

The Cost of Sheep

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Three rows back at the Centennial Livestock Auction, Abdul Himat props his feet up on the dingy red bench in front of him and grimaces as the auctioneer calls out the selling price of the sheep in the ring.

“It’s too high,” he says, shaking his head.

In the ring, four black-nosed sheep move like a school of fish, skittering back and forth, their heads pivoting in the same direction. They came in through a sliding door on the auctioneer’s left and will run out to his right. A skinny boy in a blue hoody flicks a flag at their back legs to keep them moving.

You can spot Abdul easily in the auction room. He’s six inches taller than everyone else, the only black person in the place, and he’s wearing jeans and a gray fleece in a sea of plaid and Carhart. Originally from Sudan, he’s at the auction to buy sheep and goats for many of the Halal stores and restaurants along the Front Range.

Tomorrow at 5 a.m. he’ll bring the animals he buys to a USDA slaughterhouse in Denver. Today, he’s focused on trying to fill up his trailer for as little cash as possible, which is proving to be difficult. Even though he has his niche, and a corner on the market—auctioneer Brad Olson estimates Abdul buys 50 percent of the sheep—he’s still struggling to make a profit.

According to the USDA, sheep supply has been on a decline for the past 15 years, despite the fact that demand is constant. Buyers like Abdul get pinched between rising stock prices, due to low quantity, and a flat market for their product.

One complacent-looking goat stays in the ring as the other animals run in and out. She’s wedged her butt into one of the corners of the hexagonal pen, and she grunts at the sheep.

“She’s the teaser, she gets them into the ring,” Abdul says. “She’s been here longer than I have.”

He’s been at the auction every Wednesday for the past five years. That makes him one of the newest guys in the room.

“Before this I used to work at the post office,” he says.

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The auction starts at ten. At nine, the livestock buyers sit in the attached café to eat breakfast and read the market report. Sherry Johnson brings them coffee in chipped green mugs and warns them not to talk too much bullshit.

Today, they're grumbling about broken trailers, the lack of pancakes, and the price of sheep.

Abdul walks in and sits down at the table. Chuck groans, then breaks into a smile, showing his tobacco-covered teeth. "When this guy shows up, I usually just go home," he says. "He's not going to let me buy what I want."

Abdul knows that he's the new guy, and says he realizes he sticks out among the rest of the livestock buyers, because of what he's doing and where he's from. "These people, they're all the same," he says. "They look like they have the same mother, they wear the same thing."

"I've been in the business all my life and this is the highest I've ever seen it," says Chuck Foster, who has been buying sheep at the auction since 1958.

"There's not as many lambs up in this country anymore," says Brad Olson, an auctioneer at Centennial since 1986. He says that a shortage of hay, due to drought, coupled with a loss of small farms is causing the lack of stock.

Chuck pulls out a tin of Copenhagen and passes it around. Everyone takes a pinch. Nobody spits.

They say they know some of the sellers, or know of them, but it's the buyers who hang out, have coffee and give each other a hard time. It's the same every Wednesday, they eat and commiserate before they head into the auction to try to outbid each other.

"We all eat breakfast together, but then we're competitors," Chuck says. "You can sit there and hold a grudge, or you can make a living."

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The auction house is right off the Fort Collins exit on I-25, so close to the highway that it's almost underneath it. In a triangular pen on the edge of the road three nervous-looking horses prick their noses up into the wind and roll back their ears.

The pens stretch away from the interstate for a quarter of a mile, a labyrinth of gates and fences, most of them empty. Tomorrow, cattle will flood the pens, but today it's a motley mix of sheep, goats, horses, cows and llamas.

A few of the cows are milking cows, but most of the animals will go to slaughter, Brad says, including some of the horses, despite the fact that in 2006, Congress passed a bill that made killing horses for human consumption illegal.

Brad looks frustrated when he talks about the prices of horses. He says the horse market is in even worse shape than the sheep market. "That slaughter deal, it knocked the floor out," he says. "The real value of most horses is their protein." He mentions that now buyers will pay to ship horses to Canada or Mexico, for the European meat market, but even that is getting expensive. "It's \$50 a head in freight to get horses to the border," he says.

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Inside the auction, Abdul is sitting next to his biggest rival, a sheep buyer from Buena Vista in red sweatshirt and faded camo baseball cap. He has a sheet of paper in his hand to document how many animals he's bought. so far, only two.

Wayne Cruz, who owns the place, is calling the auction, and his voice echoes through the room. "One 40, one 40, 41, 41, hup 42."

He's looking out at the audience and down at his laptop, where online bids are clicking in. Numbers flash across the digital screen above his head, trailing slightly behind his calls.

A thick-necked guy in a brown coat flips up a yellow card with a number on it, and Wayne points at him. The regulars, like Chuck and Abdul, don't have numbered cards; they just make eye contact, then flick up a pointer or a thumb in Wayne's direction.

Abdul has stopped paying attention to the auction, and is trying to convince the Hispanic man sitting behind him to bid on the ewe and lamb in the ring. "Come on, buy them," He teases. "Butcher them up. That lamb will be tacos, maybe one burrito."

The man half smiles, and then shakes his head. "Nope," he says. "Too high."

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