

There's no business like show business

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At the conclusion of the judging of the Alpaca Section of 2004 Sydney Royal Show, where Illawarra Alpacas was awarded The Most Successful Exhibitor, Harriet Davison (principal and stud manager) was invited to comment on the reasons for the stud's continuing show success.

"It's a combination of things," she volunteered. "Firstly, and always, there is that element of good luck, the things you can't control, and which may make a world of difference on the day. But luck can be good and bad, and won't keep you on top. That requires forward planning, careful selection, and a strategy."

For Ian and Harriet Davison, and sister Celia Cook, showing has been central to their business plan since they first entered the industry in 1992 with the purchase of three females and one male, all selected from photographs.

"At that stage of the industry, animals were in very short supply, and knowledge and understanding of what constituted quality were pretty Spartan," explained Celia. After their white male, Illawarra Sir Frank, was fibre tested and found to be a rare superfine (under 20 microns), they decided to send him to the Royal Melbourne Show in 1992, to see how he stood up. "We were blown away when Celia phoned to tell us he had placed first in his class," enthused Ian. "The excitement was huge; we were hooked!"

Illawarra Alpacas has been showing regularly ever since. Initially, it was for the fun and excitement of the competition, with the opportunity to meet and talk with others in the industry. But importantly, it was also an excellent opportunity to learn about the new industry, by talking with other breeders, discussing show successes and failures with the judges, and examining the animals judged to be the best on the day.

"We were thrilled to take home any ribbons at all in those days," recalls Harriet, "and longed impossibly for the time when we might have one of our animals judged to be a champion." During those early years, Harriet coined the phrase "let your fingers do the talking," and they would regularly run their hands through the fleeces of the winners and champions in each class at each show, learning what made them stand out from their competition.

In 1997, after five years in the industry, they won their first Supreme Championship ribbon, at the Hawkesbury Show. "That was probably our most exciting and memorable achievement in the industry," suggests Harriet, "winning our first supreme, with an animal we had bred from our own early Chilean stock."

It has been a long and busy road since that time, with alpacas from the Illawarra herd attracting a further 35 Supreme Championships in fleece and led classes over the past 7 years, in shows ranging from the local Berry Show to Royal Shows in Adelaide, Canberra, Brisbane and Sydney. This year, at the Sydney Royal, Illawarra Alpacas

took along ten alpacas and took home 16 ribbons, including those for three of the nine champion alpacas in the lineup for the Supreme Champion. “We were disappointed to have missed out on the Supreme,” admits Harriet, “but delighted with the overall success of our show team.”

“Showing is hard work, time-consuming and expensive,” warns Harriet, “but the rewards are huge. Apart from the sheer enjoyment of being with alpacas and alpaca breeders, we have followed a strategy that ensures that our name and our animals are constantly before the judges and the public. Our successes in showing are our best advertisement, and reassure our potential buyers that Illawarra Alpacas offers quality stock, independently assessed by experienced judges.”

For those interested in showing, they advise that careful planning is vital for successful showing. It needs to begin with careful selection of animals as potential “showies”, based on their conformation and fleece types, and the known performance of their relatives. Selection is often made six or more months in advance, and assumes (sometimes wrongly!) that an alpaca will follow predicted patterns of growth. Halter training has to be completed prior to showing, and shearing may need to be planned so that the animal is in optimal fleece at the time of judging. Where numbers permit, different animals may be prepared for different shows, as repeated inspections by judges and public may gradually detract from a fleece. Special feeding, shedding, or coating may be considered, so that the alpaca is presented at its best when showtime arrives.

Fleece shows are an attractive alternative to showing fleeced alpacas, especially for distant shows, as it can all be done by “remote control”, and does not require transporting animals for long distances, and feeding and caring for them over long periods off-farm. It has the additional advantage that fleeces are shown without a handler, removing any possible allegation that the notoriety of the handler might influence a judge’s decision. Show fleeces should be chosen and set aside at the time of shearing, and carefully skirted before showing to reduce vegetable contamination, to discard all stained or contaminated fleece, and to separate out the saddle fleece from the lower quality skirtings and the shorter neck fleece, whilst still trying to maximise fleece weight. Again, fleeces have a limited “show life”, and their quality may be expected to deteriorate significantly after about three shows, and different fleeces may need to be selected for different shows. Arrangements will need to be made in advance to transport fleeces to arrive in the hands of the show convenor in time for judging, and for their return, either privately or through the post. Individual fleeces are best transported in plastic garbags, gathered together inside boxes or sacks, with the details of the fleece entry included prominently inside the garbag on top of each fleece. The score card, returned after the show with the fleeces, is a good way of reappraising the fleece in the light of the judge’s decision.

“The show ring is a powerful motivator for many alpaca breeders,” observes Ian, “and I believe that we should use it to ensure that show success is likely to reflect commercial success.” That is, the showing should reward the same features that are likely to attract price premiums in the market. “Where judges lead, breeders will

follow,” he suggests, adding that this gives the judges the opportunity to ensure that breeders are breeding for future commercial success.

In selecting animals for purchase, Harriet advises buyers to look beyond the show schedule, whilst not ignoring it. “Our first supreme champion was a black male, sired by a white male out of a black female,” she notes. “For a breeder of black alpacas to select this male on his show record alone would be a grave error.” The International Alpaca Registry is an invaluable tool in examining the pedigree of any potential purchase, and can be accessed via the Australian Alpaca Association Herd Books, the IAR link on the AAA website, through the software of the Alpaca Breeders Toolkit, or on the IAR certificate of the alpaca to be purchased. Most buyers will wish to know the heritage of colour and fleece type (huacaya or suri) of any prospective purchase, which is clearly listed for the previous three generations on the IAR certificate of any registered alpaca, but can be easily researched back even further on the AAA website or the Toolkit. The latter includes show results for the National and Royal shows, and will facilitate a fascinating search through the colours, fleece types and show records of the relatives of any given alpaca.

For Celia Cook and the Davisons, the show business has been good business. But, as Ian observes, “The quality of animals is constantly improving. It gets tougher every year.” He adds ruefully: “But when the showing gets tough, the tough get showing.” Expect to see a lot more of Illawarra Alpacas in the showing.

Footnote: Bookmark the weekend of November 6th and 7th, 2004, for the Australian FiveStar Alpacaganza to be held at Flowerdale, Victoria, an auction of 20 elite alpacas selected from some of the largest and most successful studs in the country: Illawarra, Windsong Valley, Shanbrooke, Ambersun, Flowerdale, and Surilana Alpaca Studs. Details at <http://www.aussiealpaca.com/>