

# Sheep shearing rising

## World titles create a buzz as NZ farmers call for Olympics inclusion

**MASTERTON (New Zealand):** As a boisterous 1,800-strong crowd looks on, Englishman Adam Berry wrestles a wriggling, kicking sheep to the floor and begins shearing intently.

Within 60 seconds, the puzzled-looking sheep is stripped of its luxurious fleece, bundled to the back of the stage and Berry is ready for another one, quickly checking on the progress of rival competitors as he grabs the animal.

This is the 15th world shearing championships in Masterton, New Zealand, the equivalent of the Olympics for shearers such as Berry, who trained for months to challenge his renowned Kiwi counterparts on their home turf.

"To get the Golden Shears in New Zealand (would be) a lifetime ambition, it doesn't get any better," said Berry, who finished sixth in the overall standings at the event, which concluded last weekend.

What began as friendly rivalry in the remote shearing sheds of Australia and New Zealand has become a fully fledged sport in the past 30 years, attracting teams from 25 countries to the 2012 championships in the North Island town.

The New Zealand Farming Federation has even called for shearing to

become an Olympic demonstration sport, saying the athleticism and skill of the competitors deserves wider recognition.

Organiser Murray Tomlin said shearers were supremely fit, clipping hundreds of sheep – which can each weigh around 60kg – during the average working day in a physical effort that has been likened to running back-to-back marathons.

He said they also needed to display dexterity with the cutting comb in competitive shearing, with a nick on the sheep's skin or "double cut" over one part of the fleece attracting penalty points from the judges.

The type of sheep is also a factor, with the different breeds used in the championship's host countries over the years displaying variable fleece length, weight and, most importantly, temperament.

The corriedale sheep used by New Zealand are fairly even tempered, according to Tomlin, more feisty than the Australian merino but nowhere near as fiery as the Scottish black-face – "the next closest thing you can get to a goat".

To minimise the "home sheep" advantage for New Zealanders competing in Masterton, most of the

international competitors arrived in the country a few months before the event to acclimatise themselves in local shearing sheds.

American Emily Chamelin, who shears small flocks on hobby farms for a living in her native Maryland, said adapting to the industrial-scale of sheep shearing in New Zealand left her in peak condition for the competition.

"It's a big deal here and you can tell that," she said.

"In Maryland, I'll go to eight or nine farms in a day and do 20 here, five there – I get over here and they want 50 a run, then you get a half hour break, another 50, a half hour break, another 50.

"It took time for my back to adjust and get the fitness level to perform over here."

Berry said it took enormous concentration to achieve a clean clip while manhandling a sheep that could kick out at any moment, while also racing against the clock to beat fellow competitors.

"You're always dealing with a live animal and every one is different," he said.

"You've got to make adjustments, some are subconscious.

"We're constantly moving. And it's

got to be comfortable for the sheep."

Chamelin doubted the Olympics was ready to embrace sheep shearing, saying spectators from non-rural backgrounds may be concerned about the sheep's treatment, even though shearing was "absolutely necessary" for their welfare.

"The issue is that you get people who don't understand," she said.

"You've got to get over that hurdle first and educate people as to why we do this and why this is important before we can ever do the Olympic jump."

However, Briton Peter Guthrie, who travelled to New Zealand for the event, believed sheep shearing may one day earn a place in the sporting mainstream.

"It wouldn't surprise me in 10, 15 years from now," he said.

"It depends whether the Olympics would like to do this, but it would be good for agriculture in the wider sense if it were."

This year saw a changing of the guard when Gavin Mutch of Scotland won the overall title, breaking a 24-year stranglehold on the event by New Zealand and Australian shearers, who will be keen to bounce back at the next titles in Ireland in 2014.

– AFP