

Meet Me in the Winners Circle

by Shauna R. Brummet, Ph.D., Hobby Horse Farm

Last time we talked about what kind of “wins” one can have at a show. Among other winning situations we mentioned:

- Participating in your first adventure in showing alpacas
- Showing several animals and place with one or more
- Learning how your animals compare with other breeders’ animals
- Showcasing your overall breeding program
- Consistently placing and winning in specific colors
- Winning Color Championships

Now, let’s talk about preparing to “win.” What is needed to successfully compete with your alpacas in the show ring? A realistic evaluation of the animals that you have to show:

Conformation

Do all of the animal’s parts fit together and function as a harmonious whole? Is it balanced? Do its proportions of body length, body capacity, substance, leg length, neck length and set, head size and shape, ear length, shape and set, shape and set of eyes, and bite come together to form a sound, functional body?

Does its form follow its function? A good alpaca moves about with ease and minimal energy expenditure, obtains and digests food efficiently, has a coat that protects it from the elements, mates easily and (if female) carries and births its cria with maximum positive outcome.

These are functions that nature imposes and are a critical first aspect of being a quality alpaca.

Man imposes additional criteria on at least one aspect of function – fiber production, which makes the alpaca have economic value.

Fleece characteristics

Does the alpaca produce a sufficient quantity of fleece in a reasonable time (3-6 inches within a year’s time)?

Does the alpaca produce fleece that is desirable? Is the fleece soft to the touch and useful for desirable applications? Is it uniform in color, in size (micron), in length, in staple architecture?

To “win” requires an animal that displays these traits to a greater extent than the average animals – placing it in the upper percentile of the population. Not all animals will exhibit these desirable characteristics to the same degree or in all aspects. Not every observer (i.e. judge) will consider each attribute of the animal to the same extent. Therefore, in a class of animals there will

be a segregation based on the value judgment of the observer (the judge).

Placing appropriately with an animal is a “win” for that animal. When judged against the “ideal” in the judge’s mind and the other animals present in the class, coming out on top is, of course, the desired outcome, but placing reasonably within the class is a positive outcome as well. It provides you more information than you might have previously had. Observing the other animals in the class will help you to hone your evaluation skills and aid in forming or confirming your breeding plans for specific animals as well as for your herd as a whole.

Preparation of your animal

Training is essential to a successful show experience. You and your animal must be comfortable and in sync with each other. An animal that has been carefully, consistently and gently handled and trained since birth will be much easier for the judge to examine and evaluate. If the judge cannot see the animal walk quietly and in a balanced frame they cannot evaluate its soundness and way of going. If the judge cannot look at and handle the fleece in multiple areas of the animal’s body they cannot determine how soft and uniform the fleece is. An animal that stands up and shows off its excellent conformation and presence (especially important in males) and lets its beautiful fleece be fully appreciated is much more likely to garner a placement appropriate to its overall quality than one that fidgets, fights and generally shows its displeasure with the entire proceedings.

Bringing a clean animal into the ring is so much more of a pleasant experience for the judge. Wading through dung, hay, straw, urine stained fleece and other debris does not make a good impression. Judges certainly try to evaluate the fleece and ignore the contamination, but why make it hard for the judge to appreciate your animal’s fleece?

Prepare Yourself

The third element of successful showing is to be prepared yourself. This means being familiar with the ring procedure, show rules, able to communicate pertinent information to the judge (e.g. animal’s age, fleece growth time), comfortable with your animal and confident that it will stand quietly and behave well for its examination.

Being mentally and physically prepared is critical to success in the ring. Knowing what to do and being ready to do it at the

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The Journey and the Goal



appropriate time is key. Having a well trained animal that is comfortable with your handling of it and will walk in balance with you goes a long way towards you being cool, calm and collected in the ring.

Watch other classes so that you know the judge's ring procedure. What pattern is the judge using to watch the animals move around the ring? Where do the animals line up after they have entered and moved around the ring? Are there any obstacles to be cognizant of in the ring (posts, holes, slick spots, dark areas)? Try to set up your animal in line in a way that allows you to show it off well when the judge stands back to observe the class as a whole. Nothing like making a good first impression!

Pay attention as the judge starts examining the animals. Does the judge walk down the line looking at the profile (better have your animal standing nicely on profile)? Or, does the judge want to look at fronts and rears? If so, she may walk down the line looking at front leg conformation (and perhaps evaluating breadth/depth of chest) and then walk around the behind to look at rear conformation. Be sure your animal is standing squarely on its four legs while the judge is walking down the row of animals.

When the judge comes to examine your animal individually, be ready! Show the bite as the judge approaches and be ready to answer any question the judge might ask you, or just to say "good morning." Hold your animal gently and quietly. Don't grab your animal and don't let it wander around on the end of the lead. Hold it up close to your body and tell it to "stand" or whatever command you use.

After your animal has been examined and the judge has moved on to the next one in line, let your animal relax a bit and perhaps

walk around in a small circle. Don't disturb your neighbors and don't let your animal get too active. Pay attention to the judge and be ready to stand your animal up for that final look. The judge will be reviewing the qualities of the animals she has just looked at and will appreciate it if your animal is standing up nicely, showing itself off as she thinks through her evaluation and decides on placements.

If you are pulled out first, go immediately and stand where indicated and keep your animal looking good. The judge may not be finished judging, she may be making a cut and will have another look at the animals before making final placements. Whatever happens, tell your animal how well it did, give it a pat on the neck and smile! Now is the time for a gracious winner – be pleased with that blue ribbon. If your animal was placed lower in the class keep a smile on your face and let your animal know it performed well for you. Don't forget that the audience is watching and many people may appreciate the qualities that your animal has and will remember how you behaved standing in the line-up.

Winning in the show ring is fun and rewarding, but knowing your animal has been evaluated and placed fairly is more important. Remember, it is only one person's opinion on one day under one set of conditions in one set of competitors. There are qualities to appreciate about almost any animal and a need to realistically evaluate that animal and assess how to use it appropriately in your breeding program to create animals that move closer and closer to your ideal alpaca!

Good luck, have fun and meet me in the Winner's Circle!