



To Show, What Do We Achieve When or Not We Pursue a Blue Ribbon? to Show

By Katharine Thompson, photos by T. Stephan Thompson

Licorice's fleece was one of those hard-to-define colors, falling somewhere at the intersection of red and black licorice. While his color may not have fit easily into one category on the chart, his quality was without question. Soft, heavy fleece with a fashionable texture draped over a perfectly formed frame. This little guy was show quality right from the beginning.

Like many young alpacas heading into the show ring, he was nervous. No, he probably didn't lie awake the night before, worrying if he would win a ribbon. That kind of overanalyzing seems to be reserved primarily for humans. Licorice didn't begin to react to the stress of the show circuit until he arrived at the event site. While he gave no indication that three hours in a stock trailer with his buddies was a burden, within an hour after arriving at his designated pen, he was showing signs of mild gastric distress.

Licorice was luckier than most. He had a caring owner who was willing to see the alpaca side of things, and so his message did not go unnoticed for long.

When time and routine measures did not improve things, the event's vet was brought into the picture. She determined that Licorice had an unhappy belly, and she made the owner aware of the risk of it worsening into a more serious situation, such as an ulcer. She suggested screening Licorice's pen to provide some social relief from the close neighbors, and she offered several medications for his gastric upset.

Like any busy parent who has been called by a school nurse, Licorice's owner was thrown into an uncomfortable decision-making situation with few, if any, good choices. Considerable time, money, and energy had been focused on bringing Licorice to this show. It was one of the largest shows in the country, and he had a viable chance at a ribbon. Such recognition meant more than an ego boost for his owner; it could indicate to future clients that Licorice was stud material. Such recognition may seem essential, especially to the new or small breeder. Now that he was here at the show, there were few options. Home was too far away for

a quick trip to return Licorice to his familiar surroundings, and other animals needed to be shown as well. So, Licorice's owner opted to do what most alpaca owners would have done; he took Licorice into the ring.

And walked out with a blue ribbon.

Our tale has a happy ending. Covered with glory, Licorice returned to his caregiver's farm and soon resumed



At a show, who is more stressed, you or maybe your alpacas?



Showing can be fun... if we put the best interests of the alpacas first.

his former life of playing with his buddies, frolicking in the hose on hot days, and continuing on an upward growth curve. He was soon able to put that anxiety-producing show behind him, and his owner was happy to retire him from the show circuit now that he was “proven” by a judge. But many alpaca breeders wonder about the risk vs. benefit ratio of showing alpacas. If Licorice had not recovered quickly or fully, would that bit of ribbon have been worth risking a valuable animal? Does holding a ribbon really indicate overall quality for breeding?

On a Scale of 1 to 10, Please Rank Your Stress Level...

No one had asked Licorice for a vote on the “show” or “no show” issue; he was, nonetheless, voting with his colon. Perhaps it was the bright

lights, the blaring speaker system, the small pen, the show grooming, or the close attention from all those admiring humans. Whatever the specific cause, the effect was an at-risk alpaca.

Of course, just like humans, not all alpacas react in the same way, and many appear to tolerate or even enjoy an outing. Both owners and vets agree, however, that there are health risks to be considered and weighed against the gains of attending events. Licorice showed a common side effect of showing – stress diarrhea that progressed into mild colic. More serious concerns include injury (such as head entrapment or auto accidents), viral exposure, or even ulcer formation.

Toni Cotton, DVM, is an alpaca owner and has supported the industry by caring for alpacas at show events. “When determining how stressful

showing is for an alpaca, you must look at each animal as an individual. Some really handle it well, while others succumb to the stress of the showing experience. The recently weaned are especially prone to stress.”

Dr. Cotton has identified the following stressors that a show-bound alpaca may experience:

- Being penned with or near unfamiliar animals
- Being penned for three or more days
- Changes in water and diet
- Touching by strangers, particularly in uncomfortable zones such as the head
- Show grooming
- Transport, especially if it involves excess heat or close quarters with unfamiliar trailer-mates
- Overcrowding in show pens
- Poorly fitting halters!

Dr. Cotton is more aware than most that not every alpaca is suitable for every class. Many breeders love the costume classes, but many alpacas don't. "If an animal is trembling and refusing to walk with a costume on, then I would not recommend showing that animal."

Spend it to Earn it, Right?

The same hubbub that can be stressful for alpacas spells excitement for owners and attendees. Mark and Lori, new owners from the Northeast, attended a large, regional show with high expectations that their recently purchased animals would win ribbons, but they were disappointed in that regard. What are their feelings about showing?

"Attending shows has been a wonderful experience for both our children and us. In fact, it's the community feeling of shows that made the alpaca business so attractive to us in the first place. Even the adults have to fight back tears when the day is over. When we get home, everyone runs to find a copy of *OneVoice* to see if there is another show coming up that we might fit into our busy lives."

Many newer owners find that shows can be exciting to attend, but expensive as well. As much as they love the thrill of showing, Mark and Lori feel it in the wallet. "The cost to enter and rent stall space can be a serious impediment to smaller, newer breeders." Every year, hundreds of farms collectively spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to participate in regional and national showing competitions. The pen and ring fees for shows are only the tip of the dollar iceberg. Attending alpaca shows means budgeting fees for vet exams, state-required blood tests (which may or may not be relevant to the species), transportation, insurance, farm displays, PR materials, grooming and training, motels, restaurant meals, and show-duds for handler and animal.

Other costs include hiring herd-sitters or extra office staff to cover the farm while owners are at an event.

Experienced breeders have been heard to wonder if gains from attending a particular event outweigh the inevitable downside of being away, such as loss of contact with farm visitors and other problems that can crop up when one is not home "minding the store."

Accepting the high costs of showing alpacas, many breeders feel that one must spend money to earn it and that showing is a necessary part of every marketing program. Steve and Rose Ann Knoblock, for example, are a notable exception to this philosophy, however. Successful alpaca breeders since the early 1980's, the owners believe that success comes not from show ribbons, but from "...having a long-term vision of what to look for in an alpaca, choosing alpacas that fit into a specific breeding program, and seeing one's goals achieved in the offspring from that program." While others attending show events often spend a large part of their time scurrying back and forth to the ring, these breeders are more likely to be found volunteering, and are easily accessible at their booth. They have found a combination of volunteerism and a clearly focused breeding program to be the formula of their success. As one member of this family put it, "A ribbon should only be a small component of a successful breeding program. A positive customer experience can leave a much greater impression than a barn full of ribbons."

Breeding Stock Seal of Approval?

Many potential buyers, particularly those new to the industry, look for ribbons as an indicator that a particular animal is high quality. Some contend, however, that a ribbon is not a true measure of the overall animal. For example, one AOBA-certified show judge with 19 years' camelid judging experience has been called on frequently to assess alpacas for potential sale or to determine the suitability of an animal for a particular breeding program. While one might assume that she has a bias in favor of the show ring, this

judge frequently reminds the audience and exhibitors that the show ring is only one small part of the industry. Further, she states that a blue ribbon alone does not necessarily indicate that an animal has all of the qualities one looks for in a breeding animal, or that a particular ribbon winner is suitable for all breeding programs. *(continued)*

Many breeders love the costume classes, many alpacas don't.





The most visible trophy is the animal itself.

New owners, or those seeking to enter the industry, would be advised to have a firm idea, or program, in mind before making many selections. A judge has only a very few minutes, under difficult conditions, to view each animal and then offer an accurate evaluation. A more intense viewing under more normal conditions on the farm, with a vet or experienced owner, is a better option for serious buyers.”

Because showing judging is, by its very nature, based solely on phenotypical traits (those characteristics which are displayed, not necessarily those that may be passed on) alone, many do not consider it an ideal evaluation of an animal’s worth for breeding.

“A potential purchase of any animal for a specific breeding program should be evaluated for many attributes,

including positive traits for conformation, sexual propensities, and desirable fiber traits. The show ring cannot offer this full evaluation. Fuzzy faces and extensive leg coverage may look cute, but some people feel that this extra fibre coverage may contribute to slow growth patterns and lack of vitamin D absorption needed for bone growth and correct conformation,” the judge advises.

Experienced breeders are quite familiar with the animal that does well in the show ring, but which does not consistently or even frequently pass down desirable traits. Perhaps even more common is the not-so-pretty dam that year after year conceives easily, maintains her health and fiber, and puts out excellent babies that she cares for well. While she might not be a rib-

bon winner, she represents what most breeders would want to have in abundance in their herd.

In conversations with breeders, it is clear what most value in their breeding stock. In addition to conformation and fiber qualities, overall robustness, the ability to conceive early and often, problem-free pregnancies and good mothering instincts rank high in importance. For studs, breeders value consistent performance, not only in the breeding pen, but also in what that breeding produces. Additionally, many prefer to see traits such as specific colors or fiber “hand” characteristics consistently displayed throughout the progeny. Some savvy shoppers visit the home pasture of a prospective purchase and ask to be shown as many parents, grandparents, siblings, and

offspring as possible. Positive qualities displayed broadly within such a group would be a strong indicator that the candidate is a genetic winner.

One breeder summed it up when he said, "It's not just what they look like, it's what they will do for you, be that in makin' good babies or in makin' good fiber (hopefully both). Alpacas are a production livestock breed. It's not a beauty contest!"

To Show or Not to Show

When dealing with alpaca management issues, many breeders turn to Marty McGee Bennett for guidance. Marty's books and tapes make it plain that working with alpacas in the show ring or elsewhere can be fun and rewarding, but she encourages the alpaca handler to see things from the animal's perspective. If one follows this philosophy, the decision to show or not to show may depend more on the alpaca in question than on the owner's inclinations.

Marty advises: "Some alpacas handle the whole show thing better than others. There are some animals that should be shown minimally, and there are others who just can't take it. Animals that hum continually, don't transport well, won't eat, or can't stand having their

fleeces examined are bad candidates for halter shows."

She encourages those who want to prepare their animals for showing to use obstacle training as an aid to communication. "The hardest classes for alpacas are the halter classes. It's a good idea to use obstacles as a training aid for good performance at halter. It teaches both handler and alpaca to work as a team."

Marty often reminds us that working with alpacas goes beyond surface rewards. "Alpacas are alive and have their own personalities and intelligence. The only behavior we truly have control over is our own. Learning to listen, to compromise, and to understand a different point of view are just a few of the benefits of working with animals. Showing will be tortuous if it is only about controlling and winning. It can be fun and educational if we put the best interests of the alpaca first."

These words were never truer than when applied to the younger generation of the alpaca industry. Many breeders embrace the alpaca lifestyle for the opportunities it provides for the family to be together, and this includes showing. Many AOBA-sanctioned events have competitive classes specifi-

cally for kids as young as age eight, and children are frequently handlers in halter classes, competing for ribbons right alongside adults. It's not hard to see the excitement many kids experience while participating in Youth Obstacle or other classes, but just as in any organized sport, the heightened tension of competition can build confidence or shatter self-esteem.

Lindy and Paul Huber are experienced alpaca breeders and experienced parents. Their son Robert, age eleven, has been handling alpacas on the farm since his pre-school days and has already participated in obstacle classes.

Lindy feels that parents will know when their kids are ready for showing. Children need to be fairly calm and comfortable around the alpacas, and the kids need to demonstrate consistency in leading the alpacas safely. She reminds us, however, that even though alpacas may be high on the parents' list, kids may have little interest.

"Kids aren't ready to show until they take an interest in it themselves. Encourage them to help with the animals and gain confidence at home, but if the child is not interested in showing, don't force the issue!"

Also a firm believer in volunteerism, Lindy spent three years working with a llama/alpaca 4-H club, so she is familiar with the fun as well as the hazards the show ring can present. She sighs, remembering how easy it can be for parents to forget that showing is an opportunity to teach children about good sportsmanship.

"Parents are the ultimate role models and should be sensitive to the attitudes that they themselves project about showing. Congratulate the winners, and refrain from criticizing the judge. Parents can set a great example by demonstrating a more positive reaction to a loss in the show ring: 'It just wasn't Fluffy's day;' or, 'Wasn't that first place winner awesome?,' or 'We'll do better next time.'"

Lindy echoes the sentiments of many breeders who long for a fun, tantrum-free show environment for both kids and adults!

(continued)

Freed from the obligations of the ring, events become a place to make new friends.



Enjoy the Event, Not Just the Ribbons

Everyone agrees that showing can be stressful for owners as well as their animals. Those who feel sure that showing is in their future need not feel pressure to jump in before the time is right. As one judge put it: “plan a program and stick with it for at least three years before being influenced by the emphasis being placed on blue ribbon winners.”

Many new owners feel compelled to show as the only way to develop a reputation. “Newbies” who want to learn the ropes and network with other breeders can find exposure and learning opportunities through volunteering at events in positions such as gatekeeper, ring steward, or event organization.

Something that many alpaca owners, both new and not-so-new, often forget is that showing alpacas need not be the prime reason to attend events. Freed from the obligations of the ring, owners can instead spend their time making new friends and enjoying old ones. They can attend valuable seminars and improve craft or herd management skills. Some find that less focus on “hyper-grooming” means a more relaxed animal and one that makes a better, more natural, presentation to the public. The owner is also more relaxed and available to make the most of the opportunity to meet potential clients.

As one seasoned breeder put it: **“the most visible trophy is the animal itself.”**

Katharine Thompson owns and manages a (mostly) contented herd of alpacas on historic Fenwick Manor Farm in the Pinelands of southern New Jersey. Visits can be arranged via the farm’s site at FMFalpacas.Fenwick.net. Occasionally, Katharine lets her ego get the better of her and takes alpacas into the show ring. She can be contacted at fmfalpacas@fenwick.net or (609) 893-5552.

Fun or the Lack of it: Minimize the Stress

Ready to get the most out of that show event? Then do your alpaca buddies a favor and help them to enjoy it, too.

First things to consider:

- Don’t show until you are ready. If that day is “never,” allow a friend or your kids to do the ring duty, or be content sitting it out.
- Stay calm. Always remember that your anxiety is easily communicated to your alpaca.
- Show rules allow a weanling of six months and one day to be shown, but is your youngster mature enough to handle it?

All breeders can play a role in proactively making events more alpaca friendly:

- Be an advocate for a low-stress event site. Insist on quiet hours and no nighttime lighting. You wouldn’t accept a loud motel with room lights on all night - why should your ‘pacas?
- Assure that overhead announcements be made at a reasonable decibel level and are limited to necessary messages. All that chatter is tiring for humans, but for critters with acute hearing, it can be truly disturbing.
- Some arenas are more focused on potential lawsuits than animal comfort. Insist that alpacas be allowed an area for outside walks.
- Avoid slippery footing in aisles. Consider laying roofing paper, or other materials, underfoot in high traffic areas.

When making pen decisions, animal comfort should be a higher priority than expense:

- Don’t overcrowd the show pen: no more than two animals in a standard-sized pen.
- Bring a buddy, even if he doesn’t go in the ring; or, share a pen with a friend if your animals know each other.
- Request that your pen(s) adjoin your friend’s pen(s) so that your animals have familiar neighbors.

- Consider screening your pens from neighboring ones. You can use inexpensive sheets, or you can design your farm display to block the view.
- You may want lots of foot traffic to your booth, but your animals would prefer not to be penned on “Lookie-Loo Alley.”

You paid big money for that new trailer, but there are inexpensive things you can do to improve it from the occupants’ point of view:

- Take a long ride seated on the floor in your trailer or van, just to see how windy, noisy, bumpy, or comfortable it is. If your husband’s driving bowls you over on tight turns, the ride isn’t steady for your four-legged friends, either.
- Transport show alpacas with a buddy, choosing times when heat and heavy traffic can be avoided.
- Find ways to soundproof your trailer, such as using heavy mats or carpeting on floors and walls. Consider spray insulation on the ceiling to help keep things cool and quiet inside.
- Batten down tools and equipment to minimize rattling. Make sure boxes aren’t going to topple over onto your most valuable cargo: the alpacas.
- Consider having fans installed in trailers or trucks that are not air-conditioned.
- For a quick cool down en-route, buy large bags of ice cubes and spread them on the trailer floor. Don’t forget to add a few to the water buckets. Freeze gallon jugs of water before you leave home, but make sure they don’t roll around as the trailer moves.

Happy alpacas make the best impression:

- Don’t over groom. Grooming done prior to leaving home often becomes undone en-route, anyway. It’s not a

beauty contest, so don't fuss over minor bits of hay. Livestock judges know your animal wasn't raised in the living room.

- Limit exposure of your alpacas to the public. Not every visitor needs to feel Bosco's fiber; save that privilege for those with a serious interest. Have a small basket of fiber in your booth for "casual feelers."
- Don't hesitate to insist that parents control their children around the animals. Learning respect for another species is part of their education. When offering visitors a chance to touch your alpacas, educate them about the most suitable areas. Humans don't like strangers in their face, and neither do alpacas.
- Alpacas feel the most secure when they can move freely. Tether alpacas only when necessary.

Other important considerations:

- Every authority consulted emphasized the importance of having a halter that fits. As obligate nose breathers, alpacas cannot tolerate any restriction of the nose or lower muzzle. Halters can stretch out or stiffen with age, and alpacas grow and change face shape due to facial fiber changes, so buy halters with multiple adjustment points. Use that halter during training sessions to make sure it fits. Nothing says "inexperienced handler" like parading an alpaca in public with a poorly fitting halter.
- Bring water and feed from home.
- Honestly assess the "terror factor" of a potential costume before leaving home.
- Be prepared to scratch a show animal if he is giving indications of stress.
- Do your fellow handlers a favor and quietly leave the ring if your alpaca is wiggling out. People will remember you as the responsible owner who used good judgment rather than as the owner who wrestled a wild alpaca.
- Remember that halter classes aren't the only places to win ribbons. Consider entering your alpaca's fleece in a fleece show or a handspinners' or crafters' choice competition. Have a garment made from your special alpaca's fleece to demonstrate the quality of its fiber. After all, isn't fiber the reason we are raising alpacas?

