

Saskatchewan's famed sheep shearer takes another title shot

CALGARY – Decades of Canadian sheep-shearing frustration were flushed away with a few expert clipper strokes. Don't believe us? Just ask Cliff Metheral.

Cliff, Canada's sheep shearing patriarch, was trying to reach younger brother Don via cellphone in January to find out how he'd fared at Denver's National Western Stock Show — the industry's most distinguished annual event on American soil.

"Actually, I texted him to see whether he'd won or not, and didn't hear anything back from him, and I was wondering why he was being so selfish with the information," recalls Cliff Metheral, 57, of Nokomis, Sask., with a laugh. "What I didn't know was that he'd ended up dropping his phone in the toilet, so he didn't have a phone with him after that.

"But yeah, I was pretty excited," adds Cliff. "I looked it up on the Internet, and I was very happy for him."

Cliff's little brother had, in fact, ended up winning the Jan. 24 contest over runner-up Loren Opstedahl of South Dakota — becoming the first Canadian shearer in seven decades to win the National Western, whose sheep shearing contest originated in Chicago way back in the early 1940s.

Buoyed by his success, Don, who's based in Glen Huron, Ont., will be representing Canada at the Golden Shears World Shearing Championship in Llanellwedd, Wales, beginning on Monday, July 19. Cliff, meanwhile, will be making his usual July journey to Calgary — entering the Calgary Stampede's 14th annual North American Sheep Shearing Challenge from Friday, July 9 through Sunday, July 11 at the Victoria Pavilion.

"Cliff will be left to carry the family name in Calgary," notes Pam Barker of the Stampede's Sheep committee, "but he'll definitely hold his own. He's the elder statesman of sheep shearing in Canada."

Cliff, who shears more than 20,000 sheep a year, is the only one of these so-called natural fibre disengagement specialists from around the world who's taken part in the Stampede's clipping clinic every year. Last year, Cliff and Don squared off in the final — with Don emerging victorious, and earning a little revenge for his loss to Cliff in the 2004 final of the World Sheep and Wool Congress at Quebec City. The rubber match is on hold for now, but Cliff has plenty to look forward to as Canada's most celebrated sheep shearing competition gets underway on Friday, July 9 at 12 p.m. with qualifying in the intermediate and open categories.

"I've got family in Calgary, so we have a little reunion at the same time," says Cliff, who won the Stampede's first North American Sheep Shearing Challenge in 1995. "It's also, really, my only opportunity to compete, unless I were to go to the States. And it's really nice to get together with the other shearers, have a beer or two, and have a little jaw session."

The Stampede's shearing challenge is both a timed and judged competition, with one point added for each 20 seconds in time. Judges also assess points for second passes

with clippers, and later examine the animals for remaining ridges and tufts of wool and inadvertent small cuts or nicks in the skin.

The final rounds of the intermediate and open classes commence at 3 p.m. on Sunday, July 11 in the Victoria Pavilion. While Cliff Metheral will be vying for his second open crown, Maria Stiglmayr of Fraserwood, Man., is the two-time defending intermediate champ. First prize in the open class is worth \$2,000 and a handtooled Stampede buckle, while the open runner-up takes home \$1,000.

The best from Canada and the U.S will also go at it, clippers and shears, in a fun international challenge at 12 p.m. on Sunday, July 11 in the Victoria Pavilion.

Don Metheral will be making his third appearance representing Canada at the world championship in Wales, where 27 countries will square off. Cliff, meanwhile, has worn the Maple Leaf five times at the worlds — 1980 in New Zealand, 1984 in England, 1986 in Australia, 1998 in Ireland, and 2008 in Norway — finishing as high as ninth overall at Perth in '86.

"The first time, it was quite unreal," recalls Cliff. "I was always somewhat interested in sports . . . I was good in a number of them, but not good enough at any one particular sport to get anywhere. And to end up shearing for Canada at the worlds sure meant a lot to me."

For the second straight year, the Stampede will be adding its own twist to proceedings, as shearers face off two at a time trying to beat each other and the clock — trimming four sheep in less than six minutes.

"That's the first time (at the 2009 Stampede) I'd ever seen a format like that, and I quite enjoyed it, actually," says Cliff. "They might be using us for a bit of entertainment . . . but it sure gets the blood pumping."

Margaret Cook
ALBERTA LAMB PRODUCERS
Agriculture Centre,
97 East Lake Ramp NE
Airdrie, Alberta T4A 0C3
Tel: (Rite) 403 948 8533 Fax: 403 912 1455

Check out our websites
<http://www.ablamb.ca> for industry information
<http://www.albertalamb.ca> for delicious recipes