

Hobby Goat Games: Raising Kids and Children All Together

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Preface:

This article was written a decade or so ago for my book on meat goat management and marketing and was aimed at goat owners who were not interested in large scale, commercial production of slaughter goats, but rather in doing goats as a sort of recreational venture featuring rural or semi-rural living—with a more leisurely lifestyle and a more favourable environment for child-rearing. The current sociopolitical and economic situations seem to be making such an escape even more appealing. Given this, I again offer this (updated) piece as a possible way to help reduce your most pressing psychological pressures—life can indeed be simpler, or anyhow more tolerable, as you raise a few goats and even fewer children together.

Introduction

As long-term participants and observers of the meat goat industry, we have seen, firsthand, a number of changes in production practices and marketing schemes over the years in America and Canada. One of the more interesting (old-timers might say weird/crazy/stupid) developments has been the recent growth of ‘hobby goat’ enterprises.

We distinguish between two kinds of hobby goat enterprises. The first one occurs when an owner is actively pursuing a profitable operation, i.e., he/she hopes—even expects—to make a profit (defined as a positive return to labor, management, and capital). When, for whatever reasons, such profits prove illusionary for consecutive years, this enterprise is rationally called, in economic parlance, a hobby (perhaps also in IRS parlance?). We label this a ‘circumstantial’ hobby.

Contrarily, the second type of hobby goat enterprise is one that we label ‘purposeful’. In this scenario, owners do not intend—do not even pretend—to seek financial profit, but rather to manage the (usually small) herd to lose as little money as possible. The real ‘profit’ to be earned in this undertaking is, by design, *personal satisfaction*, however realized in its many manifestations. Put a bit differently, this type of goat hobby has goals and objectives that are little related to typical commercial, or purebred, enterprises, large or small.

Goals and objectives of a not-for-\$ profit hobby goat game

We have noted that *purposeful* hobby goat players are often a part of a larger population segment seeking to fulfill what sociologists call a ‘yen to return to a simpler lifestyle’. In practice, this yen is often realized by relocation of the family unit from an urban or sub-

urban context to a more ‘rural’ one. However, given the realities of jobs, transportation costs, educational and/or medical considerations, etc., the actual location may sometimes be more exurban road than rural lane. No matter, five or more acres with livable, or fixer-upper, house and acceptable livestock and/or poultry habitat seem to be the basic requirements for this exodus.

The major family goal in such relocations seems to be a revamping or redirection of family objectives and associated activities in order to achieve sharper foci on ‘what really counts in life’. For some, reduction of mental or even physical stress levels may be a primary objective; for others, it may be the perception of improved safety and freedom to move around untended. For still others, the principle objective may be increased social interaction with local folk, particularly so if the newcomers are attuned to (or intrigued by) the culturally dictated folkways and mores of the earlier arriving locals.

Contrarily, for *some* newcomers (escapees?), their relocation objective may be much less cultural or social in nature. It may be mostly to achieve, and maintain, one’s own ‘space’, whether it be psychological or personal—sometimes interpreted as eschewing the monotonous, enervating vicissitudes of urban life, or, put more simply, getting-away-from-it-all. For those who commonly speak in earthier tones, the sentiment may be less elegantly expressed as: I’ve just enjoyed all this shit I can stand, and I am outta here, now....

It has been our pleasure to know, and sometimes to help, such plain speakers (and others, of course) turn to goat-keeping as a way to, among other things, avoid some of the new and unexpected vicissitudes of rural or semi-rural living (insularity, suspicion, status-consciousness, vigorous proselytizing, excessive nosiness, unwonted advice, etc.). All ‘country’ folks are decidedly *not* well-informed Jeffersonian yeomen farmers with pleasant, dutiful wives delivering freshly baked breads of (recently) organic provenance, as also natural preserves from naturally neglected trees.

Limited acreage usually precludes horses or cows, and near neighbours sensitive to exotic smells and noises may also preclude hen houses, rabbit hutches, and even potbellied pigs. And so it is that many seekers of simpler times and idyllic places come to seize on the notion to raise some goats. Realizing early on that dairy goats would be just *too* confining (24/7) and thus not ‘fun’, they then opt for meat goats. Often such pilgrims are persuaded to this course by having seen well-groomed goats at Fairs or Shows or perhaps they have had occasion to visit an actual ‘back yard’ goat operation. Thus the notion—nay, the irresistible urge—to own such cute, cuddly, ever so appealing goats is engendered.

After a subsequent period of euphoric speculation about the joys of rural ownership and the wonderful opportunities for teaching the children responsibility, dependability, and concern for creatures (other than themselves), the reality of actually doing such a thing intrudes—quickly impacting parents/owners, but not, as yet, the children who remain

happily ignorant of the coming chores and inconsiderate interference with all things electronic and, by juvenile definition, entertaining to the max.

Establishing a hobby goat game

To those gaming the game in the early going, we urge simultaneous caution and commitment to the new family cause and, secondly, rapid recognition that you are about to become a Planner of Many Things, large and small, but all requiring visionary thinking, talent for overcoming myriad obstacles, and unusual perseverance, not to mention more time than you had supposed. Above-average character may also help, but an appreciation of the absurd and an abiding sense of humour are absolutely required; don't start without them.

Sad experience has also shown us that novices should develop, early on, a plan-of-work, i.e., what to do and when to do it; the why and how of it all can be—and often is—learned later, on the fly. The plan can best be facilitated by making a series of visits to meat goat operations, preferably similar in scale and scope to your situation. Do be aware that the initial foci of such investigative forays should be on 'facilities' (shelter, feed storage, working pens, fencing, paddocks, watering devices, etc.), not on goat breeds or individual goats.

A plan of work can also be improved by acquiring basic knowledge of goat husbandry. The problem for beginners is that they lack awareness of reliable sources of such information; as beginners they also lack the ability to discriminate as to the accuracy of information on offer. The Internet can be both helpful and harmful in this regard; however, Google can open the door for further, more specific inquiries. On-the-job-training is, however, the usual road to final success, though the trip may be considerably bumpier than anticipated.

Implementing a hobby goat game

The absolute worst thing a novice can do is to get goats before he/she and the facilities are ready. The article, *So You Want to Do Meat Goats* (Chapter 1, #3) speaks tellingly to this issue and is said by numerous readers/players to have been quite helpful. Indeed, it has kept some from playing at all; we count that as a *good thing*—disaster averted, money saved, family harmony not breeched, etc.

Once facilities are in place, novices are ready, if not prepared, to learn useful lessons in procurement of foundation stock. Frequently, more money is spent than budgeted. This may be explained in part by poor intel or, more likely, by the beauty and promise of an especially lovely young doe or by the budding machismo of a proud young buck. We do not presume to advise on the breed of goats to be selected; that is a purely personal choice. All breeds have pluses and minuses, as do individual goats, and asking prices do

not necessarily reflect economic reality; indeed, they may reflect the seller's appraisal of the buyer's precarious position on the learning curve of goat technology (*Caveat emptor*, as the saying goes).

In any case, once your choices of breed and individuals are made and delivered to the homestead, real-life educational opportunities await all concerned. They will not be long in coming. To wit: not all goats are friendly nor easily caught; goats can't be driven, they must be led by guile and cunning; when at the communal feed trough, they do not demonstrate sharing and mutual concern; bodily functions are casually natural as to time and place; foreplay or fornication are neither subtle nor private; parturition is, if circumstances permit, a somewhat distant thing, but may be noisy and is always messy.

In this situation, the word, gross (preceded by the expression, eu-wee, with a grimace), is often employed by observant children of a certain age; for their older siblings, however, the birthing process may be a useful harbinger of things to come, perhaps even a beneficial warning for some. But, on balance, nature and nurture are demonstrated at kidding time, and cuteness and joy abound, for all concerned. Kids raising kids is a lovely thing for grown-ups to watch and may be counted, correctly, as a most desirable return on one's 'investment in rural living'.

There are, of course, other learning experiences to be had on a mini goat farm, among them the very real opportunity to teach money matters at a young age (as soon as they can compute). It would seem to be particularly useful for learning about the phenomena of deficit-spending, and several other Teachable Moments will follow as they tote up monthly and annual outgo and compare it to income.

Son, Bruce, and I began *his Moments* in fiscal management shortly after his 10th birthday in 1960 as we established our private dairy herd. First, he learned to write cheques and then to estimate monthly expenditures (dairy and non-dairy) and monthly income (milk cheques and parental employment cheques). All were treated as a co-mingled pot from which he wrote and mailed cheques for cow things and for people things. After striking a preliminary balance, he would write himself a cheque for school expenses including, if the remaining balance allowed, \$5-10 for his (no-questions-asked) personal use. If the balance did not so allow, he did without, as did we. When the grass was greener and the milk cheque was larger, he/we ate hamburgers and went to the show; if not, we stayed home—without disagreement, reality made negative discussion moot. Real-life home economics, mutual dependency, and fiscal responsibility cannot be better, or more easily, taught, particularly if there are siblings to share limited resources.

And, then, there is the really painful teachable moment associated with the inevitability of disposing of surplus kids and, later, spent does. For some, the prospective discussion of alternatives is a chilling challenge, possibly on par with the culturally mandated, but much dreaded, Sex Talk. I have known dairy goat people to dodge this issue by swap-

ping weanling wethers with each other so that the families could each enjoy cabrito without eating Sally's or Susie's firstborn kid; they, of course could not invite each other to dinner for some time.

You *could* just chicken-out and say you were taking them to the auction barn so other parents could buy them for their children—a dangerous strategy, however, in that your beloved little goat person may want to go see if the new owner is doing right by the recently departed. Or you could just shuck-and-jive... tell them the goats are going to a new home faraway with lots of grass and things.

Alternatively, when the age of the listener is judged to be right, you could tell them about where hamburger and roasts really come from rather than being born, shrink-wrapped in plastic swaddling clothes, at Krogers or Wal-Mart. For the really hardy (insensitive? realistic?), perhaps you could demonstrate skinning and cutting up a recently dead deer from the hunt, all the while making carefully casual conversation about the usefulness and goodness of goat meat, too. The ultimate cop-out would of course be: well, *some* people may eat goat meat, but *we* don't; we suggest that you not go there.

We readily admit there is no 'good' or painless way to teach this fact of life. Somehow the philosophical homily that some things must die so that other things may live seems, to us, an unsatisfactory, ineffective explanation for the younger set.

In any case, no matter the final strategy chosen for resolution of this issue, it simply must be done. (At 89, all I remember is being the scalding-pot fire manager and then rendering fat/skin for lard and cracklings, and, thereafter, making wash-pot lye-soap, all on the day of the first cold snap-cum-hog-killing time. At 66, Bruce remembers only delivering calves to the local abattoir, picking up small white packages, and enjoying hamburgers and chicken-fried steak and gravy; did then, does now. Neither of us seems to have been lastingly damaged by these casual introductions to reality).

Perhaps a concluding word about the hobby goat family; participating in Youth Shows would be useful. Your youthful players are *already* learning-and-doing goats on a daily basis; accordingly, they do not need to undertake a youth project to learn responsibility, dependability, husbandry, etc. However, if the local Youth Program has breeder classes for doelings and does and perhaps 'pairs', this could be a useful endeavour for learning certain other things (social interaction, cooperation, public exposure, etc.).

Participation in wether market classes has similar learning educational aspects, but, as such activities are conducted currently, there is also opportunity to learn other things, among them organized gambling, and that the management and marketing strategies employed in this somewhat contrived game do not accord well with those in the commercial goat world. You and your children will likely learn also the cold reality of 'unfair competition' in which most entries will be purchased, not raised, from breeders specializing in "project goat" production with concomitant inflated prices and probabilities of placing

very high in the standings. As parents, you may feel this is a quite worthy life experience; however, your young contestant may perceive early on that he/she is destined to be the owner of an also-ran because Pop or Mom were unwilling, or unable, to compete in the 'prospects' market. As always, real life intrudes.

Be that as it may, hobby goat players should understand their increasing numbers and the resulting surplus kid output do contribute to the national supply of domestic goat meat. You are collectively responding, albeit in small ways, to the demand for nutritious, lean meat even as you pursue the goals and objectives of your chosen lifestyle. Hobby goat production is, on balance, a most useful undertaking for all concerned; you can be rightfully proud.

Perhaps a concluding observation might here be appropriate. A hobby goat operation may (but does not *have to*) simultaneously encompass corollary individual and family concerns of a larger nature. We see no reason that the recent, current thinking on eating local, sustainability, healthy eating, food safety, etc. could not easily meld with the other objectives of hobby goat owners, as previously described. Indeed, there is, seemingly, a natural compatibility between the two.