

The Importance of Dams

A few times I have been asked, “If I breed my dam to your multi champion herd sire, can you guarantee me a champion cria?” I have to tell them, he can improve bone density on your cria over the dam and he can do wonders with the fleece. If you want improved fineness, brightness, density, awesome handle, uniformity of crimp then he’s your man.

But, what is the dam bringing in genetics to that breeding? She is responsible for at least 50% of that cria’s traits and in the horse industry they believe the mare is responsible for up to 70% of the foal’s traits. Those traits can be either good or bad. Poor conformation is one genetic trait that can come back at you in future generations over and over again. Those traits I am referring to are correctness in proportion, leg angles, gait, jaw alignment, too wide or narrow base, and elongated snouts. Even presence (which is a particular style that an alpaca presents to the world) appears to be highly heritable.

Personality traits also seem to flow from parents to offspring. Up to 60% of the herdsires that are working in this country are considered improved. We have done our work in culling poor quality males it appears, but what of the females? The number I am told is only around 23% improvement in them since importation.

Even with a background of awesome genetics and a male prepotent enough to overcome the dam’s faults, those faults will not just disappear. They will be in the cria’s genetic make up. They will haunt future crias and your breeding program. A female with serious conformational issues should be culled from your herd. A hard thing to do I know.

An easier thing to do is to choose wisely when buying an alpaca. I always tell clients if you have only a certain number of dollars for

your first alpaca purchases buy two females with excellent conformation and a good background of proven quality grand sires and grand dams. You are better off with two very good dams than five mediocre dams. I am always amazed at how few people listen to that advice. They get caught up in an alpaca buying frenzy and soon have a small herd that they often do not know how to care for let alone breed to improve. They often buy cute or a great deal. Quality not quantity is the smart way to go. Remember how much influence this female will have over your end product—which is, of course, the cria.

The show ring is the place you show your peers the worth of your breeding program. If you want to go into the show ring these days you need to go with the best your farm produces and be prepared for some stiff competition.

The people that will succeed in the alpaca industry will succeed by making better alpacas not just more; so, choose your dams wisely. Then when you send your dam out for that breeding to that special herdsire that has caught your eye, you have a better chance of a superior end product...possibly a champion cria.

Gail Van Staveren
Escondido Alpacas

copyright 2010