

Got A Mean Ram? You May Be To Blame.

A. Richard Cobb
Extension Sheep Specialist
University of Illinois

Rams are extremely important and necessary ingredients in sheep production. For a new producer or a 4-H family moving up to a breeding operation, the selection of a ram means a new commitment or involvement in the industry. For most experienced or large producers, rams offer the main source of genetic improvement, and therefore ram ownership and management is necessary. No one wants to, or for that matter, should have to deal with a mean or aggressive ram.

Why your ram behaves like he does can usually be traced to one or more of the following reasons:

1. The genetics of the animal.
2. The amount of human contact the animal has had or is having.
3. The quality of the human exposure the animal has had or is having.

Let's look at the three causes individually.

The Genetics of the Animal

Rams are like all other animals and people as well. Their genetic make up, inherited from their parents, means some of them have the genes to be more aggressive, passive, or timid than the rest of the population. Some families and lines are more aggressive than others are. This does not mean that just because an animal is from an aggressive line that it will automatically be aggressive, but that it has a greater potential to be. Aggressive animals are usually more aggressive in their approach to breeding, dealing with other sheep and in dealing with humans. Aggression may be greatest during the breeding season or when rams are with ewes. Aggressive rams are a fact of life that producers need to learn to recognize and to deal with.

Amount of Human Contact

All sheep are going to have some human contact. It may be minimal in a range or commercial flock and can be excessive in a single ram 4-H or show flock. Animals that have a great deal of human contact and interaction can lose their fear of humans and can become very aggressive. Animals not raised in group situations with other sheep do not develop the necessary social skills needed for them to exist in the situation they are in and can become aggressive. Animals that do not interact with humans should retain their basic fear of humans and should be less aggressive toward humans.

Quality of Human Contact

The most important ingredient in animal handling is the attitude of the handler. This is the basic assumption or feeling by the shepherd that “The animal will do as I want, when I want”, rather than the feeling that “I can work with the animal to get it to do as I wish.” Just like rams, some people are more aggressive than others are and that can be reflected in their handling of their sheep. Men are usually more aggressive in their handling ideas than women. Women are usually more patient than men when working with animals.

People that believe that the animal will do as they are told will be more apt to use force and loud noises and quick movement or other means when working with animals. People subscribing to the second theory of animal handling, that of working more with the animal to get it to do as you wish, usually will have less physical contact with the animal and have learned to not rush the animals and to take advantage of the instincts of the animal to get it to do as he/she wants.

It has to be remembered also that what we consider as good quality of contact is not what a ram considers as good quality of human contact. For instance, the rubbing, scratching, pushing or slapping of the head or forehead of a ram may be viewed by the person as the showing of “love” for the animal. It is however interpreted by the animal as a challenge or threat that has to be returned at some time.

There are two types of aggressive rams. The first is the ram that is already aggressive, for whatever reason. The second is the ram that has the potential to become aggressive. All rams fall into one of these categories.

Suggestions For Dealing With Aggressive Rams

An aggressive ram is a dangerous liability for their owners. Not only are they dangerous for your own family or to work with or just to be around, but if they injure your neighbor or someone visiting your flock, you are liable in a court of law. Any ram that is overly aggressive or mean should be removed from the flock and shipped. Sometimes, however, removal is impractical from the standpoint of the owners. A purebred ram may be particularly of value in that his offspring sell for a great deal of money. The cost of replacing the ram may be too high or the producer, or his/her family, may have an emotional attachment to a specific ram for any number of reasons.

If you have a problem ram and you make the decision to keep him, there are some things you can do to reduce his potential to hurt someone. First, arrange it so you have minimal contact with the animal. Set the pen up which you keep him in so that it is not necessary to enter the pen to feed and water him. Second, when it is necessary to handle the animal, do so in as small a pen as possible and have someone help you. Use a panel or folding hurdle to catch the animal in a corner of a pen to do whatever you need to do. Do not try to make friends with the animal or to cure him of his aggressiveness, as doing so may just increase his meanness. Basically, if you choose to keep a mean animal you realize that you have an animal that is a serious problem and you make a commitment to separate him from direct

interaction with humans for as long as you keep him. Do not mistreat him, continue to feed and water him correctly, just never trust him and never give him a chance to attack you. Do not remove him from his confinement pen thinking that he has learned his lesson and that he will change. He has not and he will not.

Suggestions For Dealing With Potentially Aggressive Rams

Potentially aggressive rams means ALL rams. The best way to raise nonaggressive rams is to LEAVE THEM ALONE! Do not try to make friends with them, do not scratch or rub or push on their heads, do not tease them, do not treat them roughly, and do not play with them. LEAVE THEM ALONE!

Observation and assessment of rams as potential problems should begin early in the animal's life. Producers should observe all ram lambs they raise for signs of aggressiveness. We have all seen ram lambs that even at a very early age do not seem to be afraid of us as we walk through the ewes and lambs, or through the weaned lambs. They do not move away as quickly when approached as other ram lambs in the pen. Rather, they may move toward us, making obvious signs of wanting to bunt us. They may get behind us and approach us from that direction. You can bet these rams will become dangerous. Producers should evaluate the importance of these rams to their program and eliminate them as soon as possible if they are not absolutely necessary.

Many rams will eventually attempt to challenge the "top ram" (you). This will usually happen after the rams reach puberty. The most logical person they will attempt to "defeat" will be the person walking among them while feeding them. This person should be aware that he/she could be a target and should be ready to react.

We leave our rams alone, but if we are hit by an aggressive ram or if a ram is making aggressive approaches towards us, we make the first attack of the ram as negative an experience as possible for the animal. Remember, the ram has had to get his courage up to attack you and if he succeeds, he will gain confidence and will certainly try again. However, if he is "defeated" or humiliated, he will begin to reason that it may not be worth the effort to challenge you. He will accept that he is not the "top ram."

It is important that you react to the aggressive approach or the attack at the time of the attack and not leave the pen to get a stick and then return and attack a ram that has attacked you. The ram must realize that he is being punished for the attack and not attacked by a person for what he sees as no reason. That will put the ram into a mode of "defending himself, or rather getting you before you get him." Attacking the ram to teach him a lesson will not teach him the lesson you want unless he realizes you are attacking him because he attacked you. It will only increase his aggressiveness.

A ram attacking a person for the first time will probably do so in less than a "full ahead" manner. We suggest that you hit him over the head with the feed bucket, scream at him as loud as you can, knock him off his feet if possible and chase him away. Your goal is to humiliate him and not to hurt him. Once he has run away it is not necessary to beat him as you

have made your point. From that point on, you need to be aware of the ram every time you go into the pen and be ready to humiliate him again if necessary. If he continues to challenge or attack you, then you will have to determine how important he is to your program and to eliminate him if he is not important. However, most rams will lose interest in attacking something that fights back and humiliates them.

Dealing with rams is an everyday experience. Producers need to develop a system to reduce the possibility of attacks by rams. Here are some thoughts to follow:

- Never tease or taunt a ram.
- Know where the ram is at in a pasture or pen.
- When visiting another producer, as if there is a ram in the pen or pasture and identify where the animal is before entering.
- Never turn your back on a ram.
- Keep distance between you and the ram
- Never try to make them into pets.

Realize, as a producer, that a ram is going to have different behavior than a ewe, particularly during the breeding season. They are important to your program and you need to learn to live with them. They also need to learn to live with you, correctly, in a nonaggressive way or they need to be eliminated from your program.