

Meet me in the Winner's Circle!



by Shauna R. Brummet, Ph.D.

As a very wise woman once said, “if you don’t know where you are going, any route will take you there.” The same can be said for the show ring – if you do not have goals when you step into the show ring, you might as well not go as you are likely to be disappointed.

Now, you may say that of course everyone knows why they are in the show ring – it’s to win! That is true in some sense, but it is unlikely to be that simple if you really want to use the show ring as part of your overall business and breeding plan.

You do have a business and breeding plan, don’t you? If not, rest assured you are not alone. We can talk about that another time, for now let’s return to the subject at hand.

What is your goal for attending a show or a season of shows?

- To participate in your first adventure in showing alpacas – that’s great – I want you to have fun and learn something from the experience!
- To show several animals and place with one or more – this is the first step towards successful years of showing your alpacas

- To learn how your animals compare with other breeders’ animals – a must for ALL alpaca breeders
- To showcase your overall breeding program – consistent placement in classes may be a way
- To showcase the offspring of your herdsire – consistent placements and top wins will be important
- To consistently place in the top of your classes – a worthy goal for experienced breeders
- To consistently place and win in specific colors – a worthy goal for farms specializing in particular colors
- To win Color Championships – for those who breed and show at the top levels and who want to excel at the art of showmanship and animal handling

If you are just starting out in the alpaca breeding adventure you may not have ever attended an animal “show” of any kind. They are all basically about the same thing – the purpose of animal exhibition is to evaluate breeding stock. Each time a set of animals is brought before a knowledgeable adjudicator of the breed something important happens – you have the opportunity to LEARN!

What can you learn?

- How your animals stack up to those of your colleagues and competitors in the industry
- The characteristics deemed important by that judge
- How your training and handling ability affects your animal’s performance
- The characteristics most common in the breed being judged
- Which characteristics are desirable and perhaps hard to consistently attain
- How to evaluate your own stock more realistically
- Who consistently produces high quality animals
- Which bloodlines or herdsires are producing characteristics that are important to you in your breeding plan

To have a successful show you must set reasonable goals for yourself and your animals. If you are just starting out and do not really know the quality of your stock, enter the animals that you think are the best and which are the easiest for you to handle. Then listen, look and learn – from the judge, from other experienced breeders and to yourself. Take in what others tell you, evaluate it against your own observa-

tions and draw conclusions relevant to your goals.

Success in the show ring requires more than a good animal, but that is certainly a prerequisite. If you do not have a good quality animal, no matter how well trained it is you are unlikely to win. However, the reverse is not true. Many a good quality animal does not receive its just rewards due to lack of training, poor handling and nerves – mostly those of the handler!

Being able to walk your animal quietly around the ring, and in a straight line away from and toward the judge is quite important in allowing the judge the opportunity to accurately access the movement and soundness of your animal. An animal that stands quietly for examination, permitting its bite to be shown and its body and fleece to be adequately evaluated allows the judge the opportunity to appreciate the good qualities of that animal, rather than fighting just to get a glimpse of fleece and confirm by hands-on exam the conformation that was viewed on the side, front and rear movement.

Besides having your animal well trained – to walk quietly and straight and to stand for exam – there is someone else who needs to be trained – that is YOU! A nervous handler can do more to ruin an animal's experience in the show ring and its attitude for ever more than anything else.

Make sure that you take the time to learn how to properly handle your animal to its best advantage. Wear appropriate and comfortable clothes – no barn clothes – you should be turned out as well as your animal. Look sharp and feel sharp. Make sure your animal's halter fits correctly and that the lead can be easily held in your hands – no slipping and not too bulky

to fold up in your hand. If possible, go to an alpaca show prior to the first one in which you are entered and watch the judging.

Make yourself comfortable with ring procedure:

- **Correct entry number located in the correct place (arm band or hanging on your chest or back)**
- **Check in with the gate steward in ample time (but not too much ahead or your animal may tire or become nervous)**
- **Be ready to enter the ring when the judge indicates it is your turn**
- **Know what the “pattern” is – which way you are to walk the animal and where to go stand**
- **Pay attention to the judging so that you are ready to present your animal when it is your turn**
- **Smile, show your animal's bite immediately – the judge will appreciate that you are “ready”**
- **Hold your animal steady and beam proudly as the judge works her way through that gorgeous fleece**
- **When she is finished stand back and “show” your animal off for the last impression. Remember, it is not over until it's over, so continue to pay attention to the judge as she may make a “cut” or start placing immediately – you don't want to miss being called into a placement.**
- **Listen attentively to all the judges' comments and if possible take a look at the other animals that placed in your class so that you can train your own eye and hands and compare your animal to the other placements**
- **When the ribbons are handed out, thank the judge and exit the ring**
- **Hang that ribbon on your stall and**

enjoy your accomplishment

At the end of the show, look back on a rewarding experience – you came, you saw, you played and you learned – what an outstanding weekend! Take the information you gathered and put it in your databanks for evaluation of your breeding plans. Maybe you agreed with the judge's evaluation of your animal compared to the others in its class and you can plan what to do to improve your stock with the next breeding. Maybe you disagree somewhat with the judge's evaluation – their criteria may be somewhat different than yours. This is a valid outcome – there is no ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ about animals and there is often not an overall ‘best’ – there is the animal that one person (the judge) thought fit her idea of a high quality huacaya or suri alpaca on that day in that competition. Another day, the outcome could be different. You must know your own animal's strengths in relation to your breeding and production goals in order to assess how to use the information gathered at the show.

Enjoy the animals, your friends, colleagues and competitors and work on producing the animal that fits your goals – whatever those may be – and we WILL meet in the Winner's Circle!

Shauna Brummet and her husband Jeff Skinner have operated Hobby Horse Farm Samoyeds and Huacaya Alpacas for over 20 years producing many Champions in both breeds. Shauna serves as Chief Scientist and Director of the Alpaca Registry, Inc. and is a former Director of the Alpaca Research Foundation, member of AOPA and the OABA affiliate.