



Judging the Judges: AOBA Judge Certification Programme

Nick Harrington Smith is the first Brit to qualify as an AOBA judge. Congratulations are in order as it sounds like a gruelling ordeal and one he survived with flying colours.

Having spent the last 14 months obtaining my American Owners & Breeders Association (AOBA) judges ticket I was asked by the editor to outline the programme that AOBA use in the training of their new judges. Whilst the British Alpaca Society (BAS) training programme is itself based largely on the AOBA model, there are some significant differences which are worthy of note.

The AOBA training and certification scheme is managed under the direction of the AOBA Judge Training & Certification Committee (JTCC) whose activities are subject to the approval of the AOBA board. Their stated aim is to achieve a system that ensures judges provide a fair and consistent assessment of alpacas in the show ring. One of the major differences between the BAS and AOBA systems is that here in the UK you have to pass all disciplines, but under the AOBA scheme you have an option to qualify under four different categories. These are :

1. Suri Halter
2. Huacaya Halter
3. Fleece
4. Performance (not available in the UK- Alpaca obstacle course)

Before you are allowed to enter the AOBA scheme you must first attend an AOBA JTCC clinic in America lasting five days. At this clinic you help with the classes where qualifying, re-qualifying and judges seeking higher status are put through a rigorous testing regime, as well as being examined on your own ability. The aspiring apprentices are individually examined on their general knowledge of alpacas, alpaca fleece and if desired, ability to judge performance. If you pass this clinic you are then eligible to enter the AOBA JTC scheme as an approved apprentice for those disciplines selected (myself & Paul Cullen chose to do all four categories). The value of this initial clinic cannot be overstated, you get to observe some of the world's most senior judges being put through their paces in a highly pressured atmosphere. Some cope well, some do not, but the education is priceless. With a professional oral reasoning tutor in attendance you get to understand how to present your reasons in a clear and precise manner. It is this first clinic as a basic requirement and the need to serve apprenticeships that is perhaps the most significant difference between the AOBA and BAS programmes. Once you have been accepted as an apprentice the work really begins. In order to attend the final certification clinic you have to apprentice at a minimum of four halter shows for both Huacaya and Suri. These shows must consist of group halter classes, one composite show, one show with 3-500 alpacas, and one show with over 500 alpacas. For Suris apprenticeships you need two shows with at least 100 Suris entered. For fleece apprenticeships you have to complete two shows with more than 100 fleeces per show which includes both Suri and Huacaya, and a minimum of 75 Suri fleeces in both shows. Now whilst the show system is really dynamic in the States getting an apprenticeship is the hard part. It is the apprentice's responsibility to seek out apprenticeships. I was fortunate enough to apprentice at a show in the US with in excess of 1600 animals, in itself an invaluable experience as well as great fun. The smallest show I apprenticed at was about 350 alpacas and it was there that I completed my performance apprenticeship, a real eye opener in that the concentration needed to judge performance is absolute. If you get

distracted by the audience, or a pretty girl, you miss a section of the performance, and in the States exhibitors are rightly unforgiving.

Once the necessary apprenticeships are completed, and your supervising judges have reported on your performance, the big test comes, a final certification clinic. This clinic was to be one of the strangest experiences I have had in my judging "career". The clinic itself was to be seven days of training and testing. The first two days were described as a fleece total immersion clinic, an understatement! We literally spent the two days, starting at 8.00am, being tutored and assessing fleece after fleece for individual traits. The object of the exercise was to ensure that we all judged to a similar standard ensuring continuity in the ring.

On day 3 other judges joined the course to brush up on fleece judging, and those of us who had attended the previous two days spent another day judging actual fleece classes. By the end of this day we had judged something approaching 200 fleeces.

Day 4 was no different, attend lectures, practise judging and oral reasons with Brett Casson our oral reasoning coach, all the time being observed by the examiners.

On day 5, after a really fascinating lecture on Form & Function we started the formal assessments, with the delegates split into groups so that halter, fleece and performance exams could be taken. I myself took performance on this day, with more than a little trepidation. For this we had to view a DVD of real shows and mark accordingly. This proved a real test of concentration but was also fun, everyone was of the same opinion, including the re-qualifying performance judges, that it was tough.

Day 6 began for me with a practical fleece judging exam where I had to judge six classes of between six and eight fleeces, both Suri and Huacaya, in the allotted time span of three hours. Normally this would be a challenge in itself but I also had the added challenge, and privilege, of judging some truly stunning fleeces causing a number of ties which then had to be resolved adding more pressure on time. After this I then had to complete a two hour written exam on fleece and the AOBA rules. Sounds simple until you realise that the AOBA rules book contains some 250 pages.

Day 7 was the day that I had been most confident about, halter judging. However I had not allowed for the pressure of judging classes in front of the likes of Jude Andersen, Mike Safley, Amanda Vandenbosch, Christin Burhmann and Brett Casson, the examiners. This particular element was the toughest of experiences and not one I would wish to repeat to often.

So after an initial five day course, one year of apprenticeships, thousands of miles of air travel, seven days of lectures, practicals and exams the final test had been completed. All I had to do now was wait for the results for all four disciplines, a wait that lasted some two months. Whilst the programme is tough the educational value is immense and I got to travel and meet some fabulous people. I had a lot of fun and the last clinic was held in Ventura California, not a bad spot to be in December. An added bonus was that I did manage to get my AOBA judges ticket for all disciplines, something I am very proud of and for which my thanks must go to all of my American tutors and advisors. I now have the thought that I can look forward to it again in three years when I must re-certify. I can but hope that it is at least in sunny climes to lessen the pain.