

Sheep shearers flock to world championship in France

BORDEAUX: Sheep shearing experts flocked to a small town in the French countryside on Thursday for the opening of the annual world championship, a four-day event held for the first time on French soil. More than 320 competitors from 34 countries as far apart as Norway, Japan and the Cook Islands, are battling it out to win titles in woolhandling, machine shearing and "blade" shearing, a traditional method using scissors.

And the 5,000 sheep on site will no doubt appreciate a haircut, with temperatures expected to peak at 34 degrees Celsius over the coming days in Le Dorat, a town in central France. It is the first time the international competition sets foot-and hoof-on French soil, although the town, which is home to 1,800 people, has previously hosted the French sheep shearing championships in 2013 as well as the Six Nations tournament the same year. Last year, it also welcomed a 24-hour sheep shearing marathon, with six shearers clipping around 2,500 sheep, producing six tonnes of fleece.

"The world championship, it's so fantastic, so spectacular, we want to share it with the French people," said Christophe Riffaud, president of the Association for the World Sheep Shearing Championship (AMTM) who has competed in Northern Ireland and the Netherlands. "I like the physical aspect of the job," said Canadian Pauline Bolay, one of only two women among the 323 participants.

Endurance, speed, flexibility

Sheep are typically shorn at least once a year to avoid sickness caused by ticks, flies and other insects in their wool. Endurance, speed and flexibility—particularly in the back—are considered key skills for this iconic rural activity, with professional shearers typically paid per animal. Competitors in Sunday's machine-shearing final will be tasked with shaving 20 lambs in under 16 minutes.

Quality is the most important aspect, making up around 60 percent of the final grade. Judges "check for marks, uncut fleece and uneven levels of shearing," the AMTM said on its website. New Zealand is the favorite to win the world title, after celebrating home-turf victories in the machine shearing and woolhandling categories in 2017. South Africa picked up first prize for blade shearing. Apart from cherrypicking the best of the best, the event aims to educate the public about how wool goes from sheep to jumper.

"Ninety percent of French wool gets sent to China to be washed and processed," Riffaud said. "There's not much demand for French wool because of its structure, but we want to promote it as a quality natural product". The seven-hectare site is also displaying around 100 exhibits made from wool, including a wedding dress and jeans, in a bid to promote the fruits of the French countryside. —AFP



LE DORAT: New Zealand's Cam Ferguson takes part in the machine shearing event at the 18th edition of the World Sheep Shearing and Wool handling championships in Le Dorat, central-western France. — AFP

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