



Stud Males – Why Bother?

Dominic Lane, Australian Alpaca Association Judge

There is no doubt that one of the most commonly asked questions by both newly established breeders and experienced breeders is: “why should I bother using high quality stud sires?” This is a subject that, as a long established breeder and experienced international alpaca judge, I take very seriously. It seems that no matter how you approach it, some breeders still can't grasp the benefits of employing quality genetics in their breeding programme. It is our responsibility to ensure that the quality of the national herd is continuously moving forward, as it is imperative to our reputation as an elite fibre industry. I would therefore like to offer guidance on this issue to hopefully reassure the sceptical alpaca breeder that breeding from top quality, proven stud sires is the best way forward.

I have met many alpaca breeders in my years in this industry that are disappointed that their alpacas are not producing true to type, well conformed alpacas with high quality fleece characteristics. I then discover that they are using low quality stud sires that in my opinion as a judge are of wether quality and therefore should not have gone on to be a working male.

Some of the reasons that breeders use lower quality stud males are:

- Recommended by breeder/breeders
- Purchased to save on outgoing costs
- To save on stud fees
- Bred on farm
- Breeding hobby animal quality

On the occasions that lower quality males are used for the above motives I must stress that for a male to go on as a stud sire, they must be of an exceptional standard, otherwise the overall standard of your herd and the national herd will not advance.

We must remember that we are an elite fibre-producing industry. It is crucial that we do all that is possible to ensure that the alpacas we breed are exactly that. They must have quality fleeces displaying characteristics such as:

- Fineness
- Density
- Brightness/lustre
- Uniformity of micron, length and colour
- Character and style
- Lack of medullation

Conformation can often be over looked but is an important factor that is responsible for an alpaca's well being. They must possess a strong frame that is upstanding and display faultless conformation. Males that are used for breeding must not have any disqualifying or general conformation faults.

I believe that breeding males should have to pass a strict veterinary assessment indicating that they do not exhibit any disqualifying defect(s) to be registered as a certified male. This is

a practice that is undertaken in other parts of the world and also requires a DNA test to be taken.

Disqualifying faults:

- Fused Ears (short stubby ears or fused at the tips)
- Banana shaped ears
- Tail absent/short or abnormally bent
- Fewer than two testes
- Polydactylism (more than two toes on each foot)
- Syndactylism (fusion of the two toes of the same foot)
- Jaw not properly aligned
- Jaw excessively overshot
- Jaw excessively undershot

Not only can negative fleece traits be passed on to the next generation, conformation faults can also be inherited. Consequently, trying to save money by using a lower quality male does not save you money at all. It can actually cost you money and time in the end!

The quality of alpacas throughout the world has and will continue to move forward at a very rapid rate. Breeders will find themselves falling behind the industry standard very quickly if they do not realise that using the best stud sire available is the only way forward.

When it comes to selling your offspring you need to be able to present alpacas that have sound conformation and desirable fleece traits. It doesn't take long for the average new breeder to learn which fleece traits they should be looking for and nine times out of ten they will buy the alpacas that have superior fleeces, sound conformation and are true to type. Ideally, your stud's reputation should be a priority and preferably not become known for selling lower quality alpacas or eventually you will fall behind in quality and your business will suffer.

At some stage you have to decide if you are planning to be a stud that is breeding elite stud stock or a stud that breeds commercial stock. I would like to point out that even if you decided to breed commercial alpacas that produce fleece for the commercial fleece market they must still be fine in micron, cut heavy fleeces, be free of medullation, be uniform and have good character for processing. To produce thousands upon thousands of wethers of this quality that are required for our fleece industry, you would still need to be using a high quality stud with proven heritability within your breeding programme.

Market place studies have determined that manufacturers will pay for all natural fibre based on these criteria:

- Fineness
- Staple length
- Tensile strength
- Cleanliness
- Colour
- Degree of medullation

Alpaca breeders should be selecting alpacas and sires that will produce commercially valuable fibre or we are defeating the whole purpose of breeding these animals.

Selecting alpacas for fineness, length, uniformity and an absence of medullation throughout the fleece requires an understanding of what to look for in an alpaca and can take practice. The other characteristics such as density and crimp definition can be used to help select and breed outstanding alpacas.

Why is crimp important in a stud sire? Crimp plays a very important role and I have listed some of the reasons why it is used during the selection process.

Crimp acts as an indication of fineness, the more crimps per inch the finer the fleece. Although this is not always the case it certainly acts as a visual guide whilst assessing.

Crimp is an indication of density. A very dense fleece will display a well organised staple or lock structure. This allows more fibre to occupy a smaller area, the more fibre per square inch the denser the fleece.

Crimp is an indication of uniformity throughout the fleece. A very uniform fleece will show the same crimp character evenly throughout the body. A well defined crimp indicates the lack of medullation throughout the fleece. The coarser medullated fibres grow straight, lack orthocortex and therefore do not possess crimp.

When processed, the staples that display a strong well defined crimp will measure longer than a comparable length staple without crimp definition. Crimp adds elasticity to the yarn and garment after processing.

A fleece with well defined crimp will also attract less vegetable matter and will stay cleaner from one shearing to the next. I have found that fleeces which display a high frequency, high amplitude crimp style, retain their fineness. This is a very important trait to take into consideration.

Another essential trait to consider is the bloodlines you are introducing into your herd. Not only do you want to be using stud sires that display all the qualities required, you should also be looking very closely at their genetic base. No matter what industry you are looking at investing in, you want a quality product. Look at your market. What is in demand? What is selling?

Alpacas that sell well, and that are in demand, are those that not only have the sought after fleece characteristics but those that have a well-known pedigree.

In my experience it is a lot more difficult to sell an alpaca sired by or pregnant to Mr Joe Bloggs compared to an alpaca bred by or pregnant to a sire that is known within the industry for producing high quality progeny.

You will find that this is an aspect that will be evaluated by new and established breeders.

A sound, proven genetic base is a very valuable selling point and will make your alpacas more attractive to your existing clientele and future investors.

Another comment I hear from breeders that use lower quality studs is: "I am only selling my alpacas for low prices, how can I compete with the larger breeders?"

Smaller breeders are in a very good position to access top quality stud sires to use in their breeding programmes. If you have a small herd of females there is absolutely no excuse for using lower quality sires. In this situation I would recommend that you put your best females to a reputable, proven stud sire, this way you will always be improving your herds quality. This will also increase the value of your alpacas and therefore you will see a better return for your outlay. It takes 11.5 months for that special cria to arrive, this is too long a period to wait to be disappointed with the results.

I know of many smaller successful breeders that follow one simple rule, quality breeds quality. If you are a smaller breeder that can't afford to service your herd with an elite sire you would be advised to sell the lower quality females and concentrate on breeding with your best to the best. This will keep your costs down and you will consequently be breeding improved stock.

Showing is also an excellent opportunity to assess your quality with other breeders. Presenting your alpaca to a judge in the show ring means different things to each breeder.

- Simply attending a show allows you to see what other breeders are doing. You don't have to be an exhibitor to do so.

- The show day is one of the best opportunities to promote your stud and the industry as a whole.
- The show ring allows you to compete against other breeders and compare your performance in the show ring.
- Showing can enlighten the breeder to look at his/her breeding programme, to seek knowledge, to improve their breeding and to be more successful.
- The show day is a great day to network with other breeders, offering the chance to see what sires/bloodlines are doing well.

A successful show winning alpaca is obviously going to be worth more money than an alpaca that has never been shown. This signifies the benefits of showing your stock and using a top quality stud sire.

Throughout the world alpacas that are from well known bloodlines or have a successful, consistent show record can sell for very high prices. This can be achieved by private sales/auctions or auctions organised by alpaca committees/associations.

For example the highest selling alpacas at the 2006 American Alpaca Futurity sold for over \$100,000 with a average of \$42,000. At the 2006 Australian National Auction the highest sold for \$124,300 with the average per lot being \$40,000. At the 2006 New Zealand National Auction a wild card entry was passed in at a bid of \$82,000.

The prices that were reached at the inaugural British Alpaca Futurity were very encouraging and can only set the benchmark for next years Futurity!

There is no doubt that breeders can greatly benefit from studying genetics and introducing them into their herds. A careful selective breeding programme using elite proven sires can only result in superior stock.

I would also like to add at this point that we must not forget the female that is also being used in your breeding programme. So often I find that breeders do not take the dam into consideration. The offspring that is bred is a result from 50% of each parent and you greatly improve your chances of breeding advanced stock by having high quality breeding females within your herd.

For genetic gains to be fully achieved we must be striving to improve each generation. All livestock industries reward quality with the best animals fetching the highest prices. It is our responsibility as an industry to ensure that the alpacas presented to the general public, potential investors and fellow alpaca breeders are of the highest quality possible.

The truth of the matter is that careful breeding will produce superior results and therefore add value to your alpacas.

With a plan to always improve you will eventually prosper mightily. I know that my dream is to breed the best alpaca possible. What is yours?