

Showing Alpacas.....why & how?

To Show or Not to Show.....

It is an integral part of any stud stock operation to show your livestock. It is not rocket science; it is just about getting your product out and about. We believe that if you are serious about breeding stud stock then it is essential to continually put yourself alongside your peers for assessment. The show ring is an excellent place to do this.

Of course showing is not for everyone. Whether you choose to show or not will be decided by your goals in your business plan. If it is your plan to just have wethers as pets or guardians or to breed as a hobby then you may not want to show or you may just do some smaller local shows for fun. After all there is nothing to say that showing and having fun are mutually exclusive! Even if serious showing is on your agenda it is best to walk before you run. Try a smaller show with any alpaca to get the hang of it.

Assuming you decide to take the plunge, or at least give it a go, here are some hints from 12 years of showing alpacas...

Planning & Preparation

Any successful event is the culmination of good planning and preparation.

Firstly, it is important to make sure your alpaca is registered in a timely fashion and to diarise the due date for entries so you do not miss the deadline.

Secondly, schedule time each week to work with your alpaca so they are ready for the show. This should start at least a month prior. Preparation of your alpaca includes halter training and getting it used to being handled, toe nail trimming and keeping it clean and tidy. You should also get it accustomed to the kind of experiences it will have at the show such as being contained, usually indoors, and seeing lots of different things.

Thirdly, make a list of all the items you will need to take to the show. Purchase any items you don't have on hand and pack well in advance.

It is also important to review your travel arrangements. Check out your trailer or float and have bedding on hand so your alpaca is comfortable. We use a thick layer of straw.

Some more detail on preparation.....

There are many approaches to halter training and there are many different types of halters. We've tried them all! Whilst most training methods have their good points there are some terrible halters around, so choose carefully.

The key to a good halter is the fit, particularly over the muzzle, so it doesn't compromise the soft tissue which is lower down. It should be very snug so that if the alpaca carries on the halter will stay in place.

When it comes to training the key is that you must work with your alpaca and be sympathetic to its needs. Patience and gentleness are essential. Do not even attempt to work with your alpaca if you are grumpy and/or in a hurry. It will be a disaster. Take the time to get to know your alpaca and what works with them. They are all quite unique and respond differently to stimuli. The goal is to get your alpaca to the point where it enjoys the training. It must first become accustomed to the halter. Once it is used to this foreign thing around its head we start off walking. At this stage we let them go anywhere on a long lead. We gradually exert more and more of our control such that the alpaca doesn't notice. Eventually we end up going for walks together as an equal partnership...hopefully!

Preparation of the fleece of your alpaca is an interesting topic. There are many approaches. Our view is that you present your alpaca in a tidy fashion as a curtesy to the judge, the industry and the public. That does not mean excessive preparation. The old adage that you cannot improve a poor alpaca by preparing but that you can ruin a good alpaca by preparing is certainly true. We generally don't clip our alpaca; rather they are lightly trimmed to make them look tidy. In addition they are kept in a clean area, hopefully one devoid of roll spots. These guys love to roll, and a fleece full of dust and rubbish is unlikely to compete favourably with a clean fleece. We cheat a bit and mainly show over winter and spring, so any roll spots are damp and the fleece stays clean. We don't find

mud a particular problem. The night before the show we yard the show team in our cattle yards which are mainly open air with a concrete floor. We put a show coat on them so they are loaded clean and stay clean, as we pack our float thick with straw as we usually have at least an 8 hour trip. If the forecast is for rain we may shed them the night before, although often we don't as they dry out pretty well on the journey as our float has very good ventilation.

Another aspect of preparation is nutrition. We give all our alpacas many vitamins and minerals by injection, and we also try and give them optimum nutrition by continually working on our soils and pastures. We have some native pastures but the majority are based around cocksfoots, fescues and clovers. We believe the best you can do for alpaca is to have them grazing on healthy broad acres. We do supplement the show team, but mainly just to get them used to the diet they will have at the show, which is generally lucerne hay and another less rich hay such as pasture hay so they don't get the runs. We find that the hay takes them longer to eat than a concentrate and this stops them pigging out and it also gives them something to do. It is very dangerous to change an alpaca's diet suddenly, so plan their show rations and make sure they are used to them well in advance.

At The Show

So you're at the show. The first thing to do is to find your pens and get your alpacas settled. At this stage you will normally come across the organiser or one of the stewards. Make their life as easy as you can, they are volunteers and work flat out.

Once your alpacas are settled in the next priority is picking up your exhibitor information pack and then inspection. It really helps the stewards if you can tell them the exhibit number of each alpaca. They will have no idea who Flossy is. This information will be in the catalogue which will be in the exhibitor information pack.

After all that you can then finesse your pens by putting up signs and unpacking. At this stage it is permissible to have a coffee or something stronger, depending on what time of the day it is!

So you can see that by the time judging comes around most of the work has been done. Usually before judging there is an exhibitors meeting to advise of the plan for the show. Then it is a matter of paying attention and being ready when it is your turn.

Watch as much of the judging as you can before you go into the judging ring. You will be able to see exactly how the judge is going about it and you will be better prepared. Once in the ring be attentive to the judge and the stewards. Obey their instructions and do not speak to the judge unless invited. Above all, be a good sport! It is meant to be fun.

After The Show

Jot down points of interest for the future. It may be that nice young male you saw. It may be that you thought of some things that would be good to pack next time. Perhaps you made a new contact that you would like to follow up on. If you have done well or have a special story to tell you might like to contact the media, even if it is just your local paper.

Whatever your show experience, it is important to debrief and have some take home points.

Conclusion

We find that showing is a lot of fun. It is crucial to our business, as continued success over many years speaks volumes for our bloodlines. However, it is great to meet new people and socialise as well.

Happy showing, Jane Wray & Glenn Russell, The Alpaca Specialists.