

Breeding Males – A Judges Perspective

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One of the most important decisions that an animal breeder makes is which males they should consider breeding to when trying to improve the next generation of the species they are raising. The breeder needs to take time and consider all of the traits that an animal is likely to or will possibly pass on to future generations.

While evaluating 2500 or so alpacas in the past year, for both the show ring and private consultations it seems that alpaca breeders are not making enough effort to fully consider how a particular male will impact their breeding program or the marketability of the cria it will produce. I am going to discuss a number of factors that breeders should consider when making the decision on whether or not to use a particular male for breeding.

Because of the way that animal breeding works, selecting males to use for breeding is critically important. This is especially true with alpacas in the U.S. where almost all females are used in breeding programs. We are willing to accept a few faults on any of our females, however with choosing breeding males we should be much stricter in the selection process.

Show Ring Results

Alpaca breeders often rely on show results when making breeding and purchase decisions. This makes sense to a point as judges are giving an independent, professional assessment of the alpaca. Keep in mind that the AOBA show system uses a comparative system. The judge is asked to assess all of the alpacas in the ring and “rank” them based on the positive and negative traits the alpacas are exhibiting. If an alpaca has won multiple blue ribbons, especially at larger shows, that is a good sign. It probably has many positive traits and it likely does not have any “Major” or “Serious” faults. Keep in mind that all blue ribbons are not equal. The competition at every show is not the same. This is also true of other ribbons. Judges do not have to give a blue ribbon if they find that all alpacas in a class have one serious or multiple major faults. Often times there may be one alpaca that qualifies for the blue ribbon and then the rest in the class get second, third and so on. The judge has to give one of the alpacas in the ring the red ribbon for second. That does not mean that the judge thinks that this alpaca (if a male) should be used for breeding as a stud. Ribbons need to be considered in context. Again, remember that AOBA uses a comparative system.

Physical Traits

The following are traits of alpaca conformation that should be considered when making selections for breeding and purchase. These are also the traits we assess when we are judging in the show ring.

- **Bite:** A correct bite is important for alpacas and other animals that eat grass from the ground. The

bottom jaw of the alpaca should align correctly with the top palate. It is much more common to find what we call an overbite (bottom jaw and teeth past upper pad) than an under bite. It is important to look at how the bottom jaw aligns with the top pad, not just how the teeth fit to the pad.

- **Ears:** Most alpacas have spear shaped ears. They are usually pointing upward. Llama ears are more of a banana shape and point inward. Often times when an alpaca has ears that are similar to llama ears they also have other llama traits such as heavy guard hair.
- **Front and rear legs:** When I am looking at an alpaca I often will focus on the legs. I want to see if the alpaca has strong legs with correct angulations. I also like to see thicker leg bones that will withstand wear and tear and time.
- **Balance:** An alpaca that is correctly balanced will move very smoothly. When it walks you will not see a lot of extra movement. Its top line should stay even and not raise and lower much as it moves.
- **Proportions:** Alpacas generally should be more square shaped than llamas. It is said that when you look at an alpaca from the side that the neck and legs should be the same length and that they should both be 2/3 the length of the body. This proportion allows for freer movement. It is easy to imagine the stress that an extra long body puts on an alpaca everyday.
- **Tail:** When judging alpacas we always will inspect the tail of each alpaca. We do this to make sure there are no obvious abnormalities in the bone structure. A “Kinked Tail” is often very a sign that other spinal abnormalities exist. Some alpacas may have a zig-zag in the middle of the tail, others may have a “J” hook at the end. A kinked tail is a serious fault under AOBA show rules.
- **Testicles/ Vulva-** Another trait that judges will always inspect are the external reproductive organs. On males we check to see that there are 2 testicles and that they are appropriate size for the age and that they are even in size and consistency. On females we visually inspect to make sure that the vulva appears to be correct size and has what seems to be a “normal” opening.

Fleece Traits

There are many traits that need to be considered when judging the fleece of an alpaca. The following is a summary of the major traits that judges analyze in the show ring. According to AOBA rules these traits are not ranked in order of importance when judging. Individual breeders may rank these in some order based on how they relate to their breeding program. It is also important to consider what positive and negative traits each alpaca has when making breeding decisions.

- **Fineness:** Many breeders consider fineness to be the most important trait for an alpacas fleece. Certainly, it is one of the components that makes alpaca yarn and garments feel so good. It is also very important when selecting breeding males. If you have a white 2 year old male huacaya with an average micron of 26 it is unlikely that this male will ever produce offspring with lower a lower average micron fleece.
- **Handle:** It is important to remember that there is not a one to one relationship with a fine fleece (low average micron) and soft handle. While there is a direct relationship in some cases, often a fleece can feel very soft and have a great “handle” but it may not be very fine. It may have the soft handle because it is very uniform. While we judge fineness by the eye or machine, we judge handle by feel.
- **Crimp & Staple Type/ Lock Style:** People will argue whether lock style (suri) or type of crimp (huacaya) is important. I believe the more defined the type of lock or crimp, the better and the more likely that the offspring will carry these traits. If you breed a suri male that has very little or no lock structure you will need to be very careful when selecting females to breed to him. Also, it is not likely that he will be able to improve a female with similar quality lock style.
- **Brightness/Luster:** The shine or luminescence of alpaca is one of the traits that makes alpaca wool/yarn popular. A healthy fleece should have a bright shine to it. It should reflect light. While luster/brightness is affected by environment, it is important that the trait be present genetically.
- **Color:** Uniformity of color is another important trait to consider when selecting a male for use in a breeding program. If you are trying to produce solid color alpacas you should be very careful to check for uniform color. A white or light male with spots or variegated fiber is more likely to have offspring with multiple colors. Hand spinners do like some fleeces to be variegated but when thinking about a commercial wool production it is very important to keep the light colors as consistent as possible so that dyes attach to the fiber the same throughout the entire lot.

If you are breeding for grey or other mixed color fleeces color uniformity may not be as important when selecting a male.

- **Guard Hair:** The amount of guard hair present in the blanket is another consideration. Fleeces that are more uniform in micron (less variation) usually feel softer. Also when they are spun the guard hair will often affect the yarn or end product in a negative way. Some guard hair on the bib or belly is acceptable.

- **Density:** There are two ways to get your alpacas to increase the amount of fleece weight they are producing. The first is to increase the density of the fleece. Density is how tightly packed together the individual fibers of a fleece are. It is one of the hardest fleece characteristics to judge. Since fleece is sold by weight increasing the density will increase the weight and the amount of income from fleece sales.
- **Fleece Length:** Increasing the length of fleece that an alpaca can grow is the second way to add fleece weight. It is possible for a huacaya alpaca to grow 6 inches of blanket fleece in 11 months.

In conclusion, it is important to consider what positive and negative traits each alpaca has when selecting alpacas and making breeding decisions. Pay attention to show results but also look at the alpaca’s conformation and fleece traits. There is no perfect male alpaca out there so consider which traits are important to your breeding program and to the female alpacas you have.

Also, do not be obsessed with just one trait. Consider all of the positive and negative traits of each perspective herdsire.