

Oral Reasonings and Self Education at AAA Shows

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With alpaca shows temporarily cancelled due to COVID19, many of us are really missing the camaraderie, fun, fellowship, education and business opportunities that shows allow us to enjoy. Whilst we are all still independently caring for our alpacas on our own farms, many of us maybe finding this time isolating and difficult. During this time, let us look forward to the restart of shows. The Australian Alpaca Association is established and strong and the restart of shows will be such a great opportunity to get us all back together again.

Apart from the camaraderie aspect of shows, education is one area that is sometimes not fully embraced.

How can we use Alpaca Shows as an educational experience?

Many people see a ‘show’ as simply a place to present their alpacas to be judged and then sit at their pens or walk around the showgrounds. However, a show has so many more dimensions. Having a vast array of alpacas in one place at one time, creates the perfect opportunity to improve your knowledge and also “get your eye in” on the various traits of alpacas and what to look for. To not take advantage of this is a wasted opportunity.

Oral Reasonings

After judging each class or Championship at a show, the judge will give their oral reasonings for why they made their decisions. The judge will try to fully and accurately describe the traits considered and the decisions made to arrive at their final placings. This is delivered to both the exhibitors and the wider audience.

Their reasons will be both descriptive, as well as being educational and informative.

To get the most educational value from a show:

- i. Listen to the comments that the judge makes about your alpaca/s. Listen also to the comments that the judge makes about the alpacas that maybe placed ahead or further down the line. Later, write these comments down if you want to remember them.
- ii. At a suitable time, (probably after showing), ask the owners of the alpacas that were the winners, (or the alpacas that were placed ahead of your alpaca) if you may look at their alpaca/s. In all my years of showing, I have never come across an owner who is not happy to show you their winning alpaca.
- iii. Try and relate the judge’s comments to what you are seeing. If the judge commented that this alpaca was placed above yours because eg “it was denser”, “it had less guard hair”, or “it was more consistent in colour” etc... Can you see this? The more alpacas that you look at, (especially the winning alpacas), the more you will learn to identify these traits.
- iv. If you only look at your own alpacas, then you will be wasting great opportunities. Don’t fall into the trap of looking at your own alpacas with ‘rose coloured glasses’. By getting your hands on lots of alpacas you will:
 - Improve your ability to compare alpacas and identify positive and negative traits.
 - Learn to gauge what traits maybe lacking in your own herd or an individual alpaca and what positive traits you would like to see more of in your herd.
 - Improve your knowledge of genetics. By looking at lots of alpacas and observing their pedigrees, you will increase your understanding of various

genetic lines and hopefully observe some traits that certain genetic lines maybe exhibiting.

- Use your improved skills on your own herd improvement and decision making. For example, if a common comment about your alpaca is that she “is not as consistent in style as the female placed above her”. What does this mean and how can you use this information?
- Observe the style in your female.
- Look at the female that was placed ahead of your female and identify her greater consistency in style.
- If you are looking for a future mate for this female, then after hearing the judge’s comments, it would be productive to use a male who had a very consistent, stylish fleece. Was there such a male at the show? Did you look at the Champion males? What are their genetic lines? Why not have a look?

Both novice and experienced alpaca breeders can learn so much from getting their hands on many alpacas at a show. You can improve your assessing skills; you can gauge your herds’ strengths and weaknesses and use this knowledge in your own breeding program and business decisions.

Do you have to have alpacas entered at a show to be able to get your hands on lots of alpacas?

Definitely not! Both halter and fleece shows need volunteers in a range of steward roles, and this gives you a good opportunity to observe a lot of animals and fleeces. Steward training is available and there are a number of different types of roles to be filled. Even if you are at a show just as a spectator, do not waste the opportunity to observe the judging and to ask to look at as many alpacas as you can. On your farm, you can only look at your own animals, which is not a balanced view of how alpacas vary in all the traits. If you do not know what you are aiming for in breeding, then how can you get there? At many large shows, the audience are often given the opportunity to enter the ring after the judging of the Supreme line ups to have a look at the winning alpacas. This is a fantastic opportunity that should not be missed. Don’t be shy – get in there and look.

For many years, suri breeders (new and experienced), would get together as a group after the judging at large shows and visit other suri breeders’ pens. It can be less confronting to look at animals as a group and to “talk alpacas” together. It provided such a wonderful and friendly learning opportunity when as a group we could observe, discuss and absorb. No one was judgemental and everyone really benefited from the experience. I would really encourage other breeders to organise a small group to visit pens of alpacas that particularly interest you, (eg grey huacayas). These opportunities should not be missed.

Should you take the results from one show as gospel?

Definitely not! To get an overall view and learn all that you can, it is best to attend as many shows as possible, either as an exhibitor, a spectator or as a steward. There are different steward roles and a number of them provide the opportunity to have a close look at the animals (or fleeces) that have been entered. Shows vary in size from small to large, the competition changes, the judge changes and the presentation of your alpaca can change. Your alpaca can present well at one show, but due to environmental and/or other causes may not present as well at the next show. It is important that you assess each alpaca before entering them at every show. Are they looking healthy? Are they an appropriate size for their age group? Are their legs straight, (do they require more vitamin D)?” Is their fleece still “holding up” (not cotted nor tender)?

In 2017, the Showing and Judging Committee conducted a survey on oral reasonings by seeking responses from both active exhibitors and judges. The results were presented at the 2017 Judge workshop in NSW. Just a few of the questions and exhibitor responses:

How important is it that a judge is accurate with their oral reasons?

- “Very critical as the orals should reinforce the AAA breed standards. Some breeders, especially new breeders, benchmark their breeding program and base their breeding decisions on a judge’s orals”
- “This can make or break an animal’s future particularly- males”
- “We rely on these comments for future direction”

How important is it that a judge clearly explains why each alpaca is placed in a particular order?

- “As an exhibitor you generally don’t get to see the other animals in the class until after the class is judged, so to hear why one animal is placed over another gives a good explanation of the traits of the other exhibits.”
- “Breeders rely on this feedback to assess their animals against others”
- “Most Important and what I listen for”

What attributes do you really appreciate in a judge’s oral reasons?

- “The more information the better, descriptive, but precise and clear...When your animals oral reasoning comes up you focus and try to soak it all in”.

In conclusion, both judges and exhibitors have responsibilities regarding oral reasonings:

Judges:

1. Need to clearly describe their thought processes that have led to the placings in the class.
2. Fully and accurately describe the traits considered and the decisions made to arrive at their final placings to both the exhibitors and the wider audience.
3. Be descriptive of the class in the minds of the audience as well as being educational and informative.

Exhibitors

1. Should listen and “take on board” the judges’ comments.
2. Use the comments as a tool to help you assess your own and other breeders’ alpacas.
3. Use the comments as a tool to further your knowledge and to make more informed breeding and business decisions.

If exhibitors do not listen to and “utilise” the judges’ comments for their own education, then there is no point in the judges giving oral reasonings. AAA judges are well trained and highly regarded. Oral reasonings are one of the more difficult, yet highly important aspects of judging.

Both judges and exhibitors have a role to play regarding the delivery and acceptance of oral reasonings. Shows are way more than fairy floss and hot dogs. Breeding and assessing alpacas is always a learning curve, so don’t miss the fantastic opportunities at shows to soak it all in.