

JUDGING

Handling Market Lambs

no. 1.624

by S.E. Myers¹

Quick Facts...

Two priorities when judging market lambs are degree of muscling and degree of trimness.

Inspect each lamb carefully from a distance. Observe views from the rear, side and front.

Keep your fingers together when handling and use the pad of each finger, not the fingertip. Do not handle the lamb roughly.

Lambs with over 0.25 of an inch of fat are considered fat or “over finished.”

Evaluate muscle dimension of the high-priced regions of the lamb by grasping the loin and checking for width, depth, and length.

Two priorities when judging market lambs are degree of muscling and degree of trimness. Good judges will tell you “the hands are better than the eyes,” meaning your hands can give you the most accurate live evaluation of these traits. The key is to develop a system to accurately determine muscle and finish differences, and then to remember those differences. With a good system, a lamb can be handled in 10-15 seconds. To become proficient in market lamb evaluation, it is important to practice. Handling becomes very easy once you get comfortable with a well-practiced system. When possible, check your progress by handling a group of lambs and then follow them to the cooler. This allows you to check your evaluation against actual carcass measures.

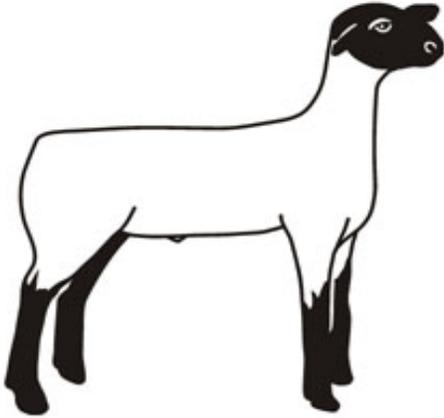
How to Handle Market Lambs

- Inspect each lamb carefully from a distance. Observe views from the rear, side and front. Reach as many conclusions as possible before handling the lambs. Visually, look for differences in base width, dimension of leg, trimness of body, length, frame size, etc.
- Before handling, be sure the lamb is standing squarely on all four feet. The way the lamb stands will affect what you are able to feel.
- Keep your fingers together when handling and use the pad of each finger, not the fingertip. Do not handle the lamb roughly. Use only enough pressure to get the proper feel or touch.
- With your fingers extended and together, place one hand over the top of the lambs shoulder, and the other over the rack. Which location spans with more width? The rack should be wider than the top of the shoulder. Additionally, does the rack tie neatly into the shoulder, or is the lamb somewhat weak behind the shoulders? Continue down the top line checking the width and smoothness of the top.
- Handle for fat over the top at the fore and last rib. Move the hide and feel the tissue between your fingers and the bones beneath. Fat thickness is measured in the carcass over the loin between the 12th and 13th ribs. Lambs with less than 0.09 of an inch of fat would be considered “under finished.” The correct or “optimum”

**Colorado
State**
University
Cooperative
Extension

© Colorado State University
Cooperative Extension.5/2001.
www.ext.colostate.edu

finish would be between 0.10 to 0.25 of an inch. Lambs with over 0.25 of an inch of fat are considered fat or “over finished.” Under finished lambs will be harsh handling with sharp divisions of their spinal processes. Over finished lambs will be smooth topped with no sharpness over the spine.



- Handle over the fore rib. Move the hands back and forth over the ribs. Again, under finished lambs will have a sharp, ridge-like feel to the ribs. You will have trouble feeling any ribs in over finished lambs. Correctly finished lambs will have a thin, soft layer of fat under the skin but the ribs will still be prominent and easy to feel. Lambs should feel trimmer at the last rib compared to the fore rib. Realize the lambs have different skin types. Some lambs have a very thin, tight hide. Others have a thick, looser skin. To avoid confusion between the hide and finish, grasp the skin in the fore rib area on each lamb when feeling for finish over the rib.
- Evaluate muscle dimension of the high-priced regions of the lamb by grasping the loin and checking for width, depth, and length. Width and depth of loin is an indication of loin-eye area. The farther apart your thumbs, the wider or more muscular the loin. Depth of loin is determined by grasping the loin gently between the thumb and index finger. Length of loin is determined by measuring the distance between the last rib and the hip bone.
- Handle the lamb for length and levelness of rump, and uniformity of width. Length of rump is the length from the hip bone to the pin bone. Width and fullness of rump is critical. The loin, rump and leg combined make up the hindsaddle, the higher valued retail cuts found in the lamb carcass.
- Determine the size of the leg and the amount and firmness of inside and outside muscling. This is accomplished joining the fingertips of both hands, on the inside of the leg. Put the hands as far up in the rear flank and twist as possible. Reach high on the rear leg for fullness and dimension of the leg muscle, not just the lower leg. Reach around and see how close your thumbs come to touching. The leg should be firm and heavily muscled, and the muscle should extend toward the hock. Placing your right knee into the animal's left flank will also help to prevent movement of the lamb while handling the leg.
- A final measurement that can be taken is length of top. Place your thumb in the middle of the lamb's shoulder (between the neck and rack). Stretch the hand (from your thumb to the small finger) and do this repeatedly down the lamb's topline to the dock.