

Show Rules, Breed Standards, Auctions and Poisoned Alpacas.

By Adrian Stewart

The show season is once again upon us and over the winter months there has been much debate here in the USA about whether to stay with the 50:50 system of judging in the halter classes or move to the 60:40 system which is sometimes known as the International Standard of judging. With a 60:40 system, 60 % is awarded to fleece characteristics and 40% to conformation. In the end AOBA opted to let each show decide which system they wanted to use. Which of course gets AOBA nicely off the hook but overlooks the fact that very few judges have not been trained in the 60:40 international system and of course none have been officially trained in 60:40 by AOBA which essentially means we have no guarantee of consistency.

So all things being equal which 2007 blue ribbon is going to be the most valuable...the 50:50 or the 60:40 ? Time alone will tell.....

The other new idea which was discussed at some length and is being implemented by a handful of shows was an Open Gelding class which would have prize money associated with it. In some quarters this was received with enthusiasm and I know at least two farms that have offered to put up the prize money. The thinking here is that an Open Gelding class will encourage breeders to geld and register those sub standard males in the hope of winning prize money. Plus it acts as a show case for fibre only animals which are a big chunk of the market that nobody likes to talk about too much. However, as I implied earlier, in some quarters it was given a distinctly cold reception by breeders. I think this was in part due to the fact that shows nearly always sell out very quickly. So introducing a new class simply puts more pressure on the existing system.

The suri breeders have now written a breed standard and the majority of suri breeders have now voted in favour of adopting the standard. The huacaya breeders however haven't yet completed their breed standard so instead all AOBA members (suri owners and huacaya owners) are voting to decide whether to stop now or to complete the huacaya standard. I could go on but I won't.

On the auction circuit prices appear to be remaining quite firm. The Snowmass Private Selection Sale started off the year with an average selling price of approx. \$37,000, after you strip out a lot made up of 3 studs and a 50% stake in a further 23 studs which went for \$950k.

The Americas Choice Production Auction was less impressive with 84 lots going under the hammer for a total of \$1.9 million giving an average price of \$24,000. I think what this clearly demonstrates is a difference in both quality and perhaps equally as important the brand premium that comes with the Snowmass name.

The lawsuit between Magical Farms and Land O'Lakes is now in federal court. To recap on a Tuesday morning, March 18th 2003, Magical Farms were confronted with tragedy. In the early hours of that day they discovered almost a dozen of their male alpacas dead with no apparent signs of trauma or obvious cause of death. Many more were extremely lethargic, refusing to eat, drink, or stand, and displaying some shaking primarily in their front legs and heads. The total number of alpacas killed at Magical Farms due to this feed is now over 100, with over an additional 250 alpacas affected. The problem was linked directly to a batch of alpaca feed mixed by Land O' Lakes that was heavily tainted with a substance poisonous to alpacas. This dreadful mistake somehow slipped through the Land O'Lakes quality control systems, and the tainted alpaca feed was distributed widely in Northern Ohio. A good number of alpaca farms were adversely affected.

The case has now gone to Federal Court and as I write the summing up is underway. Many of the farms affected have settled out of court. The plaintiffs in this case are asking for \$15 million in damages.

Whatever the jury decide in this case we all need to ask the question; What I am wondering is how will other producers of alpaca feed stuff respond to this case and the verdict?

In business, it is prudent to have product liability insurance and to do something called risk assessment. Which is asking the question What if? Then calculating the consequences whether they be financial, environmental or human.

The "What if?" question here is clearly; What if we mix the alpaca feed badly and accidentally poison 300 alpacas? What will that costs to us? In compensation and in damage to our brand name?

Having made the assessment as an alpaca feed producer you have some choices:

You can implement further safeguards and checks while mixing the alpaca feed or institute post mix testing of the alpaca feed. Now all this will obviously add to the costs of production so it is only fair the price of the alpaca feed should be increased.

Once you tell your insurers about the risk assessment they may well increase the insurance premiums, even though you have put in place additional safeguards to prevent the alpaca feed becoming contaminated. Yet more costs to be passed on to the buyer of the alpaca feed.

As an alpaca feed producer you may even decide that the risks do not justify the rewards and so you stop manufacturing alpaca feed altogether.

Of course, this then makes the nations alpaca breeders dependent on an even smaller pool of alpaca feed suppliers and as a result their risk has just increased because they have more customers with yet more alpacas.

I don't know what the answer will be. Maybe some alpaca feed producers will ask us to sign a legal waiver, limiting the amount of damages we can claim should an accident happen.

There are a number of people interested in the outcome of this trial other than those who were in Federal Court for the last two weeks, namely the alpaca feed stuff suppliers, their insurers and of course the alpaca farmers of North America.

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