breeds.

Maniscalco: Ok

Ross: The wool breeds, they judge them by how much. Well if you pull a sheep, pull the wool a part, on the wool breed it will have, uh well, crinks in the wool. The more crinks in the wool the better the wool is. Uh if we had another one, but that's alright, but anyway, it will show ya , how well and how thick and how good and strong the fiber is and everything.

Maniscalco: Yeah

Ross: And this particular breed of sheep, we are really just raising them for the meat, really it doesn't have a dense or thick wool and really it doesn't have that good of a wool on it. This particular sheep wouldn't make a good sweater like a Corriedale? or a Columbia? or one of the wool breads will.

Maniscalco: Ok.

Ross: Anyway, when we get done with it, we want it to all look smooth like this one is and it will take us another twenty-five or thirty minutes to get the top and neck and the other side done. We will put a little more hairspray on it tamp? it down put a blanket on it and she will be done and ready to show Wednesday afternoon.

Maniscalco: Great

Ross: Yup. Is there any other questions we can help you with?

Maniscalco: No I think we got it all. Thank you very much

Ross: We thank you too. It's good for the [audio ends]