

## **Alpacas 101 - Start out making fibre your priority!**

*by Julie McClen - Oak Grove Alpacas*

Starting out in alpacas can be confusing, and navigating the maze of opinions, information and sometimes well intended misinformation, can at times be daunting for the new alpaca owner.

Setting up your farm for alpacas, visiting alpaca shows and studs, talking with a variety of breeders, or working out a budget for your starter herd are the easy parts. Knowing which alpacas to buy, and why you should buy them can get quite a bit more complicated.

Most articles aimed at newcomers give a good outline of the basics to chew over, but don't really offer anything particular to sink your teeth into.

Over the years I have met many new breeders that haven't been told more than the absolute basics about alpaca fleece.

Most of my new clients are hungry for real in depth information on assessing fleece, and feel confused by an industry that claims to be a fibre industry, yet doesn't appear to have a commercial fibre focus as it's core.

But first let me be clear, you will not make a living from alpaca fibre itself if you don't run thousands of alpacas, and this is no different than in the merino wool industry.

But you can achieve returns on your fibre that cover your shearing & general husbandry costs at least, and maybe even have something left over in the piggy bank.

When looking at alpacas to buy, don't let yourself be swayed by that cute face or big name genetics, make a breeding plan before you look & don't buy an animal if it doesn't fit your plan! Apart from the obvious issues of the animals you buy being in good health, having good conformation, being able to reproduce well and raise strong healthy progeny, there is the big issue of fleece.

Alpacas are fibre producers and this whole industry revolves around the fleece, how fine is it, what crimp style does it have, what bundling, what lustre? It's endless and often confusing for the newcomer unfamiliar with fibre terminology.

Yet in many ways breeders often seem to lose sight of the big picture - that the long term future is in the fleece. We are the pioneers in a very young industry, and the future of commercial quality Australian alpaca fibre is in our hands, lets get it right!

If you take anything from this article, let it be this - The Australian Alpaca Industry needs to seriously concentrate on fibre traits that create the best return for the grower, if we want to have a viable commercial future and not just be a pet/show industry.

But can you do both? Can you win show ribbons confirming your alpacas have good conformation and fleece character, as well as have fleece with high commercial value?

Yes, you can.

But if your budget is limited you may need to compromise a little, and be aware that achieving your perfect alpaca type can often be a multiple step process. Start out with alpacas that exhibit those traits that are at the top of your want list and are the most heritable, then work on introducing the other traits by careful selection of stud sires to produce more well rounded progeny, without losing what you already have.

The last 5 years have seen many changes within this industry, and the focus has started to shift toward breeding alpacas whose fleece has a higher dollar value, especially since several new buyers have entered the market offering better prices for fine quality fibre.

Currently, if you want to cover your shearing costs from your fibre returns you need to produce higher value fibre or a huge amount of lesser quality fibre.

However most breeding alpacas don't produce 4kg's plus of useable fibre, so you need to make every kilo count.

If you breed alpacas that have finer fleece, and more importantly can stay finer for longer, then your fleece has a much greater value per kg for more years. Therefore those animals producing this valuable ultrafine to fine fleece for more than a year or two, and producing progeny that do the same, are themselves becoming more valuable to an industry looking toward commercial viability.

But quite often our industry has disregarded these valuable fleece traits in favour of fleece that looks nice but can be worth only a few dollars a kilo.

So if you really want to breed alpacas that can win show ribbons, but also produce a fleece that has commercial value you need to know what to look for.

To be able to ascertain which alpacas are high value fibre producers you need to consider more than just how a fleece looks.

- Fibre Statistics - ask to see the yearly fleece histograms for an animal, not just the first fleece test, and be sure to check the dates of the fibre test compared to the date of birth, to know how old the animal was when tested.

If possible ask to also see the parents and siblings fleece tests, to see if there is a pattern related to fibre traits, such as staying fine or blowing out in micron as they age.

- Know what you are looking at - understand what Micron, SD, CV and CF mean and what they should be for quality high value fleece.

Be aware that handle does not determine commercial fleece price! Handle is highly subjective and can easily be influenced for example by dust in the fleece.

Humans are about 23% accurate for estimating micron correctly, machines are closer to 90%.

- Take note of the body score, under nourished animals tend to be finer because of their environment and may well increase in micron at your place if feed quality is better.

- Understand what determines the value of fleece. Micron, comfort factor, correct length, and not being tender are factors that influence fleece value much more than crimp style or lustre for example.

Most importantly, do your research!

Ask the hard questions of the people offering to sell you animals, if they can't answer to your satisfaction - don't be afraid to walk away.

Just be aware that all the show ribbons and famous genetics in the world are not guarantees of animals producing fibre of high commercial value.

To achieve the best of both worlds, you need to delve deeper and look past the pretty faces, the famous names and the show ring, and see what's really happening with the fleece.

Making fibre your first priority is a huge step in the right direction toward securing your place in the future of the commercial alpaca fibre industry.

*Julie McClen is a partner in Oak Grove Alpacas located in Candelo NSW, further information explaining fibre terminology and other resources related to fibre can be found on the Oak Grove website at [www.oakgrove.com.au](http://www.oakgrove.com.au)*