

## Are we in a Global Industry ?

Report on the International Judges School in Peru, October 2001



Me with Dr Julio Sumar

If the answer is 'yes', then surely it makes sense to work to an International Standard which is recognised globally, doesn't it?

The definition of a Standard in this context is 'a definite level of excellence or adequacy required, aimed at, or possible.' Standards are not new to us. They touch on our everyday lives. In recent years, due to the growth of international trade, National Standards are steadily being replaced by International Standards. So when importing from wherever, be it Peru, Chile, the USA or Australia the standard is the same. When exporting into other parts of Europe the standard is the same.

We agree to agree with our trading partners through adoption of standards. Life becomes simpler.

When I first started looking into the ownership of alpacas in the UK I found myself looking at many variations of what was referred to as an 'Huacaya Alpaca'. Some had long muzzles and ears, others more square muzzles with shorter ears; some had straight backs, others tapered; some thin legs, others fatter. Why the variances?

I have to say I was a little taken aback when I discovered that our beloved alpacas did not have a standard as other breeds do.

Having an analytical mind I was trying to find out answers to questions but was receiving many different responses. I was becoming confused so I sat down and thought long and hard about why I had bought alpacas and what I wanted to do with them in the future.

'Go back to basics', is an expression we often hear when faced with a difficult problem. Alpaca selection and breeding to me was a problem so where better to go back to basics than in the country of origin for many alpacas, Peru. After all they were domesticated there 6000 years ago and what better way to learn how to evaluate them, than to learn how to judge them.

The International Judges School in Peru was my answer. Not only would I be immersed amongst the animals I had come to love so much, but I would be able to see how they survived and thrived amongst their own people and natural environment. It was an opportunity to eat, sleep and breathe them. To learn from

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the masters in my opinion. The course kept us on our toes with very little to distract us. Nearly three weeks of practical fleece and conformation examinations in both Huacaya and Suri, individual CCTV analysis and critique of our oral reasonings by the rest of the group, plus evening lectures, was all followed by a written exam.

Locations were Mallkini and Rural Alianza. Then a week of fleece practical at the Mitchell mill in Arequipa, observed with some amusement I am sure, by the Peruvian sorting masters - the ladies whose heritage sorting has become. This was culminated by a further written exam.

The course instructors were no less than Dr Julio Sumar and Maggie Krieger. Both with superb credentials and who better to learn from. With these two most respected pioneers of our industry how could the course be anything but a gigantic success. There were thirteen alpaca breeders on the course from the USA, Canada and Europe. With herds of all sizes. One had a herd of five hundred alpacas in America, plus a further three hundred at his family's farm in Chile. The learning



An example of a polydactyl foot

curve was steep and intensive but deep and thorough. We saw defects, the like of which I wonder if the western world will ever see publicly. Polydactyl toes (see photo), wry faces, abscessed neck (this had not been noticed by the handler and culminated in the alpaca being culled the following day); severe rickets but with the most amazing fleece, hypoplasia of the testes and many more.

We saw the genetic problems created by cross breeding. From a distance the fleece of a Suribred to a Llama looked fantastic. Long enviable ringlets, but up close the touch was that of a coir mat. We saw the effects of this through three generations and how it affected the fleece, thus the reason why cross bred camelids are classified as Intermediates. How? Why? Because our first training base was Mallkini, which is establishing itself as an official breeding and genetics centre for alpaca learning, as well as an Eco Centre.

To be able to judge any animal, be it dog, horse or alpaca, you must have a standard by which to compare. Without this surely the judge's selection is subjective and can be described as nothing more than their personal preference or the preference of their instructors. This would be grossly unfair to the exhibitor and equally unfair to the judge. To take this pressure away the judge must have a standard by which they compare. A standard is not an onerous thing or something

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to dread. Fundamentally, it is a set of guidelines which describe the main shape of the head and muzzle, back line, leg to body ratio, balance and most important, fleece coverage, density and fineness.

There will always be a loving home for those alpacas who don't make the breed standard. Look at the world of dogs, cats and horses. How many mixed varieties are bred, bought and sold every year Each one loved as much as one with a pedigree.



Instructors, students and campesinos celebrate a successful course

In Peru we had some of the most amazing Huacayas and Suris this country has yet to see. But because the standard was so high, it made the practical selections all the more difficult. Training the eye to look at every minute detail so that when placing the alpacas in first through to sixth place we really had to work at the oral reasoning to ensure the other exhibitors and visitors (in this

case our fellow course delegates and instructors) also understood what merits we saw in placing number one over number two, and so on.

What did I gain out of the experience? At least five years of learning in the UK, into one month in Peru.

Coming top of the class gave me my 'short wings' to judge at the smaller shows we have here in the UK and Europe. But to receive my 'full wings' I must apprentice to an International Certified Judge. These shows currently take me to America where around five hundred alpacas exhibiting is the norm.

Earlier this year I was one of two colour checkers at an American show where they had over five hundred and fifty alpacas. This forms a major part of their checking-in procedure, and is undertaken the day before. Reason being that as a result of this, many alpacas have to change colour class and naturally, all paperwork must be correct on the morning the show starts. Imagine the experience that gave me with fleece judging, being able to delve my hands into more than two hundred and fifty alpacas of all colours. Back home I was Halter Judge at the BLAA show and co-Fleece Judge at the BAS show.

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In 2003, I hope to take part in some more US shows and bring this experience to our European shows.

In my 'Life before Alpacas' I was once called a 'workaholic'. If I am that then I feel no pain, just complete enjoyment and huge satisfaction every day. I am happier now that I know what a top quality alpaca in Peru looks like and that there is a standard from which to appraise. I am confident in my knowledge and can spend my time breeding towards that ideal and helping others reach the same goal.

It makes sense to work towards an International Standard for the alpaca. We have the ideal opportunity in this country to make things happen. We are still in the embryonic stages of our industry. We have the chance to lay the right foundations and make a difference before the herd numbers grow to be unmanageable. Why not lead by example, after all, we once were pioneers who others followed.