



Alpaca Shows - American Style!

Nick Harrington Smith reports on the American show circuit

Many will know that my desire to become an Alpaca judge was driven by the wish to avoid doing the hard work at shows that is stewarding. When it was suggested that I should broaden my experience of judging and get my American Owners & Breeders Association (AOBA) judges ticket I thought why not, it can't be too much work. Boy was I wrong but that's another story in itself. Still not all was bad, as I entered the fray I realised not only was I going to get an insight into an alpaca show circuit that is unrivalled anywhere in the world but also an opportunity to understand how American breeders have become so successful. The most obvious question was how important to the American market is the show circuit, and are there lessons to be learnt for us here in the UK?

My first experience started a little earlier than planned. Somehow a show organiser got wind of the fact that I was going to be in Indianapolis at the time of the Futurity. I was only going for the fun, but of course in time honoured tradition, said organiser asked if I would "like" to be a ring steward. I of course explained that I would be arriving late in town so would understand her need to appoint someone who was more readily available. Good try, but in a spirit of generosity, I was assured that they could accommodate my timings! Net result, my first ever ring stewarding job, but surprise surprise, even the ring steward gets paid.

Now that was the first indication that they do things rather differently in America when it comes to alpaca showing. Here I was at the American Futurity, being offered money for my time, and realising that the whole event was based on commercialism. Firstly, for those that do not understand how this futurity shows work it is quite simple. A breeder pays to nominate a Sire thus making any of his progeny eligible for entry into the show, the owner of the progeny also paying an entry fee. The sire owner is entitled to 20% of any winnings of its progeny. Yes, there is money being paid out as prizes with the first four in each preliminary class getting cash and then colour champions winning bigger cash prizes. In this instance the main sponsor was Celebrity Sales, the company who would be conducting the auction of some animals entered into the show, and whose owners were willing to sell them. Now as you might expect with money involved there is some tension but in this instance I was to witness, what I am advised was a defining moment in the American show ring. Just prior to judging the judges address the exhibitors, just as in the UK. Perhaps I forgot to mention that there were nearly 800 entries, three rings and three judges. So, three judges told the assembled exhibitors that AOBA show rules would be applied to the letter, and that those entrants who had "prepared" their alpacas contrary to the rules would be penalised. Terms such as "cheating other breeders" and "trying to deceive the judges" were used when roundly condemning such illegal practises. As a ring steward I watched with interest the reaction to what can best be described as a hard hitting address in a very commercial situation. Another surprise, only those trying to gain unfair advantage reacted badly. Even some who prepared their animals, held their hands up and lived with the directive, all in all the "levelling" of the playing field was well received with only a few packing their bags and going home. So onto showing, three rings swung into action and Huacaya were judged by Jude Anderson and Kristin Burhmann, Suris by a heavily pregnant Amanda VandenBosch (I had strict instructions to catch Amanda in the event of trouble, only one catch was needed), Now you might think having three rings running a little difficult but no such thing. This show was organised by a dedicated team, some of who are paid, and was very professional. Each ring had its team of

gate steward and runner outside of the ring. Their job was to make sure that the next class was ready and waiting long before the class in the ring was finished. In addition to each "ring" team there was another team recording results and making sure that classes were being called in plenty of time. Each judge had to wait their turn for the microphone but very few delays were experienced. One thing was evident even in this commercial environment, alpacas still misbehaved, but camaraderie was high. Now I think one of the reasons for the high spirits can be put down to the inclusiveness of this kind of show. A number of awards are given and these include "Small Breeder of the Year and Reserve Small breeder of the Year. Herd sire of the year is awarded to the male whose progeny win the most money. All of these awards keep tension building throughout the 2 days of the show. On day one Judging went on until early afternoon when preparations for the auction began and the judges retired from the venue. The auction results were the stuff of which we in the UK can but dream at present, but did demonstrate how a good show can invigorate alpaca enthusiasts. Day 2 dawned with people still talking about the address of the day before, as well as the success of the auction, but more importantly talking about another successful show, and this before it had concluded. The classes started being judged at 8.30.am and the steady flow of animals, equally as well organised as the day before, ensured that at the end of the day approaching 800 animals had been judged and the vast majority of breeders left the venue contented to have taken part in such a spectacle. And all of this with money being paid to judges, stewards and exhibitors alike!

From this show I went on to Harrisburg to apprentice at what I suspect is the worlds largest alpaca show. MAPACA was run on more conventional lines but with something in the order of 1700 entries originally made(some withdrew prior to the show, it was thought they may have prepared their alpacas early!). this show was to be run over 3 days with 4 judges. Mike Safley judging Huacaya Females, Dr Julio Sumar Huacaya Males, Jude Anderson Suri and Tim Lavan judging performance and then Huacaya. I hear you ask what on earth is performance, quite simply an obstacle course for alpacas testing harmony of owner and alpaca, sounds good anyway. Whilst the purist might question this it must be said that the spectators find watching the kids entertaining, its just a bit strange watching some forty something year old kids running round an obstacle course, including climbing through a tyre. Perhaps not part of the American show scene we would want to import but who knows? Anyway a show of this size is bound to be a test of endurance, taking three day to judge with a total number of 1600 plus entries to be judged, it requires slick organisation. Again the team of volunteers and paid staff were equal to the task with the rings running smoothly and the judges working in harmony to make sure rules were fairly applied during the whole process. As an apprentice at this show I was once more struck by how enthusiastic and committed the exhibitors were, many had made the long journey from Indianapolis to Harrisburg during the week to promote their farms, some 550 miles.

After spending the summer on the UK show circuit I then went back to the States to finish my apprenticeships in October at 2 smaller shows, one in New England and the other New York State. Now of course most things are relative and the 2 smaller shows attracted entries of circa 400 and 800 respectively. All summer I had wondered how the shows could start again so early in the year. Surely with much the same rules as ours re fleece length etc it would be difficult to get entries in the ring. This was clearly not the case The first show, The North East Coastal classic was held just North of Portland, Maine in what can only be described as one hell of a facility. A facility needless to say equestrian based, but open for other serious use. Seemingly Alpaca breeders from all the Northern half of the US turned up to show, although I think this might just be my perception. Two things were most noticeable, one being the rain, it was responsible for making a 9 hour journey time from the UK turn into a 22 hour marathon, the second was the positive and helpful attitude of organisers and judges alike who were committed to allowing as many entrants as possible their day in the ring. Mike Safley and Kristin Burhmann were to be the judges over the two days and were immediately faced with problems. The alpacas being housed in the marquee hired to cope with the extra numbers were wet, the marquee having failed to cope with the amount of rain. Typical of the attitude I found prevalent amongst competitors and judges alike in the US, everyone accepted the conditions and just got on with the show. The judges just taking a little extra time to evaluate damp animals when they entered the ring. At the end of the very wet 2 days all present held the view that it had been another very successful show, with numbers

significantly up on the inaugural show held the previous year. Talk was how to make it better next year? After this show Terry and I spent 5 days driving/sightseeing through New England and including 2 days at Niagara Falls. Only on 2 days did it not rain, so I am not taking any flak about British weather from Americans again. When we rocked up in Syracuse, Northern New York State, for the last show it was still raining but again the "can do" attitude was prevalent. This show boasted nearly 800 entries, with all stall space having been sold out within 4 days of show entries being invited. In fact exhibitors had agreed to share stall space to allow their competitors to attend! With only one judge having made it in on time you would have expected some degree of panic, but no, all was well with the world. Amanda Vandenbosch had arrived on time, albeit late in the day, and with baby Hunter in tow, Julio Sumar, late replacement for Jude Anderson herself stuck in Australia, was not due in until late Friday night, Harold Herbolt, performance judge, had missed his flight and would not be arriving until late Friday night also. Never mind, the show organisers wanted the exhibitors meeting the night before showing commenced so that judging could begin early Saturday. Amanda duly obliged at 8.00 o'clock at night, having arrived about 7.30 and the exhibitors were keen to hear what she had to say, especially the "show virgins". Yes, even in this well developed show circuit there were a considerable number of people showing for the first time, and all exhibitors were willing to be around late in the day. Yours truly was used as the demonstrator to show how the judges would like the ring to proceed, this was so authentic I even got told off for not leading the alpaca properly! None the less what it did mean was that everybody could rest easy that showing would begin at 8.30am which should mean it finished on time on day 2, well that was the theory. In truth the show ran really smoothly with 3 rings in operation, although in fairness it did take some time for the exhibitors to understand that they were needed at ringside before their classes actually started. Given the weather outside, raining perpetually, the lighting in the ring made judging hard work, perhaps the only real criticism that could be levelled. That said the organisers took all such comment positively and promised to deal with it for next year. The centre ring was to be the home of "performance" classes which were to be highly entertaining and at times providing some wonderful music and other distractions in the background for the halter judges. The most memorable sight was without doubt the timekeeper in the performance ring, whose enthusiasm and drive, will I doubt ever be matched, no matter how many shows I attend! Notwithstanding the distractions the judging did finish at about 6pm on day 2 and credit for this must go to the show organisers. Again this team were in part volunteers and in part paid professionals but this structure does help ensure a successful show. The most memorable trip at this show, dinner with Amanda, Terry, Vicki and Hunter after day two and then the ensuing "diaper hunt" at 11.00pm!

Two days after I arrived home I was due to be at a judges meeting here in the UK and it was only following that meeting that I had chance to ponder any differences between here and the US. I, along with I think most British Alpaca breeders, assumed that all the animals entering the ring in America would be of the very highest quality. Whilst this is in the main true in respect of white animals it is by no means true of the coloureds. Whatever the event, hundreds of animals are entered that the owners know cannot win, but they still play the game. Why? It strikes me that the attitude of the Americans is that the Show circuit is their shop window, and if they want to succeed they all need to participate. This means not only showing animals but helping organise and promote shows regionally. With on average over 2 shows a week scheduled for this next year their commitment is obvious. If you add to this a very clear show structure, with comprehensive and well enforced rules applied by well trained judges, enjoyment and fair play can be reasonably expected. We probably have the judges, but perhaps not the well developed and understood rule book and show structure although this is being worked on. We certainly do not work so well on a regional basis. So, what other major differences? Perhaps the fact that AOBA love to reward people for showing by awarding ribbons to 6 places and splitting classes above 15 to give more awards is a major difference in philosophy, whatever else it does make more people happy and enthused. I think undoubtedly the issue of auctions attached to shows, prize money, the commercial value placed on winning stock in a competitive show circuit and perhaps most of all exhibitors willingness to travel long distances, make shows the success they are. In short a commercial edge to the show circuit. Part of that commercial edge is the fact that regional shows make profit in the region, and that profit stays for the regional group to utilise with only a set levy being paid to AOBA. I can already hear the comment, "but the States are much bigger", "they

have more alpacas”, “prices are higher” etc. That only leads me to think of their “can do” attitude rather than “can’t do”. That said there are major advantages they have starting with Tax breaks and the US state legislature beginning to recognize alpacas as proper livestock, which give owners an advantage over the UK. But of course this hasn’t come about by accident. It has taken much lobbying by AOBA to make alpacas the success story they are in the US and this lobbying has only been possible because of the support given by the members to AOBA’s comprehensive infrastructure. We are by no means as advanced as America but we do have some great animals. We do not have the sophisticated infrastructure yet but we can make it happen. AOBA has politics just as we do, but it doesn’t allow it to get in the way, a lesson we must learn. We do have breeders who are just as committed as the Americans. What we desperately need is for those breeders to have the confidence in their industry that the Americans have. In short we need to create an infrastructure that allows more people to participate in the running of the industry from the shop window up, and not to be frightened of being seen to benefit from a commercial industry. In America the pet owner still plays alongside the commercial breeder, they have learnt to co-exist. Best of all, create an impression of confidence and others will follow. Support a strong show circuit and you can enjoy a social side of the industry that has yet to arrive.

One other thing I did learn about the States, the hotels around the shows are equally as appalling as here in the UK, just a little cheaper.