



In the Shadow of the Tetons

Ball Brothers Sheep Company: Four generations on Idaho's Snake River Plain.

Words by Carolyn Dufurrena. Photos by Carl Ball.

Blond grasses of the Snake River Plain wave in the dark of a full Idaho moon as 31-year-old Blake Ball drives north through the darkness, four hours east of Boise. The chocolate basalt of the rift steps down to the river flowing silver along the highway. Darker mountains of the Caribou range stand tall to the east. The night is dotted with the yellow light of small homesteads spreading their circles of safety, and fields of red lights on foothills mark rows of wind turbines, a thousand beacons flashing out of sync. Blake has hauled sheep all day for a neighbor, Henry Etcheverry, 150 miles away in Rupert. It will be past nine p.m. before he gets home to Lewisville.

At six the next morning, Blake has been

up for hours, but he's already behind. He has finished milking the family goat and is due to meet his dad, Robert Ball, to pick up groceries for half a dozen shepherders in Idaho Falls. This will take about an hour and a half, and he then has camps to tend and sheep to move. The second of eight children, he is the only one of his siblings to work with his father on this fourth-generation outfit. Uncle Carl and cousin Lance Moss round out the partnership.

Both men's boundless energy speaks to their love for the work. Ball Brothers runs six bands of sheep across a swath of Idaho, lambing in long sheds filled with small "jugs" (sheep stalls) from early February till April. "We lamb two bands at a time," Blake says,

"bringing the ewes and their newborns into the sheds for up to 48 hours." It's a labor-intensive operation, and Robert hires a full-time cook—often niece Sarah Thomas—for the crew, which works steadily through the nights, picking up hour-old lambs and their mothers and moving them inside onto warm straw. "They'd never survive the north wind here in February," he says.

When the first bands are lambbed out, they will be trucked 150 miles west to the Big Desert where they will spend the next couple of months. The later bands to lamb will move north to a combination of state leases and BLM land near Rexburg. By the time the snow comes off the high mountains, all the flocks will move east to allotments in the



Caribou National Forest near Soda Springs. “I tend the camps we can drive to,” says Robert, smiling. “Blake takes care of the ones that we tend with a pack string.”

Running sheep in the forest seems a bit like an act of faith. “You might have 2,500 of them up there, but you’ll never see more than 200 at a time,” says Robert. There is one herder per band, accompanied by a few guard dogs, either Great Pyrenees or Akbash, and several border collies. “They’re a happy family, most of the time,” he adds. “There are a lot of bears, but there are a lot of bear hunters, too. The bears have become familiar with hunters who run them with their dogs, and when they hear the guard dogs bark, the bears are for getting the heck out.”

Ball Brothers hasn’t always run on Caribou Mountain. Until 1994, its summer permit was in the high meadows on the east side of the Tetons, visible on the skyline on a sunny morning from Robert’s place in nearby Hamer.

“It’s what we like best about Hamer. We summered on allotments in the Teton basin for many years.” When a coalition of well-



heeled environmental groups decided to do grizzly bear recovery, Robert says: “Congress bought out all our neighbors. The grizzly bear recovery line was right on the edge of our allotment. We had heard the stories about the guy in Montana who shot a grizzly bear on his porch and had gone to jail. We

Blake Ball in the lambing sheds with one of the Akbash guard dogs. Lambs and their mothers get the same paint number on day one to keep them from getting mixed up before they get to know each other. AT TOP: Ball Brothers’ late-lambing flocks graze state lease and BLM lands in the spring desert near St. Anthony, Idaho, before moving to summer country in the Caribou National Forest.



FROM TOP: It's a family business. Blake's wife, Carlianne, and baby, Rosie, help move a band to winter pasture. ▶ Robert Ball ponders his next move. ▶ Cross traffic does not stop. Robert hazes a flock of rambunctious ewes back onto the road as they negotiate the urban fringe in Idaho Falls.

figured if the herder had to shoot one, we were going to be out of business.

"There were seven bears up there and they took turns killing sheep. The Forest Service provided us with flashing lights and cracker shells, and we took another man out to help keep the bears off. A Chilean herder we had knew those bears personally. Our Forest Service ranger would ride up there almost every day to check on him. I came up there one day and that herder was right in the middle of his sheep on his horse. A big bear was sitting on a rock, watching him."

In the meantime, the Forest Service found a different reason to facilitate moving them off: bighorn sheep. Although unverified by research, environmentalists believe that domestic sheep are responsible for bighorns dying from "shipping fever," a type of pneumonia. Government regulations have been put in place on this basis, moving domestic flocks a minimum of seven miles

from bighorn herds, which are planted on mountain ranges across the region to encourage sport hunting. As a result, many domestic sheep producers have been marginalized or driven out of business.

"The bears were our incentive for moving, but there was a lot of money raised for bighorn sheep in the Jackson Hole community. We didn't stand a chance," says Robert.

The family was given the option to move to the west side of the range, to Caribou Mountain. "It's not quite as good a permit," Robert says. Because the east side of the Tetons is high and open, it stays green longer, but Caribou Mountain has proved to be decent country too.

When the sheep come off the mountain in the fall, they move to pasture on farmers'

fields around Idaho Falls, grazing a few days at a time and then moving to another pasture. With six bands trailing through the urban fringe, challenges present themselves. Developers have bought up many of the family farms around the edges of the community, and what were once hay fields and beet stubble are now tracts of condos and planned neighborhoods. That means fewer

"If a few more gringos went shepherding, they might realize that it's not that bad a job for somebody who likes being alone in the desert."

—ROBERT BALL



places to pasture, and more challenges with people when moving between those pastures.

On this particular morning, the move involves maneuvering 1,000 head of rambunctious young ewes six miles across the Yellowstone Highway, one of the major thoroughfares in Idaho Falls. Robert's

flatbed pickup is in the lead, towing a sheep camp. Hooked on behind the sheep wagon is a homemade trailer that looks like a little house, full of dog food and supplies. Robert leaps out of the truck with a wave and tells me: "You go ahead and drive this outfit. Just don't let 'em get ahead of you! I'll be right behind you hazing them back onto the road."

We creep along at a sheep-trot, inevitably clogging traffic. Many people smile as they move slowly through the herd: folks are not so far removed from their agricultural heritage up here. We pass a school bus and an ambulance without lights flashing. A garbage truck momentarily distracts the big white dog in the lead, but not as much as the black cat that it cannot resist chasing under a farmhouse. Robert stops to chat with motorists, assuring them we'll be out of their way as soon as possible.

Half a day and one six-lane highway crossing later, the ewes are enjoying their new lunch spot. Robert's phone has been



ringing all morning with calls from farmers with pastures, and he and Blake spend a few hours looking over the next potential location and strategizing which herders to move into the patchwork of pastures that remain on the fringe of the city.

The Ball Brothers' herders are all H2A workers from Chile, Peru or Mexico. These guest workers come on a three-year visa negotiated and paid for by their prospective employer. Contracts are facilitated by private labor relations' associations and regulated through the Department of Labor. Ranchers who employ these herders provide travel to and from their country of origin and also pay their salaries, housing, food, clothing, and even cell phones and batteries for the duration of their contracts. Multiple lawsuits in places like Florida and Colorado have plagued agricultural producers, who have had to explain why sheepherding is not the same as working in a factory. Western Range and Mountain Plains Ag Services have spent \$500,000 fighting these lawsuits. "They just keep adding little things," says Robert. "The judge will throw one thing out and then add something else."

Labor Department policy-makers are based in Chicago and Washington, D.C. They certify a company to make it possible for them to hire workers through the H2A program. They also employ investigators responsible for levying fines against producers for falling short of the raft of new regulations generated during the Obama administration. Robert says they had no idea what sheepherding is all about, until recently. Last winter, after a sheep conference in Ketchum, Idaho, "the president of Western Range, Henry Etcheverry, managed a conference call with the folks from Chicago," Robert says. "Now everybody's current on everything and the wheels are turning smoothly. Since the sheepherders talked to the regulators, it's been like night and day."

The ramifications of sheepherders talking to bureaucrats cannot be imagined. But as the Idaho sun sets over the Snake River Plain, one thing is certain. Understanding and productive communication between these two unlikely groups does suggest that there's a new day coming in the sheep world, and Ball Brothers will be around to see it come. ■

Carolyn Dufurrena studies the sheep business from a respectful distance on the Quinn River Ranch in northwestern Nevada.



FROM TOP: Blackface ewes keep an eye out as the flock grazes on summer pasture in the Caribou National Forest. ► Sheepherding in the forest is an act of faith. There may be 2,500 ewes on this slope, but you can only see 200 of them at one time. ► Ball Brothers' lambing sheds from the air. The "drop-picker" constantly moves through adjacent corrals, moving newborn lambs and their mothers under cover.

