



## *No pulling the wool over Sam's eyes*

### Better choices

Graduating from Marcus with honours, Sam returned in 1988 to the family partnership at Coolah NSW, and took part in running the mixed enterprise of 7000 Merino Breeders, 700 cows, principally Hereford, and a mixed cropping enterprise up to 1500 acres. He married Annie in 1989 and their two daughters, Ellie and Amy, were born in the drought years of 1992 and 1994.

In 1995 Sam started to make changes to the merino breeding program, developing a modern, wrinkle free merino that is highly suited to all environments. Sam joined the SRS company and remained with it until 2004. The unique SRS type of Merino sheep has been developed over the last 20 years by the SRS Group's Chief Scientist, Dr Jim Watts. The result is a plain-bodied and virtually wrinkle-free Merino that does not require mulesing and has exceptionally high levels of fibre density and length. This leads to increased profitability for producers, more efficient processing and exceptional product quality.

Connecting with innovative breeders across Australia, Sam and the group of seven formed the MPM (Multipurpose Merino Pty Ltd). There were challenges placed by declining interest in Merinos and the emotive issue of mulesing. The mulesing debate put MPM at the forefront addressing all issues with their highly productive merino that produces on average 20-40% more lambs than the industry average as well as being a great carcass sheep that can be shorn more frequently than once a year. Importantly, it doesn't require mulesing due to a bare breach and no wrinkle, thereby reducing risk of fly and fly infestation.

Sam's strong interest in wool propelled him, in 2004, to the role of a Director of the Australian Wool Growers Association (AWGA). This is a body of wool growers with no industry or political alignments but with the passion to be a voice for growers in an endeavour to see a better industry for all growers.

Just prior to the start of 2002 drought, the Stephens family partnership was dissolved and this heralded the start of Sam and Annie's Merino Stud Partnership 'Gotta Rock'. Education was becoming a major issue and their daughters lived in Coonabarabran for a couple of years prior to the challenge of further education. They sold the Deep Creek property in 2007 but were fortunate to be able to keep the merino enterprise there whilst moving to Northern Rivers to educate the girls.

Three months later Sam was approached by Bayer Animal Health to consult on a national role within the sheep industry, taking Bayer's new pain relief product to an industry that was under fire from the PETA movement over the mulesing issue. Along with this, the 'Better Choices' program was started to promote the best welfare practice throughout the wool industry. Better Choices is a community of farmers, industry members, retailers, suppliers and consumers who have come together to support Australian farmers who care about the welfare of the animals they raise for meat and fibre production.

As part of the Better Choices commitment to a better life for livestock, the Better Choices audited program certifies wool growers who follow an integrated, planned approach to achieve best-practice welfare for husbandry procedure in sheep. This has progressed and can be seen on [www.betterchoices.com.au](http://www.betterchoices.com.au)

This role remained in place up to the end of 2009 when again approached by Bayer, Sam moved to a permanent position as Area Manager covering the eastern seaboard from Gympie to Newcastle.

Sam's deep interest in, and passion for, the wool industry and care for the animal that produces the wonderful fibre has resulted in him now managing an interesting role of maintaining a merino stud enterprise through to covering key accounts with the Vet Wholesale in Brisbane, to major distributors along the seaboard.

As Sam said, "They tell school children today that they may have seven career changes in their life. It is never too late to adapt and Marcus has, and will, put you in a good place to make adjustments or change."



*Sam Stephens with Amy, Annie and Ellie (Miss Showgirl Entrant Sydney Royal Show 2012).*