

Big shearing stars, small towns - September 24, 2010

Many of New Zealand's smallest communities will host some of the country's most successful sports stars as a season comprising 60 shearing sports competitions throughout New Zealand starts next week.

The season opens with the New Zealand Merino Championships in both shearing and woolhandling in Alexandra next Friday and Saturday, October 1-2, with entrants expected to include new World champion and Hawke's Bay shearer Cam Ferguson, and World Champion woolhandling team member Keryn Herbert, a North Island star currently on a merino classing scholarship in the South Island.

Ferguson, whose title was the starring moment of New Zealand's three titles at the 14th Golden Shears World Championships in July, faces two overseas assignments and an early 2011 tally record attempt, but expects to compete at more than a third of the competitions, including a defence of his Golden Shears open crown in Masterton in March and a bid for his first New Zealand open title in Te Kuiti four weeks later.

The Alexandra competition is the only merino event, following the cancellation of the Waitaki McKenzie Merino Shears which had two successful years after coming out of recess in 2008 and which would have otherwise started the season this weekend (sept 25).

The NZ Merino Championships are the first leg of the PGG Wrightson National Series, which comprises five rounds of qualifying during the season over five different wool types before the semi-finals and final during the Golden Shears. The second round will be the New Zealand Spring Shears at Waimate a week after the event at Alexandra, and other qualifying rounds will be held at the Canterbury Show in November, the national lambshearing championships at Raglan in January, and the Pahiatua Shears just four days before the start of the Golden Shears in Masterton.

Many competitions are now linked to circuits or series, and the North Island events open on the East Coast, with the Poverty Bay Show in Gisborne on October 16, and the Great Raihania Shears on October 22 at the Hawke's Bay Show in Hastings.

The competitions range from stand-alone events such as the Merino Championships, Golden Shears and New Zealand Championships, to events at A and P shows and remote district sports days.

The importance to the A and P Show is highlighted by new Wairarapa A and P Society secretary-treasurer Ray Beale who has been working to save the shearing and woolhandling championships at the society's show at Clareville, near Carterton.

Also a successful event since returning to the show in 2008, and scheduled this year for October 30, the Wairarapa Spring Shears have been under threat because of planning manpower problems which afflict many smaller competitions as personnel try to mix organisation with the vagaries of the shearing season, hit by declining sheep numbers and disrupted by wet weather.

Mr Beale said: "The shearing and woolhandling is a very important part of our show. It attracts alot of people, hundreds, and it creates alot of excitement."

"It's 99 percent certain to be a part of the show again."

Shearing Sports New Zealand chairman John Fagan says most shearing competitions have a history in A and P shows, and they provide New Zealanders a great opportunities to see many of the best shearers and woolhandlers in the World - comprising not only New Zealanders but dozens of others who make the New Zealand season a "must" on their shearing calendars each year.