



Caring for your stud males

John Gaye kicks off this second part of our feature on stud males with a timely reminder about their care and management.

Owning twelve stud males means that every time you look at them you are looking at a huge capital asset valued in the hundreds of thousands. Who else leaves sentient creatures of that value out of doors in all weathers? How do we sleep at night with that sort of value grazing in the fields, prone to attack from anything that chooses to take a dislike to them? How do we ensure that they stay healthy and fit for the job? How do we ensure that they retain their ability to impregnate females with a reasonable degree of certainty and that they are not 'firing blanks'?

Firstly one has to recognise that the testosterone that flows in a herd of stud males makes Chelsea FC look like a bunch of fairies. However despite what one might hear it is possible to run a herd of stud males in the same paddock without too much trouble – certainly less than José Mourinho has with his team of primadonnas.

There are two ways of reducing the risk of damage – the first way is obviously not acceptable in a herd of males that are expected to breed; but the second way is rather less dramatic – the cutting out of the fighting teeth. These are razor sharp teeth at the back of the mouth that the males would otherwise use for biting out the gonads of their 'mates' thus reducing their competitive spirit somewhat. Removing them at least reduces the risk of damage to essential equipment and lessens the worry factor for the owner. Taking out the fighting teeth is best done at shearing time when the animal is restrained but it can also be done quite easily in between times if necessary with two people involved using either 'cheese wire' or the snipper that you might use for cutting dogs' claws.

But perhaps the most important aspect of reducing the competitive spirit amongst a herd of stud males is to use psychology when introducing a new male to the group. One of the ways is to take a few of the less competitive males and put them into a new paddock with the new male so that they all get to know one another without too much tension – and then re-introduce them into the main herd as a group. Animal psychology is not much different to that of children. One has to assume that there will be a pecking order with the usual bullies wishing to laud it over the others. It is only George Orwell's *Animal Farm* but this time with animals as the subject rather than humans.

Despite our best endeavours at Alpacas of Wessex we have to accept that there is one male that we can never integrate with the other eleven – Wiracocha. He, at the age of 15, has lived such a life of total domination that he cannot possibly accept any challenge to his authority. Perhaps it is his South American background but he will not live in a field with another male that might challenge his authority as the ultimate 'macho'. At 15 years of age, rather as with humans at the equivalent stage of life, the teeth are somewhat tender and to use them as fighting tools would rather reduce their other use of chewing the cud. So Wiracocha is privileged to live out his senior years sharing a paddock with his 'wife'. They rarely talk and they only have sex spasmodically – no comment! However they both seem quite content with the arrangement.

During most of the year the males live a life of privilege – close to home with a regular supply of beautiful women who come to them for one reason only. They are not required to chat

them up, they do not need dining out or wooing in anyway. Indeed they are lead to them on a halter and encouraged to get to know them as quickly as possible.

However, as with all things in life, there is a down side and that is the 'spit-off' or rejection. Each and every day during the summer weeks one or more males are put on the halter to be led into the spit off pen. Here they are introduced formally to various females – some of whom will metaphorically lie on their backs and say 'take me big boy – I am yours'; others will look them in the eye and spit at it, not a pleasant experience and something that not even a Geordie lad would expect after one of his famous chat up lines in a Newcastle night club. Either way they are dragged off their beau by their human mentor – what a disappointment.

However it is the stud owner's responsibility to ensure that their males are 'fit for role' in every extent during the time they are called upon to fulfil their job as stud males. Very few alpaca breeders wish to have winter babies so from late October through to late March all our males are placed in their winter quarters off-farm. Here they are sent for their holidays. Rather as with busy alpaca owners, holidays are better taken during the winter months. Certainly the males enjoy their change of environment with the best grass we can find and supplementary feed to top up what is missing in winter grass. If they are not getting sex throughout the week the least we can do is to ensure that they can enjoy good fodder on a daily basis.

In their winter quarters well away from the girls they thrive without any form of aggression. However it is important to watch over them closely because the pecking order still pertains and if there are one or two males that are not really 'macho' in their outlook, however good their other qualities may be, they will be the last in the line for feeding – so in the winter they may find that they lose weight unhealthily. As with all our animals the males are regularly body scored throughout the winter and should there be any concern then the individual will be brought into the home paddock for close attention. Fortunately we have never had that sort of problem.

Come April, comes romance - at least in the alpaca world. Just as importantly April signals the first proper growth of spring grass. The males are thus brought back to home pastures where the grass is at last beginning to grow again and to which clients are starting to bring their females for services.

As with all athletes, and our males are Olympic Gold standard athletes in this discipline, the competitors must be fully ready when the starting pistol is fired. To that end we have ensured that they are fully fed up and in best condition to be 'fit for role'. We have done that by feeding them sufficient supplement during the winter months to compensate for the lack of goodness in the grass. We feed them regularly with lucerne and Camelibra but when they need an extra supplement we add sugar beet, peas or oats to ensure that they are really firing on all cylinders come April. We want to ensure that all our clients' girls are fully satisfied at the earliest opportunity without recourse to Viagra. Anyway our local feed merchant is easier to approach and less risky than applying for dodgy drugs on the Internet.

The next problem to overcome is summer heat. It has been quite categorically proved that males, in alpacas at least, lose their potency if they are asked to copulate while too hot. So there are two factors to consider. Firstly we try to shear our males as early in the season as possible. This may be difficult for those going into show classes but nevertheless losing all that high tog value overcoat is essential in ensuring that the body heat of the male is such that he can perform his role efficiently in the heat of the day. An additional way of ensuring that the male performs to the best of his ability is to use him only early in the morning and late in the afternoon throughout the summer – thus avoiding the heat of the day. This may be inconvenient to all humans concerned but it may well ensure that a service is taken on the first visit, which must be to the advantage of all.