

# The Groton Independent

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## GHS 2020 Royalty

The 2020 GHS Homecoming Royalty were selected Monday evening at the coronation ceremony held in the GHS Gym. They are pictured above with their parents: Chandler Larson, son of Carson and Julie Larson, and Alexis Hanten, daughter of Sarah and Cody Hanten. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Lots of home activities during the next few days. On Thursday, Groton Area will be hosting boys soccer at 4 p.m. with James Valley Christian. Clark/Willow Lake will come to town for volleyball action with the C match at 5 p.m., the junior varsity at 6 p.m. and the varsity to follow, all in the Arena. The junior high matches will be played in the GHS gym with two matches starting at 5 p.m.

The homecoming parade is set for Friday at 1 p.m. with the football game at 7 p.m. Tea Area will come to Groton on Saturday for soccer with the girls game at 1 p.m. and boys at 3 p.m.

## Schedule Addition

There is an addition to the volleyball scheduled. Groton Area will host Wauaby-Summit on Monday, Oct. 12th. There will be a junior high match, junior varsity and varsity.

The SDHSAA has ruled that there will be no wrestling tournaments this year. Only duals and triangulars will be held during the regular season.



## Base for new water tower

The base for the new Groton water tower was poured Wednesday afternoon. As you can see in the photo above, they had the concrete truck with a long conveyor belt moving the concrete to the hole.

Bottom left photo features the round base as workers smooth it out and make sure all of the air bubbles are out of it. (Photos by Paul Kosel)





# S.D. sheep farmers hurting as pandemic reduces demand and processing capacity

Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

In March 2020, the sheep-farming industry in South Dakota — the sixth-largest in the country — was humming along nicely.

After a few sluggish decades, prices for meat and wool were at or near all-time highs and markets were stable. Fine-dining restaurants and the cruise-line industry continued to fuel strong demand for South Dakota lamb. And the annual massive sales boost during the lamb-centered celebrations of traditional and orthodox Easter, Passover and Ramadan in late March or April lay ahead.

But then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the statewide sheep industry that produces about 250,000 head a year and generates nearly \$42 million in annual revenues took a dive.

Demand for lamb and wool in the U.S. and



**Sheep are herded through pens at the St. Onge Newell Sheeppyards during a sale held in Newell, S.D. in late August. Though prices for lamb have plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic, producers are still trying to get what they can for animals that are ready for harvest.**

Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

across the world fell dramatically as restaurants closed, cruise ships stayed docked and international trade and travel came to a halt.

Prices paid to farmers for each animal fell by half, leading to major financial losses. Ranchers were forced to store thousands of pounds of sheared wool in warehouses to wait for prices to rebound.

Almost all sheep ranchers have had to drastically alter their business plans and shift breeding, lambing, finishing and slaughter cycles to reduce losses and keep their operations alive.

"This COVID pandemic couldn't have come at a worse time for the sheep industry in South Dakota," said Lisa Surber of Newell, who is executive secretary of the South Dakota Sheep Growers Association. "It's been a really difficult period for the industry."

The bad news for sheep producers only got worse when the rancher-owned Mountain States Rosen sheep-processing plant in Greeley, Colo., went into bankruptcy this spring and was purchased in August by Brazilian meatpacking giant JBS, which has said it may close the plant or convert it to beef production.

The closure created another challenge for lamb producers who were already finding it hard to get animals processed at plants that slowed or halted operations during the pandemic. Before closing, the Greeley plant had processed about 20% of the national annual sheep harvest.

"This [the plant closure] hit right at the run-up to the holidays in April, which is the single-highest consumption period for lamb," said Peter Orwick, executive director of the Colorado-based American Sheep Industry Association, the national trade group for sheep farmers.

The low per-pound prices and processing challenges forced many sheep producers to stall delivery of sheep to feedlots or processing plants and keep feeding their animals much longer than usual, which increases feed costs and reduces the price paid per animal, Orwick said.

Industry experts do not predict that many sheep farms will go under or that a glut of animals will lead to euthanizations, like those that occurred in the hog industry after pork processors shut down amid the pandemic. Sheep farming allows for adaptations in how animals are bred, raised and harvested, so producers have been able to hold onto animals or shift them around until prices rebound.

Most American sheep farmers received money to offset pandemic losses through the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, part of

the congressional CARES Act, which provided a per-head payment. Those payments, however, only covered about 20% of losses suffered by many sheep farmers, some of whom have had to visit their bankers with bad news about loan payments that may be hard to make, said Orwick.

"For us, it's really about survival at this point," Orwick said.

John Erk, 42, works with his father, Paul, on the Erk Ranch in western South Dakota, where they raise sheep and cattle and grow hay about 30 miles north of Newell in Butte County.

Erk recently left his job as a partner in a Sturgis engineering firm to return to the farm, where he plans to build a home, take over the operation from his father and become the fourth generation of the Erk family to run the ranch, which was homesteaded in 1912 by his great-grandfather, a German immigrant.

The Erks saw strong prices for lamb in recent years but watched the bottom drop out of the market when restaurants and cruise ships shut down amid the pandemic, Erk said.

"Nobody's making any money right now, because if nobody is eating it, nobody's going to be buying it," he said.

Erk said the family owns about 1,200 ewes and mostly raises "feeder" sheep that are sold to feedlot operators for finishing and then slaughtering. He said they sold ewes for \$100 to \$120 during the pandemic that would usually fetch about \$200 per head.

Erk said his family has endured prior upheavals in the sheep industry over their long history, and he is keeping a positive attitude and has high hopes that the market and prices will return to profitability soon.

"If this would be a few years in a row, I probably would be panicking, but I'm familiar with the ups and downs in the ranching industry," Erk said.

The number of U.S. farms that raised sheep fell from about 105,000 nationally in 1990 to 80,000 in 2010, but rose back to about 100,000 in 2019 as demand for meat and wool stabilized and more farmers took on small flocks to diversify their operations, according to the USDA.

The American sheep industry saw average annual production growth of 3.8% from 2015 to 2020. In all, farmers raised 5.2 million animals in 2019. In 2017, gate receipts for animals and wool sold were about \$500 million, and the overall economic impact of the industry was an estimated \$5.8 billion, according to the sheep industry association.

In South Dakota, the sheep industry has followed a similar pattern of historic decline and recent stabilization, and also in the growth of small farms, known as farm-flock producers with annual production of fewer than 100 animals. The great majority of sheep farms in South Dakota, about 88%, produced fewer than 300 animals in 2017, and only 31 farms produced 1,000 animals or more.

In 2012, about 260,000 sheep were raised on roughly 1,800 farms; in 2017, about 235,000 sheep were raised on roughly 1,350 farms, according to the state Department of Agriculture. Not unlike cattle ranches, sheep farms are more common West River but with a significant number of farms dotted across East River.

Most South Dakota lamb is processed and shipped domestically to high-end restau-

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Continued on next page

rants and cruise lines, Surber said. American producers cannot meet the full domestic demand for lamb meat, with Australia and New Zealand the top exporters to the U.S. market. Texas, California, Colorado, Wyoming and Utah are the top states for sheep production, with South Dakota sixth with about 5% of the total U.S. production.

TOP SHEEP-PRODUCING STATES IN U.S. AND GREAT PLAINS	
STATE	ANIMALS PRODUCED/YEAR
1. Texas	735,000
2. California	570,000
3. Colorado	425,000
4. Wyoming	340,000
5. Utah	285,000
6. South Dakota	250,000
7. Idaho	230,000
8. Montana	200,000
9. Oregon	165,000
10. Iowa	151,000
12. Minnesota	115,000
20. Nebraska	78,000
21. North Dakota	75,000

Source: American Sheep Industry Association

Wool is still sold to the U.S. military and also shipped to China, where sales were hurt by tariffs implemented by the Trump administration during its ongoing trade war, Orwick said.

No sheep farm in South Dakota has been as dramatically affected by the pandemic and supply-chain challenges as the VanWell Livestock operation in Watertown, the largest in the state.

Trevor VanWell runs VanWell Livestock with his brother, Travis, and their mother, Stephanie. The family's breeding, lambing and finishing operation handles about 140,000 lambs a year in one form or another.

The VanWells sold thousands of sheep in April and May for 75 to 80 cents per pound, less than half the \$1.65 per pound they were receiving before the pandemic, Trevor VanWell said.

They also held onto and fed animals longer than the ideal period, selling some at weights of 200 pounds or more after a year on feed when 150 to 165 pounds after seven to 11 months on feed is preferable. The farm lost money on those larger animals due to extra costs for feed, vaccines and labor in addition to price discounts demanded by buyers.

"We're pretty much doing all that work and nothing has paid off for it so far," VanWell said.

The VanWells also have about 300,000 pounds of wool in storage in a Watertown warehouse, creating another lost revenue stream.

The family owned about 10,000 shares in the rancher-owned Mountain States Lamb Cooperative, which operated the processing plant that shut down in Greeley. Bankruptcy rendered the shares, once valued at about \$200,000, totally worthless.

The VanWells were still losing money on each animal sold in August, VanWell said.

"The bloodbath continues, and we're just hoping to see some daylight at the end of all the chaos," he said.

Surber said positive signs emerged at a "premium sale" held in Huron in July, in which sheep ranchers presented their best animals to buyers seeking the best genetic material to launch new flocks. Interest and prices paid at the event were both high despite the ongoing gloom of the pandemic, Surber said.

The wool industry may also bounce back, Orwick said. The U.S. military has commissioned a new line of wool uniforms, and washable wool socks have become a popular retail product, he said.



**Brooklyn Gilbert**  
(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

## Warner has clean sweep in volleyball action

Warner had a clean sweep in Groton Tuesday night as the Monarchs won all three matches in volleyball action.

The C match was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM/GDIRADIO, sponsored by Frost Construction. Game scores were 25-18 and 25-6. The junior varsity match was also broadcast on GDILIVE.COM/GDIRADIO sponsored by Jerry and Kathy Bjerke. Game scores were 25-10 and 25-16.

The varsity match was broadcast on GDILIVE.COM/GDIRADIO, sponsored by BK Custom T's & More, S & S Lumber, Hefty Seed, Bary Keith at Harr Motors and the Groton Chiropractic Clinic. Game scores were 25-6, 25-6 and 25-8.

In the varsity match, Aspen Johnson and Megan Fliehs each had three kills and Madeline Fliehs had two. Allyssa Locke had seven of the nine sets. Alyssa Thaler had nine of the team's 24 digs with Madeline Fliehs and Allyssa Locke each having four.

The Monarchs had 15 ace serves, 33 kills, 31 assists, 31 digs and six blocks.

## Mobridge-Pollock defeats Groton Area netters

Mobridge-Pollock defeated Groton Area in volleyball action Thursday in Mobridge, 25-19, 25-14 and 25-16.

Groton Area had six ace serves with Allyssa Locke and Tricia Keith each having two. The Tigers had 18 kills with Madeline Fliehs having six and Aspen Johnson and Grace Wambach each having four. Groton Area had 17 assists. Allyssa Locke had 10 of the team's 39 digs while Madeline Fliehs had nine and Grace Wambach seven. Stella Meier had two of the team's three blocks.

Mobridge-Pollock won the junior varsity match, 25-14 and 25-15.

## Fliehs places fifth at Tiospa Zina golf meet

Tiospa Zina hosted a golf tournament Thursday at Dakota Magic Golf Course, the host site of the regional this year. Brevin Fliehs shot a 83 and placed 5th. Other golfers were Lucas Simon who shot a 105 and Logan Pearson who shot a 112.

## Smith places fifth at Deuel Cross Country Meet

Isaac Smith placed fifth at the Deuel Invitational Cross Country Meet held Monday in Clear Lake. He finished the 5000m course in 17:39.05. Jackson Garstecki placed 41st with a time of 23:03.07.

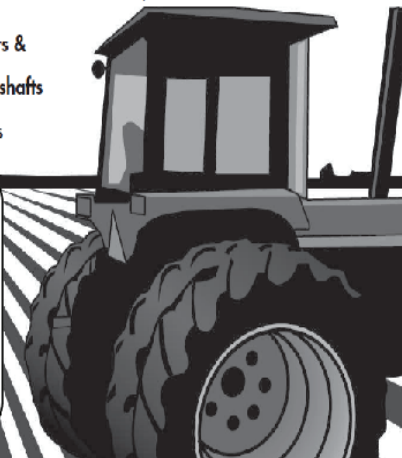
In the girls junior varsity division, Sierra Ehresmann placed 13th with a time of 15:30.10 and Rebecca Poor was 29th with a time of 18:34.28. Dragr Monson placed third in the junior varsity boy's division with a time of 11:54.41 and Jayden Schwan placed 20th with a time of 13:38.38. The junior varsity races run 3,000 meters.

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# Milbank wins own homecoming game

Milbank, somewhat, celebrated homecoming on Friday and won it's homecoming game over Groton Area, 27-0. Milbank did not have a homecoming parade due to COVID-19.

The football game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Kevin and Kara Pharis.

Milbank had 249 yards rushing, 15 first downs and 69 yards passing. Groton Area had 77 yards rushing, seven first downs and 82 yards passing.

Andrew Marzahn had 42 yards rushing and caught three passes for 20 yards. Jaimen Farrell had 18 yards rushing and 20 yards receiving. Colby Dunker and Jacob Lewandowski each had 10 yard rushing. Jordan Bjerke had 20 yards receiving and Jackson Cogley had 22.

Alex Morris led the defense with 17 tackles followed by Pierce Kettering with 16, Jaimen Farrell 11 while Evan Nehls, Paxton Bonn and Tate Larson each had seven tackles.

Justin Osborn had 140 yards rushing for Milbank.

Milbank scored with 34 seconds left in the first half and with the PAT conversion, it was 8-0 at halftime. The Bulldogs scored again with 3:16 left in the third quarter and it was 14-0. Milbank scored two more times in the fourth quarter.

Groton Area will host Redfield on Friday in Groton's homecoming game at 7 p.m. The game will be broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM/GDIRADIO 89.3 FM, sponsored by Mike Nehls for Brown County Commission.

# Lady Tigers tame Blue Dragons

Groton Area posted a 5-0 win over Garretson in soccer action played Saturday in Groton. The event was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Jason Roberts and Lisa Pray.

The Tigers are struggling to get into the playoffs as Garretson is still holding on to the number six position while Groton Area is at number seven. The top six teams advance to the playoffs.

The five goals were scored by five different players. The first score was with 22:37 left in the first half. A Groton player kicked the ball and it bounced off the top bar, landing just in front of the goal. Garretson's goalie lost track of the ball and Jerica Locke was there to give the ball and boot and it rolled into the net. The second score in the first half came with 38 seconds left when Mia Crank kicked the ball towards the goal and Kenzie McInerney finished the play with the hard kick and the ball went flying into the net for a 2-0 lead.

Groton Area scored early in the second half at the 38:07 mark when Riley Leicht kicked the ball into the net. The Tigers scored again at the 23 minute mark when Regan Leicht kicked the ball in, and the final score was with 14:40 left when Brooklyn Hansen scored.

Groton Area, now 3-4-1, will host Tea Area on Saturday for the regular season finale at 1 p.m. That game will be broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM/GDIRADIO 89.3 FM.

The boys were suppose to play Freeman Academy on Saturday, but that game was called off. Freeman Academy has not played any games this year. The boys will host James Valley Christian on Thursday and that game will be broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM/GDIRADIO 89.3 FM, sponsored by the White House Inn.

Then on Saturday, Groton Area will host Tea Area with the girls playing at 1 p.m. and the boys at 3 p.m. Both games will be broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM/GDIRADIO 89.3 FM. The girls game is sponsored by Dan & Marjae Schinkel, Nick & Sadie Leicht, rent & Heather Traphagen ~ Del & Joan Lehr, Emily & Wes Dinger ~ Stacy & Craig Hansen and Jeff & Bridget Flihs. The Groton Vet Clinic is sponsoring the boys game.

- Paul Kosel

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**Emma Schinkel**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Regan Leicht**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Brooklyn Gilbert**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Jaedyn Penning**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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