

Selecting and Preparing a Show Fleece

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Before giving away all my secrets allow me to answer the following question. Apart from their good looks, what is the most defining feature of alpacas? It is their fleece. Unfortunately good looks will only get them through the front door. It is the fleece that wins at the end of the day in the show ring.

The show ring gives you a subjective assessment of your fleece relative to the other alpacas in that show. The advantage of a fleece show is that you also get an objective assessment of the two most important commercial fleece traits; the micron and the weight. In addition to this you receive a score card that enables you to compare 11 fleece traits against other fleeces in that show as well as fleece scores from other shows.

In a fleece show everybody wins because the score card can be more valuable than a ribbon. It will highlight both the successes and failures in your breeding program and therefore enable you to modify your program accordingly.

Fleece preparation starts before an alpaca is born. A fleece will not achieve its genetic potential if the cria does not receive adequate nourishment during the third trimester before birth and for at least the first 6 months after birth. This is when the fleece follicles are formed and subsequently produce fibres. Fleece judging allocates 5 points for density of staple and 15 points for clean fleece weight.

When selecting fleece for a show it is important that you understand how the 100 available points are allocated (see score card below). Thirty percent of the points are objectively scored. This means that you can determine before the show how many points your fleece would probably receive out of the 30 points for fineness and clean fleece weight. These can be estimated by using the AAA fleece micron and weight scoring calculators. Your fleece is probably not going to do well in a major show unless it receives at least 17 of these points.

Of the 70 remaining points, 35 are influenced by the extent to which you skirt the fleece. These are the points for uniformity of micron, length and colour, and the lack of guard hair. The extent to which you skirt can often determine whether or not the fleece receives a ribbon. If you don't skirt enough you will lose a lot of these points however if you skirt too heavily then valuable points will be lost for weight.

There are 30 points allocated for handle, crimp character and style, density of staple and brightness. These traits need to be considered when selecting a fleece but are pretty much out of your control when preparing the fleece prior to a show. They are mostly determined by the genetics of the dam and sire and how their genes are allocated after conception. Some can also be influenced by nutritional intake and the amount of dust in the fleece.

The remaining 5 points are for lack of impurities, stain and tip damage and are largely influenced by the alpaca's behaviour. It is however worth removing as much vegetable matter as possible. The difference between a first and second place is often no more than half a point. Judges are only human and they may not take kindly to their fingers finding a thistle or blackberry thorn in your fleece.

Finally, when a fleece is rolled or folded before being bagged it is difficult to rearrange the fleece after being removed. This can then lead to an unrepresentative grid sample for testing. A better method is to carefully push the sides of the fleece towards the midline and then feed the fleece into the bag while pulling the bag along the table. To remove the fleece it is simply a matter of tipping the fleece out along the table and then rearranging the sides of the fleece. Of course it helps to check which side of the bag is showing the top of the fleece before doing so.

Good luck in your next fleece show. You won't get a score card unless you enter.