



## Life as a Ring Steward

*The indefatigable **Pete Watts**, a highly experienced steward, talks about his job.*

Entering a show ring with your 'well trained' alpaca is not to be taken lightly. It's the fear of the unexpected. It's the vision that your alpaca may decide that today he or she is not going to 'play ball' and it's time to have fun. Is the judge going to be kicked, or worse still are you going to be dragged around the ring with all of the people looking on at the excellent entertainment. Is someone going to get a face full of glob? OK, I know alpacas are far better behaved now than they were several years ago, and I agree! However, there are still those nagging worries in your mind, no matter how well you trained them over the past months.

So who am I? I'm the one in the white coat, with the judge in the ring, you know, the one who gets in the way just as you are about to take that picture of the handler and your prize winning alpaca in that perfect pose.

OK, I'll admit that I was just as apprehensive as anyone when first taking on the role of Ring Steward. The first time I was given the job, I had the rule book placed in front of me about an hour before proceedings commenced, and was told "learn this, it's your job". Having turned into a quivering jelly, I approached the judge asking where she wanted the alpacas to walk when entering the ring. I was given a route march that only a fully trained SAS person could remember. Was I supposed to be calm? Darned right I was.

I found that everyone else in the ring was probably worse than me - that gave me comfort strangely, so I knew that from that moment, the Ring Steward had to be like a doctor with a patient - be calm, make the handler feel at ease, and try and make them smile.

Positioning yourself when helping the judge is paramount - keeping away from those back legs, not getting in a position where the alpaca can take you for a ride literally, and watching out for anything emerging from that mouth. Those clean white coats can really look like a dog's dinner after a nasty bout in the ring, and no one will want to talk to you for the rest of the day - I think you will agree that it is definitely worse than BO or the leftovers of garlic from the night before. On the other hand it is perfect if you're waiting for a drink at the bar, where is everyone?

Let's get serious for a moment. I love the job of ring steward - why? I've made many friends and seen first hand the excellent quality of some of our alpacas.

Another season of shows is about to kick off and you'll be training your alpacas as you read this - hopefully.

Talking of training your alpacas, it's always good to see an alpaca walk calmly across the ring and stand quietly while the judge puts his or her cold hand in awkward places. But...and here's my one message for you this year - a clean alpaca will always impress the judge. This takes several weeks with clean fields, combined with the obligatory last minute picking over. I regularly hear this one comment from the judges - they want to see clean alpacas free from debris and dags.

Now is the time to start preparing your alpacas, getting them in a clean field as soon as possible, and beginning the process of getting them clean. It will definitely pay dividends.

I've attended two levels of judge training courses, which gave me an insight into what the judge has to think about when looking at a selection of alpacas for the first time. A photographic memory comes in handy, good use of the English language, confidence, and plenty of patience.

I take my hat off to all the Judges who will be 'performing' at our shows this year. The standard will be higher than ever and there will be less to choose between alpacas in a class.

Being a ring steward at times require stamina, a sense of humour, and a strong bladder. The longest day that I've stewarded, was where the judging began at 10am and finished just before 8pm with half an hour break for lunch. A long day, but a rewarding one, as I was able to work with one of the world's leading alpaca judges, Dr Julio Sumar. It was wonderful hearing his comments and humour.

The fun part for me was to constantly remind Mr Sumar to make sure he checked the male's genitals, something he probably doesn't need to do in other countries. After a while, my reminder to him was shortened to the simple word "Balls"! The next day, I was back in sunny Warwickshire, Ring Stewarding for the Kenilworth Show. A busy weekend.

I would like to finish off by giving you something to think about as the Handler/Owner. Here's the handler's checklist for a successful show, by no means exhaustive, but from the Ring Stewards prospective:

1. Know your alpaca's age, you will be asked!
2. Get used to showing your alpaca's teeth to the judge. (Using your first two fingers like scissors).
3. If your alpaca is a male, have someone put a cold hand on his genitals whilst you are holding him (gently). Remember, we don't want any sudden lurches forward into the crowd. Whilst you at it, get the alpaca used to being touched all over.
4. You will be presented with a numbered label when arriving at the show - this identifies your alpaca to everyone at the show. Wear it so all can read it from a distance.
5. Find out when you are 'on' and be ready at least three classes before. Some classes are small, so you might be taken by surprise. Most shows should be able to give you a running order before the start of the judging.
6. When entering your alpaca for a show, make sure you double check the date of birth is correct, and also be absolutely sure of its colour - use the alpaca colour chart if you are not sure. Often an alpaca will be entered into the wrong class due to an error in its date of birth on the entry form.
7. Trim the fringe of your alpaca if the eyes are covered, you would be surprised how much it can affect their behaviour. If they can't see properly, they might kick out more often - they will definitely benefit from it in more ways than one.
8. If the weather is hot during the show, your alpaca will be even hotter than you and more unresponsive. Bear this in mind. Keep them as cool and calm as possible and well watered.

The number of alpacas in this country is increasing and so are the number of shows and because of this, there will be new Ring Stewards trained as the season progresses. If you see a Ring Steward that is maybe new to the job, you know what will be going through his mind. For me, being a Ring Steward is a great experience - I hope to see you in at least one of the forthcoming shows this year - we're all in this together!