



Showing Suri Alpacas

Maggie Krieger gives an insight into the wheezes that some Suri breeders pull on the other side of the Atlantic.

Suri Alpacas have for years been exhibited in the Alpaca show ring in South America but have only relatively recently been introduced to the alpaca show ring in other countries of the world. The delay in their introduction to exhibition and show competition outside Peru has probably been due to a couple of factors. Firstly they have been extremely rare outside of South America until the importation trends of the last five years or so. Secondly the numbers that have been available for competition have been so limited that it has hardly been worth while competing since numbers of participants in any competitive scenario dictate the value of winning.

From the actual practical aspect of showing a Suri there is no difference between the methodology of taking a Suri into the show ring versus a Huacaya. The principles are all the same. However the temperament of the Suri is different to the Huacaya and if you ask any Suri breeder that has show experience with both they will confirm this statement. From the point of view of the judge it can easily be seen that the Suri has a more flighty and nervous disposition, lending to its general reputation of being difficult to handle in the show ring.

This creates a problem when it comes to the hands on physical restraint of the Suri alpaca. It is highly advisable and essential at the outset of a Suri's show career to invest a bit of time in training it to behave appropriately prior to exposing it to the showring. I have experienced many a situation in the showring that has lead me to believe the introduction of some Suris to this weird and unnatural environment has come as a huge shock to the alpaca. No prior training and even in some extreme cases no prior handling has happened for the poor alpaca before exposure to the ring situation. To my way of thinking it is simply cruel not to prepare the alpaca in some way for what it will encounter on show day.

There are countless ways to train your Suris for the show ring and it is not my intention to give you a quick lesson here. There are many authorities out there that can teach you how to do this training; Marty McGee and John Mallon are but two of the experts that come to mind. My recommendation is to address training for the show scene very seriously not only for the sake of your alpaca's health and welfare but also for the safety of fellow handlers, show personnel and last but not least the poor Judge. It is the Judge that has to evaluate the alpaca and if it is uncontrollable how can he/she possibly get an impression of quality if it cannot be scrutinized either from afar or close up because it is throwing itself around in a wild and crazy frenzy?

There is nothing more eye catching than a group of suri's with fully grown fleece, walking around a showring with their fibre almost touching the ground and flowing around them, shimmering with lustre and waving as they move by. Add a little breeze to the picture and the motion of the fleece around them becomes spectacular to watch. But the price of this aesthetic quality is a conundrum for industry and breeder alike, which I will go into once I have described what is looked for in terms of Suri quality in the show ring.

In terms of conformation and balance we are searching for the perfect alpaca in the show ring. Perfect conformation and balance means that the body parts of the Suri fit together in a size and proportion that is both functional and pleasing to the eye. Correct proportion has traditionally been considered to be where the length of the legs equals the length of the neck and is two thirds the length of the back or topline. Eyeballing correct proportion from the side view of the Suri should depict a rectangle formed by the legs in the front and rear and the belly on the top and ground on the bottom as shown in Fig. 1. Although size varies tremendously according to the age of the alpaca the adult fully grown animal should not measure any less than thirty two inches at the withers (Shoulder area). So far there has been no maximum size determined for either Huacaya or Suri. The balance and proportion for the Suri is the same as that of the Huacaya type alpaca.

I have been questioned in the past on what the conformational differences are between the Suri and the Huacaya. From my understanding of the Peruvian Suri (the country considered to be the source of all Suris) there is no major difference in balance and proportion however the muzzle does have a slightly different profile than that of the Huacaya. The configuration of the mouth looks as if the nose had been pushed down and forward fractionally so the upper lip overhangs the lower a little more than the Huacaya's profile. I have observed this seems to be the case where the fiber is more typical of the Suri style as well.

Suri fleece characteristics are the main phenomena that distinguish the Huacaya from the Suri. The classic fleece style for the Suri is considered by the Peruvian breeder to be a lock style that exhibits ringlet formation and independent locks that form to the skin of the alpaca. Crimp found in the Suri fleece is indicative of a crossbred animal that carries neither Suri nor huacaya fleece style but rather a mixture of both. High lustre is also a trait that distinguishes true Suri phenotype. When I questioned Suri Breeders at the National Show in Peru 2001 about why they bred for this fleece style in the Suri, I was told that it was indicative of great fineness and density and therefore production was high volume off this style of alpaca. It follows that the higher the volume and the finer the grade the more financial return on the fleece. So this fleece characteristic relates directly to the amount of income the breeder will make off fleece production – a relevant issue when you participate in a fibre production industry!

The aforementioned conundrum comes into play at this point because the ideal style of Suri fleece exists naturally and can easily be seen when opening and examining the fleece. However with the knowledge that this is the ideal fleece style for Suri some breeders have learned that they can hoodwink the judge into thinking their fleece is naturally this style if they spend hours separating each lock of the fleece into a unit and falsely create the ringlet effect by curling it with hair curlers prior to show. Any wandering fibers that do not stay in the ringlet unit are removed in a process called "stripping". This is where the extraneous fibers are literally torn off the alpaca and disposed of. To complete the picture of the ideal fleece a little mink oil or some lustre enhancing substance is sprayed on the fleece. Lustre is enhanced but the hand of the fleece is completely undetectable once it has been sprayed in this fashion. With a coating of oil left over the judge's palm after attempting to feel hand of this fleece, it will make it impossible to accurately assess the hand of the fleece.

I do not know of any show rules in the world that condone this practice and cheating in this manner is extremely difficult for the judge to detect in the show ring. One may ask how we know this practice takes place? Well when the odd curler is accidentally left in the alpaca it is a little hard not to know! However as education begins to make the difference in the show arena the cheating show person/breeder will loose out because discriminating, knowledgeable and educated buyers will recognise the inferior suri fleece and simply not pay good money for those genetics in the future.

I am also happy to report that there are many breeders out there that do nothing to their Suri's fleece prior to bringing them into the show ring. Those I have mentioned above are fortunately in the minority. But as the years go by and competition gets more competitive I would really hope that this problem does not develop into the norm and Suri showing goes the way of sheep or dog

showing. The Suri poodle does not hold much appeal to my imagination. In my estimation the natural form cannot be beaten. In addition why would anyone in their right mind want to spend hours of their valuable time in the pursuit of making an animal miserable just to pull the wool over the judge's eyes!