

Evaluating Carcass Quality on the Hoof and Hook

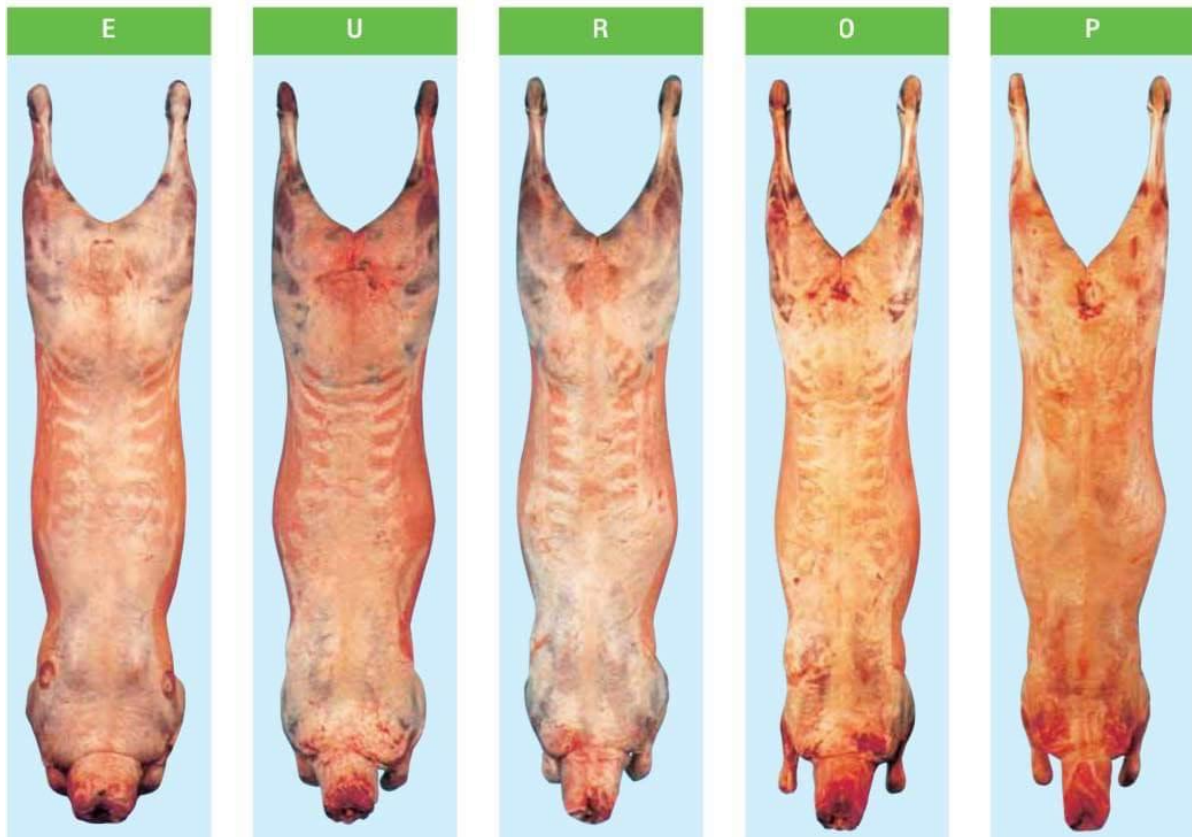
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It is notable that goat keeping knowledge tends to revolve around the live animal, in terms of feeding, management and marketing and selection of breeding stock. However, an essential part of the red meat business is the assessment, evaluation and marketing of carcasses; which are after all our end product. With beef and pigs, grading at abattoirs is compulsory (if more than a small number are processed per week). Sheep are currently classified on an industry wide voluntary programme which will soon become law. The criteria for these assessments cover dressing specifications, accurate weight, carcass conformation and fat levels.

There is currently no official or legal scale for goats, the sample size is just too small – a mere drop in the ocean compared to sheep. Estimated figures for processed goats range from 25-45k annually, compared to sheep/lambs of around 12 million! However, it makes sense for us as producers to learn how to judge our live animals for readiness to market/slaughter and assess our carcasses in order to better inform our breeding and feeding decisions. Whilst there is no requirement to use the existing sheep classification scale (EUROP), it makes sense to do so as this allows us to talk to butchers, farmers and wholesalers in a universal language. As the goat meat market grows, these classifications will be used in order to determine value as they already are in other species.

The scale works by assigning a letter to the conformation of the carcass (see photo 1) and a number to the fat level of a carcass (photo 2). In simple terms, the weight of a carcass tells us how much is there; the conformation tells us where it is; and the fat level tells us how much lean meat is available. As these are sheep grades, we have to be realistic in our expectations of goats. An R grade (average in sheep) is a very good goat carcass, a U grade is exceptional.





Fat levels are more controversial. Too fat is far worse than too lean. I will put in a proviso at this point -if you have a customer who particularly wants fat carcasses, and you can provide them at a profit, crack on! However for the general meat market/general public it's not what is required. An R3L is 'industry standard' – chops are a good size, the legs and shoulders make nice joints and the fat cover is good for cooking. If you go to 3H it's a more traditional carcass, which local butchers may prefer (and won't penalise against). A 2 grade for the fat is not an issue either, and in the processing/export markets, is actually sought out for its higher lean meat percentage.

By way of a comparison of how fat affects yield, see the below picture (photo 3). If you take an average conformation, moderate fat carcass (R3L) and compare it to a heavier, better conformation, high fat carcass (U4H) there is no advantage in running an animal on for heavier fat levels, costing more in time and input too. Would you see that return?

In order to achieve the right carcass grades for your given market, being able to assess live animals will put you at an advantage. Whilst it is possible to have some idea visually, hands on is essential to get an idea of how the animal will kill out. Weight isn't the best indicator of market preparedness – we are not farming poultry.

To assess conformation, the key handling points are shoulder and loin. A P grade shoulder and loin will feel very concave. The spinous processes (backbone) will be very evident and the profile of the animal generally dipping/saggy. An R grade (reminder - this is a decent goat) will have straight profiles, a well-developed muscle that will feel slightly convex through the loin and the spinous process will be harder to detect. A U grade (an exceptional

goat) will have convex profiles, with the spinous process difficult to detect and a fuller look. In terms of fat, the dock and ribs are often the most useful indicators although the loin can give an idea of fat levels. Anyone familiar with body condition scoring in sheep or cattle should be able to adapt this. The difficulty in the loin is that a well muscled animal that has a covered transverse process can be mistaken for fat...or vice versa! In a 1 grade for fat the individual bones of the dock are very easy to detect, individual ribs feel bare and hard, are prominent and visible. For a 3 grade, moderate pressure is required to detect bones in the dock, the individual ribs have a softer feel and if using the loin, the processes begin to feel rounded. In a 5, the bones of the dock can't be detected; the ribs are undetectable with the fat having a soft and spongy feel to it. By learning to predict carcass grade in advance, not only can we send to slaughter in a timely fashion, we should also be able to match the correct carcass to the correct market. For example, if you estimate you have an R2 and an R3H and one customer wanting dice for curries and another a traditional butcher, it makes sense to send the R2 for dicing (as the lean meat percentage is higher) and the R3H to the butcher (as the joints will look great on display and cook really well).

With goat meat still a niche market, as producers we need to be professional and able to market our product to the existing industry standards - in a way that is understandable to all parties and ensures repeat custom. I hope you found this brief article useful. I am always available for a more in depth chat about carcass matters (find us on facebook @nettagoats or contactus@nettagoats.co.uk).

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