



Alpaca Fibre: Colour Contamination

*As we enter the summer show season, **Mike Safley** asks 'When is it a fault?'*

Alpacas come in many colours; on occasion, too many colours. Dark-coloured fleeces with the occasional light-colour fibre spread throughout the blanket have one colour too many. White fleeces, with the odd fawn or black fibre hidden among the white ones, are equally at fault. The subject of colour definitions, roan, grey, and multies is a hot potato tossed between the show rules committee, judges, the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA) Board, show management, and exhibitors. If alpaca breeders do not discriminate against solid coloured alpacas with the occasional off-colour fibre in their fleece, the problem could haunt them for sometime. In my opinion males that lack uniformly coloured fleeces should not be herdsires.

I judged the largest show (2005) in the United States with Jude Anderson and Julio Sumar. My apprentice was on the microphone doing oral reasons, and when he finished, the show superintendent Peg Stephens gave a stern wave, signalling me to her desk. As I approached, she handed me a cell phone, which was a surprise – I had never been summoned to the telephone in the middle of a show. “Your apprentice just used the ‘C’ word”, a voice at the other end of the line intoned. It seems an exhibitor phoned an AOBA official, not in attendance, to report my apprentice for using the words “colour contamination” in his oral reasons for class placement. The AOBA official instructed me to gather my fellow judges and their apprentices to inform them that the use of the word “contamination”, referring to colour in oral reasons, is against show division policy. The acceptable term is “lacking colour uniformity”. Does this “policy” take political correctness, or should I say colour-correctness, too far?

THE AOBA SHOW RULES

Alpaca colour is an extremely important textile trait, and it has been confused by constant changes in the AOBA show rules. In the beginning, the show rules' colour chart designated the 21 natural alpaca colours used by the international textile trade. There have been multiple changes in the original colour designations, and several of the colour classes were deleted in their entirety. Among those eliminated were streaky white black, streaky white fawn, intermediate grey and streaky light coffees. Not only were these colours important as textile designations, but also as selection markers. The failure to acknowledge these colours in properly designated classes is potentially disastrous to the future breeding value of our national herd.

The current AOBA show rules make small work of the colour uniformity issue. The total of what they have to say in the handbook is set out below:

- C. Negative traits for unshorn Huacaya [Suri] Fleece. (The categorisation of minor, major, and serious faults shall be assessed by the Judge according to the degree of fault present.)

5. Lack of consistency of fineness, staple length, character, colour, and density. (Page 118 - 2005 AOBA Show Division Handbook).

The judge has wide latitude when construing the fault. I expect the subject to attract considerable attention in 2006.

BRITISH ALPACA SOCIETY (BAS) SHOW RULES

On the subject of colour contamination the BAS rules are better than AOBA. Solid colour description definitions from the British Show Rules follow:

Solid colour may have a small amount of secondary colour around the head and extremities only. The prime fibre shall be uniform in colour with no second colour contamination.

Exceptions: alpacas with primary solid prime fibre and a patch no larger than 50mm (2 inch) in diameter in this area shall be judged with solid fleeces, as opposed to being judged in multicoloured, however the animal will be penalised for this second colour in the prime fibre.

Uniformity of colour — an even colour is preferred by processors, but allowances need to be made for greys and fawns, which can have colour variation.

The door to colour contamination is left open by the BAS rules when they allow secondary colours on the alpaca's extremity. From my experience the additional colours are very hard to eliminate from a breeding programme. Cria from dams with minimal secondary fibre often carry considerably more colour contamination than their parents. Any secondary colour should be selected against if uniform colour alpacas are the goal.

COLOUR CONTAMINATION FROM A TEXTILE POINT OF VIEW

On a recent trip to Peru, I asked Carlos Montavalo, the central manager of fibre processing at Inca Tops, in Arequipa, Peru, what breeders could do to improve the value of their fibre production. He said, "They could reduce colour contamination. By that I mean eliminate dark fibre in light fleeces and light fibre in dark fleeces." He went on to tell me that if a customer such as Ralph Lauren (Polo) found more than four or five dark fibres in a 45-pound bolt of fabric, they would return the cloth. But worse yet, if they found these fibres in a finished garment, they would claim the total costs incurred for all of the garments made from that cloth. "These charges often exceed the price of the fabric that we sold them," he said, "and that is a disaster." Montavalo finished by saying, "We spend millions of dollars each year for labour to extract dark fibres from light coloured cloth."

I also spoke with Alonso Burgos about the colour contamination problem, and he pointed out another pitfall. When a customer for white tops, perhaps a Chinese client, takes possession of an order, the lot is immediately inspected to see if even 1 or 2 dark fibres are present. If any are found, a call is made and a price discount requested. If the seller refuses the discount, the client says, "come get the order". Alonso points out that this negotiation usually ends with "the seller bowing to the east".

There is another cost associated with colour-contaminated fibre: keeping the scouring train and combs free of off-coloured fibre. Once a white fleece containing dark hairs is scoured, the entire production line must be shut down to remove any offending colour impurities. A blow torch is fired up, burning away any remaining fibre from the equipment: a costly process.

Dr Julio Sumar recently told me that he has studied the average micron counts for each of the colours found on multicoloured alpacas. He discovered that there is often a significant difference between the two.

This is an additional consequence of contaminated fleece – variability in micron counts which coarsens the handle of finished garments. Dark fibres in white fleeces are often guard hairs, and guard hairs, as we all know, are one of the most negative of all fleece traits.

If you need more proof about the evils of colour contamination here is what Jude Anderson has to say about the current status in the Merino Sheep industry in Australia. “There’s a fibre market assurance programme called Clip Care, which among other things requires farmers to totally clean their shearing shed before and after shearing, to cull anything with any colour other than white, and not to allow any coloured animals on the property.” The Australians take the idea of colour purity as seriously as any fibre breeders in the world as Jude points out when she says, “We’ve had sheep farmers buying fox guard alpacas from us that absolutely will not take any other colour than white. They said they don’t want the sheep getting contamination from coloured alpacas by rubbing up against them in the paddocks and getting a coloured fibre mix up, or if coloured alpacas rub themselves on fences, the sheep can come along behind them and become contaminated. Call it anal, call it paranoia, but that’s the real world!”, says Jude.

ALPACA SELECTION & COLOUR CONTAMINATION

I was recently invited by Alonso to accompany him and Dr. Rito Huayta on a trip to Julio Barreda’s Accoyo. They intended to purchase several males for the Pacomarka breeding programme. I leaned against the rock wall of the corral as Barreda herded 20 beautiful Accoyo males into the catch pen for Alonso’s review. My eye immediately found an exquisite male, big and bold, with ideal phenotype. I fell in love. As Alonso worked his way down the line of males, coming closer to the object of my affection, he would eliminate any animal that did not meet his exacting standards. I smiled as he laid his hands on my “first place” male and was shocked to see him signal this beauty out of the corral.

As the cowboy dragged the rejected macho past me, I asked if I could inspect him. The fleece was dense, fine, and wonderfully crimped. I was puzzled. Alonso finished his selection, and we walked down the hill to Don Julio’s home, I asked why he had culled such a beautiful male. “It had a few dark fibres in the fleece”, he said. I excused myself; huffing and puffing I made my way to the top corral to re-inspect the reject. Looking very closely, I soon detected the offending foreign fibres, the fawn ones, that I had previously missed; one about every 6 inches.

As Alonso and I made our way back to Macusani, he explained that he has made every effort to eliminate colour contamination from the breeding herd at Pacomarka: both white and coloured alpacas. I learned a valuable lesson that day. I won’t soon forget to test my aging eyes in identifying this defect.

AOBA’S NEW SHOW RULE ON COLOUR CONTAMINATION

The AOBA Board of Directors, acting on input from their members, the Show Rule Committee, and the Judge’s Advisory Committee, has made an important revision in the colour classification rules for 2006 fleece and halter shows. The rule change reads:

Part VI. Section 1.B. 5.e and f. (Page 50) Creation of two new colours and deletion of roan (Global including Appendix XIX).

Purpose: A handbook global change that clarifies the confusion that exists with regard to dark and light alpacas that do not fit into the solid colour classes or grey classes. Creates more inclusive show environment for exhibitors and their light and dark alpacas that clearly do not fit the solid colour or grey colour definitions.

e. Indefinite Light: White or Beige alpacas/fleece with significant dark fibres uniformly interspersed throughout the blanket.

- f. Indefinite Dark: Coloured alpacas/fleece with significant white/light fibres uniformly interspersed throughout the blanket.

Alpacas with two colours in their fleece will hereafter be classified as indefinite light or dark. Eliminating the roan classification is a very significant improvement in the show rules that will make life easier for colour checkers, exhibitors and judges. The new rules tell us that animals with “significant” off-colour fibres will be placed in indefinite classes. I suspect that, over time, animals in these new indefinite colour classes will be used in grey breeding programmes. Solid colour classes will be made up of alpacas that have either no off-colour fibres or only the occasional off-colour fibre in their blankets. The new rule for solid colour classes states:

PART VI. COLOUR RULES

Section 1. Colour Definitions

B.1. Solid Colour alpacas **shall be defined as animals with solid colour blankets and may have minimal, not easily recognizable, secondary colour contamination regardless of the colour on the head and extremities.**
[Emphasis in original]

Personally, I would hold to an even higher standard; that alpacas with **any** off-colour fibre belong to the indefinite colour classes. I submit that the benchmark should be zero tolerance for colour contamination in solid classes. The new rules state that alpacas with minimal off-colour fibre, competing in solid colour classes will be regarded as “lacking colour uniformity”. These animals, all things being equal, will not fare well against entries that have truly solid or one-colour fleeces.

The next step in the process of refining our industry selection criteria will be a new appreciation by breeders that selecting solid-coloured alpacas with colour uniformity is critical. It is my hope that, as this awareness is incorporated into selection decisions, a potential problem for our national herd will be eliminated.