



The Scahills produce top quality Mule females, sold at special Mule and Greyface sales annually

# Growing the family farm

This Mayo farmer left school at 13 to start building an impressive business based on the best breeding and management for his flock.

## Frank Hynes

Sheep Specialist, Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research & Innovation Programme, Athenry.

**T**oday Joe Scahill lives and farms on the family farm in Prospect, Westport, Co Mayo. The scenery is fabulous, contributing to the hugely successful Wild Atlantic Way, “though not to the sheep farmer’s bottom line”, says Joe, smiling.

He is married to Cathy and they have four children Lisa (19), Kate (17), Sean (14) and Joseph (12). Together, they farm around 162ha (400 ac). Much of the land is mountain grazing, with some of the farm up to 370m (1,200ft) above sea level.

The terrain is a mix of heather, blanket bog, upland grassland and some good-quality lowlands. “We keep 600 Scotch Blackface ewes,” says Joe. “The flock is made up of Lanark and Lanark Mayo Connemara crosses. We also have a small flock of pedigree Blueface Leceisters. We buy 20 to 30 weanling cattle each year to sell off grass the following autumn.”

## History

Joe left school at 13 to work on the family’s hill farm. “At that time, the farm consisted of just 9.5ha (23ac). This included 2.5ha (6 ac) of owned fenced land and 6.9ha (17 ac), being a share of commonage, which was not fenced. Joe’s father, Sonny, kept a small number of cows and sheep on the home farm. At 17, Joe rented some land in his own name.

“I bought 200 Scotch Blackface ewes and applied for a herd number as soon as I was eligible,” says Joe. “Over the years, I bought land whenever possible and I was fortunate to be able to buy out the other shares of the commonage that I farmed as a boy with my father.”

After buying this land he was able to set up a grazing system by fencing the commonage land. Joe also established a contracting business with his brother, Brian. This included shearing, fencing and, at a later stage, a sheep showering business. “The contract work provided us with a steady source of income over the years, enabling us to fund expansion.”

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## Breeding

The Scahills operate two flocks. The best 200 ewes are picked for breeding with Scottish Blackface rams to produce replacements for the Scotch Blackface flock. The remaining 400 are mated to Blueface Leicester rams. The objective for this group of ewes is to produce females for sale at the Mule and Greyface breeding sales in Ballinrobe.

Here, it is generally lowland producers from around the country that purchase these as replacements for their own flocks. About 17 years ago Joe introduced the Scottish breed Lanark to his ewe flock. “I believe this has brought great improvement to our breed of sheep over the years,” says Joe.

“In the early years, we crossed the Lanark with the Mayo Blackface to produce crossbred ewes. These ewes were then mated with the Blueface Leicester ram to produce Mules. Annually, we produce around 250 to 300 Mule ewe lambs but this varies depending on the male to female ratio of the lambs born in any year.”

Joe believes the Mayo Mule is a very suitable ewe breed type for part-time farmers. He says: “They are great mothers, well capable of lambing on their own with little supervision and are well capable of rearing two good fast-growing lambs.” This he claims means that “they suit a low-labour system”.

They are also highly prolific. Joe’s



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Teagasc advisor, Andy Ryder, says Mules and Greyface ewes have no difficulty delivering weaning rates of 175% and even more when properly managed. “They are top-class mothers great for producing excellent fat lambs for slaughter when crossed with terminal sires,” says Andy. “So, when properly managed they can produce a big crop of lambs and farmers will end up with a lot of lambs for sale.”

“The quality of the Blueface Leicester ram is very important,” says Joe. “It is worth spending an extra bit of money on the ram. Because of AI in sheep, it is now possible to access the top sheep genetics at a relatively low cost. This can make a huge difference when producing Mules, for example, by giving Irish farmers access to high merit Blueface Leicester rams from Scotland or other places.”

The Scahills use such semen in their flock of Blueface Leceisters. This means that farmers generally can access progeny from this breeding through the organised sales which includes pedigree Blueface Leicester rams as well as the highly prolific Mule and Greyface females.

## Marketing

The group approach to marketing lambs and adult sheep, which is greatly supported by Teagasc advisor



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John Noonan, is very important in Mayo. Over the years, Joe has been involved in a number of groups. In 1984, the Mayo Mule and Greyface group was established in the area. "The aim was to produce quality productive ewes for lowland sheep farms," says John Noonan. Joe joined the group in 1995 and in 2014 he became chairman.

This group has three sales in autumn, with the premier sale having around 3,000 mule ewe lambs and hoggets on offer. In 2018, the group intends to spread the premier sale over two days: one for ewe lambs and the other for hoggets. "The special breeding sales are a great way to sell. The sellers have an opportunity to put top-class sheep together for the sale that they know buyers will be interested in."

Buyers are confident of the spec of the animals on sale. Over the years, many buyers return every year knowing they will continue to find top-quality breeding stock. Having these special sale days in place gives the producer a sale date and a market to work towards. The male lambs are sold through another producer group, the Blackface Group, which was set up in 2004. This group currently deals with Kildare Chilling. The Scahills usually aim for a target carcase weight of about 19kg.

### Technical Management

Putting fences in place meant the Scahills could make better use of the land. "We can out-winter and feed a lot of ewes on the rough grazing," says Joe. "We have soil tests taken regularly on the better-quality land and we aim to keep soil fertility at the optimum. This includes applying lime as well as phosphorous and potash according to recommendations."

The Scahills see liming as important to maximise the value from fertilisers. The better-quality land is regularly reseeded over time in an effort to maintain pasture in good condition. The cattle are used to eat surplus grass on land where it is not possible to access with a topper.

In 2017, the Scahills grew a crop of Typhon. This is essentially a stubble turnip variety that has high levels of leaf production. It is the leaf, not the root that is the main target for grazing. "We grew it as a leafy catch crop to finish lamb lambs at a lower cost than feeding meals. We sowed about six acres of Typhon in total. This was planted the first week in



Joe Scahill with his flock.

### Conclusion

The Scahill farm has always been a family business and it continues to be that way. "While it takes a lot of hard work and determination we see this is a great way of life and a great environment to bring up a family," says Joe.

Key to their success has been the maximised use of whatever land is available. This includes effective use of fertiliser, operating a rotational grazing system taking good care of livestock with a positive flock health programme.

"By working with other farmers in a group approach to marketing, it is possible to exploit whatever potential there is in the market. By operating an effective breeding programme, it is possible to produce good quality stock and that is what buyers demand," concludes Joe Scahill.

June and was ready for grazing four weeks later.

"We stocked it at 20 forward store lambs per acre. It took four to five weeks to eat it down and this was sufficient time to finish the lambs," says Joe. "After the first grazing we applied a bag of nitrogen per acre and it was ready again for grazing again a little over two weeks later."

The crop was grazed three times in 2017 and finished 350 lambs in total. The Typhon was under-sown with grass seed. "While lamb growth rate was satisfactory, the new grass is somewhat patchy and open but we expect that it will thicken after grazing in spring 2018."

The Scahill farm achieves a good litter size and a weaning rate of 1.5 lambs reared per ewe mated. This is a top level of performance for a Scotch Blackface flock. "I put this down to grassland management and breeding," says Joe.

Ewes are scanned around the middle of February. The singles are usually left outdoor to lamb while those carrying twins are usually housed. Housing on the farm consists of both slatted and straw-bedded accommodation.

### Flock health

Flock health is very important on the farm. Lameness is treated very seriously with regular use being made of a footbath. Worm control and liver fluke are also major issues receiving attention. With vaccinations following the correct programme is another important factor.

### Male lambs

The Mule male lambs are castrated. "The mule lambs are easier finished if they are castrated," says Joe. "The Scottish Blackface lambs are left entire as they grow into heavier carcasses."

Since introducing the Lanark breed, the Scahills find that all lambs are killing with heavier carcasses. Joe says that this is especially noticeable in the Blackface ram lambs. He says these lambs are killing on average 4kg heavier than 10 years ago.

Steady progress is a constant for Joe and his family. "We don't have a choice," says Joe. "Farmers in Mayo need to keep moving forward if they want to continue to survive in these beautiful surroundings."