

The goat in the photo got a lot of attention and generated a lot of questions at our Winter Farm Day last week.

He is a one-year-old wether. A wether is a male goat (or sheep) that has been castrated.

Some goats have horns, some do not. This fellow is odd. He is literally a unicorn.

We bought him last spring when he was a kid. A "kid goat" is a male or female goat that is one-year-old or less. He was a unicorn then.

I do not actually know how he came to be a unicorn but there are several possibilities.

His former owners named him "Chocolate". Chocolate, like most goat wethers, is very docile and affectionate.

Wethers do not smell bad. Most intact, male goats do.

Mature male goats are called "Bucks" or "Billys". They make themselves smell horrid for reasons that are only known to goats.

Domestic livestock that have been selected by breeders to be hornless are referred to as "polled". Many breeds of domestic cattle, sheep and goats are polled.

Horned animals can be dangerous to farmers and to their herd or flock mates.

For example, I buy over 100 beef heifers each year but I do not buy horned animals. A horned animal within a group of animals that are mostly hornless, will become a bully very quickly.

If all animals in a group have horns, the situation is fairer, but there is a heightened probability of animals injuring each other.

But back to the original question, "Why is Chocolate a unicorn"?

He could be a natural unicorn but that is extremely unlikely.

He could have broken a horn off. That happens, but rarely. In those rare instances it results from mature animals fighting. So, again, extremely unlikely.

Most likely, his original caretaker did an imperfect job of "disbudding".

Disbudding is the removal of horn-producing cells in young animals. At this stage, horn buds are still free-floating and not yet attached to the frontal bone of the skull.

Disbudding is often done by caustic paste or hot-iron. The simple but unpleasant procedure destroys horn-producing cells in the horn bud.

Chocolate, with his one short horn, is probably not dangerous to anyone. However, he does stick his head through fences and then has difficulty pulling his head back. For that reason, I have considered cutting his uni-horn shorter, lest he should strangle himself.

I am reluctant to do so. It would again be an unpleasant procedure.

For now, he seems to be learning to avoid getting his head caught. There are some risks in life.

Tom







