INTRODUCTION

Urochloa spp. (Syn. Brachiaria) is the most widely used pasture in the Brazilian cerrado biome regions by virtue of its hardiness and little need for fertilizer (Euclides et al., 2019). In those regions, productions of animals are mostly finished on pasture. However, this type of system is known to possibly result in the reduced or worsened carcass composition (Euclides et al., 2018).

Proper nutrients utilization results in the increased gains per animal for the producer. Fat is the most variable tissue in the animal carcass, as can be influenced by the finishing system, diet, age, and sex. Fat is also a parameter of great importance since current consumer seeks meats with little fat content. In contrast, the carcass should have a minimum amount of this fat tissue to protect the muscle (meat) during refrigeration, thereby preventing the alterations of color, tenderness, and the other properties (Araújo Filho et al., 2010).

Meat is the main product of the sheep-production chain, and consumers have become increasingly demanding when purchasing it. Some of the first aspects considered in choosing meat at the time of purchasing are color and smell, and later, flavor and tenderness (Osório et al., 2012). The nutritional quality of the diet supplied to the animal as well as management and slaughter procedures directly influence these characteristics.

In searching for alternatives strategy to improve the composition of carcass and meat of animals reared on pasture, the producers started to adopt a supplementation technique to improve the final animal product and make the system profitable, since the other options for finishing these animals would be the feedlot, which is a rather costly practice. However, the tropical pasture-based sheep finishing system is not yet well elucidated due to the lack of information and studies investigating the ideal herbage offering for sheep to optimize performance and final-product characteristics.

In this scenario, with a view to reduce costs but to maintain a good carcass and meat qualities, also to combine animal production with pasture quality, the present study was designed to examine the performance, carcass
characteristics, and meat characteristics of lambs on *Urochloa brizantha* cv. Marandu pasture, under varied green-leaf offerings during the finishing stage.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Location, Animals, and Diets**

The experiment was conducted in the Sheep Farming Section at teaching farm (20°26’34.31"S 54°50’27.86"W; 530.7 m altitude) belonging to the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science (FAMEZ) at UFMS, in Terenos - MS, Brazil. All experimental procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee on Animal Use at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS) (approval no. 481/2012).

Lambs, male, contemporary (60 days old on average) Texel × mixed breed, with an initial average weight of 22.6 kg, from a pre-weaning system with slow feeding, were used for two consecutive years. The experimental period in the first year used 33 lambs and, in the second year, used 35 lambs. The animals were evaluated in the pasture after weaning at 60 days. All animals were slaughtered at six months of age (180 days old) by the end of the finishing stage.

After weighing at weaning, the 60 lambs were distributed with 12 animals per treatment. The treatments consisted of 4 offers of green leaves, namely: 105, 90, 75, and 60 g DM/kg of body weight. The supply of leaves was adjusted every 28 days, according to the variation of the animal weight and the pasture structure. The animals were weighed at the start of the experimental period and continued every 28 days to measure body weight gain and average daily gain. Body condition score (BCS) (Russel et al., 1969) and degree of anemia (Gordon & Whitlock, 1939).

Forage Sampling and Analysis

Grazing simulation was performed by analyzing the way an animal was fed and the grazing site was monitored in order to obtain a representative sample of its natural and behavioral grazing habits. Monthly samples were collected manually without using scissors (Costa et al., 2019). Fecal sampling and grazing simulation were performed to obtain a sample composed of animal/treatment. After drying in an oven at 55°C, the samples were processed in a sieve mill with sieves of 1 mm for subsequent laboratory analysis.

| Compound | Green-leaf offering (kg DM/100 kg BW) |
|----------|--------------------------------------|
|          | 60 | 75 | 90 | 105 |
| ---------|----|----|----|-----|
| DM       | 390.0 | 405.5 | 396.8 | 412.4 |
| OM       | 909.8 | 908.9 | 906.2 | 914.5 |
| CP       | 103.0 | 107.9 | 108.0 | 149.8 |
| NDF      | 676.8 | 659.5 | 652.1 | 670.8 |
| ADF      | 375.7 | 368.9 | 367.3 | 380.7 |
| ---------|----|----|----|-----|
| ---------|----|----|----|-----|
| DM       | 375.2 | 381.0 | 371.6 | 369.9 |
| OM       | 934.1 | 932.5 | 927.8 | 918.0 |
| CP       | 49.4  | 49.9  | 51.0  | 50.1  |
| NDF      | 791.4 | 760.0 | 787.5 | 766.5 |
| ADF      | 535.3 | 529.6 | 539.3 | 501.1 |

Note: DM= dry matter; OM= organic matter; CP= crude protein; NDF= neutral detergent fiber; ADF= acid detergent fiber; BW= body weight.
Internal indicator (iNDF) on forage and feces were determined using 0.5 g of samples packed in TNT bags (cut and sealed to a size of 5 × 5 cm with the porosity of 100 microns), previously dried, weighed, and incubated for 144 hours to represent the indigestible portion of the food (Costa et al., 2019), in the in vitro incubator for degradability testing (MA443 Marconi®). Next, 1600 mL of buffer solution and 400 mL of rumen inoculum were added and CO₂ was purged to maintain anaerobic conditions. After 144 h of inoculation, the bags were removed and washed in running water until fully bleached, dried, weighed then boiled for 1 hour in neutral detergent solution (Van Soest & Robertson, 1985), washed with hot water (80°C for 3 × 10 min) and acetone (10 min), dried, and weighed; this residue was considered as iNDF. Estimates of dry matter intake (DMI) was calculated, according to Lippke (2002).

Slaughter

The lambs were sent for slaughter at six months of age, after a solid-feed deprivation of 18 h. Prior to slaughtering, their body condition scores (BCS) were determined by palpating the lumbar region and assigning scores of 1.00 to 5.00 (1.00 being the worst and 5.00 was the best) (Russel et al., 1969). Additionally, in vivo measurements of body length, heart girth, rump height, and chest width, and height at the withers were also taken.

The lambs were slaughtered at an abattoir under inspection in Campo Grande - MS, Brazil. Lambs were stunned and then bled by sectioning their carotid arteries and jugular veins, following the techniques proposed in the Regulation of Industrial and Sanitary Inspection of Animal Products (RIISPOA, 1997). After the slaughtering and evisceration procedures, the carcasses were weighed (hot carcass weight - HCW) and moved to a cold room where they were kept over 24 h, at 2°C, hung by the Achilles tendons on appropriate hooks so that the tarsometatarsal joints were kept 17 cm apart. At the end of this period, cold carcass weight (CCW) was determined by calculating the percentage of chilling loss and the dressing percentage (ratio between cold carcass weight and slaughter weight).

Carcass

The colors of fat and muscle in the lamb carcasses were evaluated using a portable colorimeter (D65, 10° viewing angle) operating in the CIELab system, in which L* represents the lightness spectrum in the fat/muscle, a* represents the color variation from green (−) to red (+), and b* defines the color variation from blue (−) to yellow (+). The carcass pH was determined using a digital pH meter by inserting the electrode directly into the muscle. The color and pH evaluations were performed on the longissimus muscle in the region between the 12th and 13th ribs.

Internal and external carcass lengths, chest depth, and leg circumference were measured (Omisión et al., 1996a; Osión et al., 1996b). Subsequently, the carcass was sectioned in two parts, and the left half was weighed and sub-divided into seven anatomical regions, which were weighed individually. The percentages of these regions relative to the whole carcass were determined, as follows: loin, leg, flank, neck, ribs (anatomical base at the eighth last thoracic vertebrae, along with the upper half of the corresponding ribs), rack (region whose osseous base are the five dorsal vertebrae along with the upper half of the corresponding ribs), and shoulder (Trindade et al., 2018).

The longissimus muscle area was measured transversely between the 12th and 13th ribs using transparency. Loin-eye area (LEA) was determined using AUTOCAD® computer software. Subcutaneous fat thickness (SFT) was measured using a caliper ruler in the same longissimus section.

Meat

The samples were weighed and stored in a refrigerator for 24 h at 5°C. After this period, they were weighed again to determine thawing losses by weight difference. Longissimus dorsi muscle samples of a 2.5-cm thickness (frozen at −20°C) were extracted from each sample perpendicularly to the direction of the muscle fibers. Next, the muscle samples were cooked in an oven at 170°C until they reached an internal temperature of 71°C to determine cooking loss by difference. After the sample (longissimus muscle) was chilled and reached the temperature of 28°C, four sub-samples of 1.23-cm thickness were sectioned in the direction of the muscle fibers to determine the shear force, using a texture analyzer (TA. XTPlus was Texture Analyzer with a Warner-Bratzler Blade probe; Texture Expert Exponent software was Stable Micro Systems, Ltd, in Godalming Surrey UK. SMS). The result corresponded to the force required to cut each meat sample. Shear force value was calculated from all samples.

Economic Analysis

The economic data involved in all proposed treatments were recorded and organized as revenue obtained from the sale of lambs and nutritional costs with supplementation. Supplement costs were calculated per day, per animal, and per hectare (30 g/d of mineral supplement/animal), and revenues were calculated as US$ 3.29 per kilogram of CCW of a slaughtered lamb.

Statistical Analysis

The experiment was set up as a completely randomized design with four levels of herbage offering, according to the following statistical model: Y = m + Of + Y + Of × Y + e, where: Y was the observed value of the evaluated variable; m was the overall constant; Of was the effect of green-leaf offering (1, 2, 3, and 4); Y was the different years (1, 2); Of × Y was the interaction effect between green-leaf offering and year; and e was the random error associated with each observation. The data were evaluated by analysis of variance and means were compared by Tukey’s test at the 0.05 significance level.

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RESULTS

There was no significant effect of year neither interaction of year with the green-leaf offer on all parameters measured. The average herbage mass supplied was 4779.69 kg DM/ha. This quantity consisted of 21.7% leaves, 27.7% stems, and 50.6% senescent material. There were significant effects of leaf offers on total and forage dry matter intakes (DMI) with positive linear behavior and negative linear behavior for DMI of supplement (Figure 1).

Performance

There were significant effects of leaf offer on final BW and average daily gain (g/d) of lambs (Table 2). The in vivo pre-slaughter analysis of the lambs, which included final weight, body condition score, body length, chest girth, rump height, rump width, chest width, and height at the withers, revealed no significant effects of green-leaf offering in the finishing stage (Table 3).

Carcass and Meat

Herbage offering did not affect HCW, CCW, pH, internal length, external length, leg length, chest depth, leg circumference, LEA, or the color of muscle and fat (L*, a*, b*). The mean values for the respective variables were 20.07 kg, 18.55 kg, 5.82, 62.02 cm, 91.67 cm, 38.73 cm, 18.16 cm, 40.55 cm, 13.85 cm², 38.55, 15.38, 8.92, 82.83, 0.96, and 9.01, respectively. However, there was

![Figure 1. Dry matter intake (DMI) by lambs finished on Marandu pasture in function of green-leaf offering (OF). DMI supplement ( ), DMI forage ( ), DMI total ( ).](image)

Table 2. Productive performance and nutrient intake of lambs finished on Marandu pasture slaughtered at 6 months old

| Performances                      | Green-leaf offering (kg DM/100 kg BW) | SEM   | p     |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Initial BW (kg)                   | 60  75  90  105                       | 1.28  | 0.6879|
| Final BW (kg)                     | 60  75  90  105                       | 1.64  | 0.0358|
| ADG (g/d)                         | 60  75  90  105                       | 6.01  | 0.0345|
| Total Gain (kg)                   | 60  75  90  105                       | 1.01  | 0.0345|
| HCY (%)                           | 60  75  90  105                       | 1.22  | 0.0124|
| CCY (%)                           | 60  75  90  105                       | 1.21  | 0.0286|

Note: BW= body weight; ADG= average daily gain; HCY= hot carcass yield; CCY= cold carcass yield. Means in the same row with different superscripts differ significantly (p<0.05).

Table 3. Body size variables of lambs finished in Marandu pasture slaughtered at six months of age

| Variables                      | Green-leaf offering (g/kg BW) | SEM   | p     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Body condition score (points)  | 60  75  90  105               | 0.09  | 0.9564|
| Body length (cm)               | 60  75  90  105               | 1.11  | 0.1452|
| Chest girth (cm)               | 60  75  90  105               | 23.85 | 0.5401|
| Rump height (cm)               | 60  75  90  105               | 0.90  | 0.7552|
| Rump width (cm)                | 60  75  90  105               | 0.29  | 0.5864|
| Chest width (cm)               | 60  75  90  105               | 0.32  | 0.9602|
| Height at withers (cm)         | 60  75  90  105               | 1.09  | 0.2374|

Note: BW= body weight.
a significant effect of leaf offering on subcutaneous fat thickness (SFT). The lambs receiving 75 g/kg offer showed the highest SFT (5.8 mm). There were no significant effects of treatments on cooking loss or shear force (p>0.05) (Table 4), which averaged 10.27 kg and 4.32 kg, respectively. In the analysis of primal cuts, there was no significant difference for the weights of loin, leg, flank, neck, rib, rack, or shoulder among the green-leaf offerings (60, 75, 90, and 105 g/kg BW) (p>0.05) (Table 5).

Economic Analysis

The highest individual revenue per slaughtered lamb (US$66.00) was obtained in lamb, receiving a green-leaf offering of 60 g/kg BW. The best revenue per hectare (US$ 563.00) was achieved with the treatment with a leaf offering of 75 g/kg BW. The treatment with a leaf offering of 90 g/kg BW resulted in the highest cost per hectare (US$ 208.86), but which was similar to that obtained with the leaf offering of 75 g/kg BW (US$ 207.43). Lastly, the highest and best profit per hectare (US$ 356.30) was obtained by the group treated with 75 g/kg BW (Table 6).

DISCUSSION

Performance

Because there were significant effects of leaf offer for final BW and average daily gain of lambs, being the highest results in lambs receiving 75 g/kg of leaf-offer, this offer was able to meet the animal requirements just as well as the highest offering (105 g/kg BW) despite total and forage DMI were positively linear behavior and negatively linear for DMI of supplement, once the supplement was formulated according to NRC (2007), together with forage intake to meet a daily gain of 150 g/d. According to Silva (2016a), supplementation at the rate of 1.6% BW for lambs on pasture is sufficient to minimize the negative effects of low herbage quality.

Table 4. Carcass characteristics and physical analysis of lambs finished on Marandu pasture slaughtered at 6 months old

| Variables | Green-leaf offering (g/kg BW) | SEM | p   |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-----|-----|
|           | 60                            | 75  | 90  | 105 |
| HCW (kg)  | 21.7                          | 20.6| 18.5| 19.5|
| CCW (kg)  | 20.0                          | 19.0| 17.0| 18.1|
| SFT (mm)  | 3.1ᵇ                          | 5.8ᵃ| 3.5ᵇ| 4.9ᵃ|
| LEA (cm²) | 1.4                           | 1.5 | 1.3 | 1.3 |
| pH        | 5.8                           | 5.8 | 5.9 | 5.7 |
| Internal length (cm) | 63.0 | 61.9 | 61.0 | 62.1 |
| External length (cm) | 90.9 | 93.8 | 95.5 | 86.5 |
| Leg length (cm) | 40.7 | 38.2 | 37.9 | 38.1 |
| Chest depth (cm) | 19.1 | 17.8 | 17.9 | 17.7 |
| Leg circumference (cm) | 41.4 | 40.9 | 39.1 | 40.7 |
| Muscle lightness | 37.5 | 38.0 | 38.9 | 39.7 |
| Ma        | 15.8                          | 15.2| 15.5| 15.0|
| Mb        | 9.6                           | 8.0 | 8.3 | 9.8 |
| Fat lightness | 82.5 | 83.1 | 82.0 | 83.7 |
| Fa        | 0.9                           | 1.2 | 0.7 | 1.1 |
| Fb        | 9.9                           | 9.4 | 8.2 | 9.3 |
| Cooking loss (kg) | 12.5 | 10.6 | 9.2 | 8.8 |
| Shear force (kgf) | 3.6 | 3.3 | 3.7 | 3.4 |

Note: HCW= Hot carcass weight; CCW= Cold carcass weight; SFT= Subcutaneous fat thickness; LEA= Loin-eye area; Ma= muscle color ranging from green (-) to red (+); Mb= muscle color ranging from blue (-) to yellow (+); Fa= fat color ranging from green (-) to red (+); Fb= fat color ranging from blue (-) to yellow (+); BW= body weight. Means in the same row with different superscripts differ significantly (p<0.05).

Table 5. Meat cuts of lambs finished on Marandu pasture slaughtered at 6 months old

| Variables | Green-leaf offering (g/kg BW) | SEM | p   |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-----|-----|
|           | 60                            | 75  | 90  | 105 |
| Loin (kg) | 0.8                           | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.7 |
| Leg (kg)  | 3.3                           | 3.1 | 2.8 | 3.0 |
| Flank (kg) | 0.5                          | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| Neck (kg) | 0.8                           | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.7 |
| Rib (kg)  | 1.4                           | 1.3 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| Rack (kg) | 1.4                           | 1.3 | 1.1 | 1.2 |
| Shoulder (kg) | 1.9                          | 1.8 | 1.7 | 1.7 |

Note: BW= body weight.
In this way, the animals manage to achieve satisfactory performance, which would be similar to that of feedlot-finished lambs.

Oliveira et al. (2016) stated in which the animals received 40, 80, or 120 g DM/kg of pasture, found a total weight gain of 16.85 kg/animal during the same period of this research. This value is lower than the average of 18.7 kg per animal observed in the treatment of 75 g/kg (Table 2), which shows that the performance of the production of supplemented animals can be affected when they receive varied pasture offers, as they fully meet nutritional requirements.

Carcass Characteristics

The similarity for most carcass measurements may be linked to the compensatory effect observed in food intake, and the animals that had higher leaf offerings showed less supplement intake and greater forage intake. In contrast, the animals that had less leaf supply consumed more supplements and less forage. This compensatory mechanism was not sufficient to level the nutrient intake, given the difference observed for the animals ‘weight gain. However, the difference of three kg in the animals’ final weight was not enough to change the weight and carcass and commercial cuts.

In commercial terms, the producer is mostly concerned with hot carcass yield (HCY), calculated as HCW divided by slaughter weight (Rezende et al., 2019). In the present study, the average carcass yield was 48.3%, higher than the 38.9% found by Trindade et al., (2018) in Santa Ines sheep finished in tropical pastures receiving supplementation at a rate of 1.38% of body weight; it was favorable to the animals under varied forage offerings. This is due to the fact that the animals were fed fluently during the pre-weaning phase may explain these high values of FTS, which a pasture-only regime would not be allowed.

Supplementation emerges in this scenario as a mean of meeting the lamb’s nutritional requirements, besides directly contributing to the finishing process for slaughter. Souza et al. (2010) evaluated different supplementation levels for grazing sheep (0, 0.6, 1.3, and 2.0% BW) and found that increasing supplementation levels led to the increases in external carcass length, rump width, chest depth, rump circumference, and leg circumference. However, even more important than supplementation is an adequate herbage offering. We found no difference among leaf-offering in in vivo pre-slaughter analysis of lambs finished on Marandu pasture slaughtered at 6 months old receiving supplementation of 1.6% BW.

The rib eye area was an average of 13.85 cm², higher than the 11.95 cm² reported by Silva (2016b) in sheep supplemented with 1.6% BW in pastures of Urochloa spp. The present results are also higher than the 9.03 cm² found by Urbano et al. (2015) in sheep finished in confinement, both works were developed in experimental periods similar to this work. These differences are probably due to varying body size, body weight, and age at slaughter. The average slaughter weight in the present study was 41.5 kg, while Urbano et al. (2015) found an average of 29.5 kg.

As stated by Ithavo et al. (2019) and Silva et al. (2019), fat was the carcass component that most varied in terms of thickness, color, flavor, and quantity. In this regard, Osório et al. (2012) described the importance of fat for meat, as it gave flavor and aroma and protected it during the chilling period.

### Table 6. Revenues, expenses, and profits of lambs finished on Marandu pasture slaughtered at 6 months old

| Variables               | Green-leaf offering (g/kg BW) | SEM  | P  |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|------|----|
|                         | 60                            | 75   | 90 | 105 |
| Revenue (US$/animal)    | 66.0ᵃ                         | 62.6ᵃ| 56.0ᵇ| 59.7ᵇ| 0.91| 0.032|
| Revenue (US$/ha)        | 318.6ᵃ                        | 563.7ᵃ| 505.0ᵇ| 353.2ᵇ| 0.36| 0.005|
| Supplementation expenses (US$) | 160.6ᵇ | 230.2ᵇ | 231.8ᵇ| 166.7ᵇ| 7.01| 0.001|
| Individual expense (US$/animal) | 12.3ᵇ | 14.4ᵇ | 17.8ᵇ| 10.4ᵇ| 0.75| 0.001|
| Total profit (US$)      | 301.4ᵇ                        | 395.5ᵇ| 328.7ᵇ| 251.5ᵇ| 7.25| 0.001|
| Individual profit (US$/animal) | 23.2ᵇ | 24.7ᵇ | 25.3ᵇ| 15.7ᵇ| 2.50| 0.001|
| Area profit (US$/ha)    | 207.9ᵇ                        | 356.3ᵇ| 296.1ᵇ| 208.3ᵇ| 3.25| 0.001|

Note: BW= body weight. Means in the same row with different superscripts differ significantly (p<0.05).
there were no significant differences in the color of fat or muscle between the leaf-offering tested in the present study.

**Meat Quality**

No significant differences were observed for primal cuts, which may be because the animals received the same type of herbage and supplement, extracting the ideal amount of nutrients from them. In doing so, they met their requirements and achieved optimum body conditions.

Physical characteristics of meat, such as tenderness, color, and lightness, are important attributes at the time of purchase (Gois et al., 2017). In the present study, these variables did not show significant differences, because, regardless of the amount of forage or supplement consumed, the finishing system was the same. The feeding and finishing systems to which the sheep are subjected can alter the quality of their meats (Silva et al., 2019 Itavo et al., 2019). The shear force was 3.5 kgf, presenting an aspect of intermediate mercies (Costa et al., 2018). Costa et al. (2018) obtained 7.52 kg/cm² in supplemented grazing sheep. This better softness value in this research may be due to the animal breed and, mainly, to the age of slaughtering. Younger animals of meat breeds produce softer meat when compared to animals of mixed breeds, such as those used in the present study.

The pH of meat (5.59) did not differ between the leaf offering treatments. This result suggests that the finishing system does not interfere with the quality of the final product, considering that all animals consumed the same type of herbage and received the same amount of supplement (1.6% BW). Similar findings were reported by Silva (2016b) (average pH: 5.74) and Costa et al. (2018) (average pH: 5.85), in experiments with grazing lambs.

**Economic Analysis**

The highest profit per slaughtered animal was achieved between the leaf-offerings of 60g/kg BW, while the highest profit per hectare was obtained in the treatment with leaf offering of 75 g DM/kg BW. Therefore, despite the lack of significant differences (p<0.05) for in vivo measurements, carcase characteristics, and meat quality variables in lambs finished on Marandu pasture and receiving supplementation at 1.6% BW, the profit can be an extremely important factor of great interest to sheep producers and consumers. We observed better profits (total, individual, and by area) in leaf offering of 75 g DM/kg BW.

**CONCLUSION**

We recommend 75 g/kg of BW of leaf offering of Marandu pasture for finishing lambs when aiming at the increased performance and total profit without alterations in carcass characteristics, or meat characteristics.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organizations related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors thank to Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, to Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, and to Fundação de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento do Ensino, Ciência e Tecnologia do Estado de Mato Grosso do Sul for financial support; and carried out with the support of the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES (Financing Code 001).

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