

Llama Fleece – a growing interest

I have to admit that it has taken several years of llama breeding to become interested in the finer detail of fibre and its management. I guess this is in part to me never seeing myself sat at a spinning wheel or trying to make money from it through selling it on.

I recently became interested due largely to what I witnessed overseas – this is in terms of types, qualities and management.

Silky fleece is certainly trending in North America and largely it would appear the most sought after type for look, feel and processing. Good confirmation has become the standard for all types of llamas at major shows and so fleece has become the next challenge to get right/add value when being sold. There would certainly be no point entering a llama with even the mildest of congenital disorders because they if allowed in the show ring and they would get anywhere.

As well as handle (feel/touch a quality of the Silkies) I have been impressed with the volume of fleece some types of llamas can produce especially the Rebrano Escondidos, the additionally soft, silkie smooth untangled nature of fibre of a well prepared Argentine, the bright, jazzy colours of some of the Peruvian types, the length of some Suri fleeces.

I am sure we all like to see our llamas looking nice and whilst beauty is inevitably in the eye of the beholder, I cannot foresee anyone thinking that dull, lifeless, matted, felted, fleece looks better than bright, free flowing, untangled fleece. If a given, how do we achieve this? The British Llama Society Showing Regulations forbid use of any commercial or non-commercial grooming product. Exactly why I am not entirely sure but from what I am led to understand it is to do with spoiling the 'natural look' and damaging the fibre. I am advised by other sources this latter point isn't necessarily true. More damage can be done through having grooming and the use of some types of brushes. In North America, many hours, over several weeks are spent preparing llama for the show ring to look their best. Mats, if present, are removed, cuts styled to show off the main attributes/hide any shortcomings. The tails for example, can be made to look bigger and as if stood higher (a positive trait) if the fleece around is cut back. There are other distinct advantages. Blowing out the grit and dirt gives added life to your sheers, believe me it does. Use of a medicated shampoo can help eradicate ticks, fleas and other surface parasites (a problem for llamas in some parts of the world including so far as the UK is concerned - Scotland), condition the skin and fibre, make it easier for you and the llama to have debris, mats and tangles taken out without harsh or long combing. I would have certainly appreciated it before my mum used to comb out my hair before sending me on my way to Sunday School in a hurry as a child. I would be surprised if many llamas would naturally volunteer for a blow and set but they do seem to get used to it. No doubt some of you will have seen on *You Tube* one of Terry Crowfoot's llamas sat/stood patiently in the open paddock whilst having their fleece trimmed. In warm weather, if I leave the sprinkler on my llamas take a voluntary shower with pleasure. So, if well managed non of these processes need be stressful for the llama. If it's part of good husbandry then surely it is an acceptable part of show preparation.

The process of preparing for the show ring is generally, to blow out the fleece to remove dust, grit, and vegetable matter, shampoo to clean and bring out the sheen. If mattes are present combed out using a combination of detangler brushes and lotions. Llamas are then heavily rinsed to remove any residues, especially those likely to dry or deaden the fibres. The fleece is blown again to dry followed by a final brush out



Figure 1- A 'Blow Out'



Figure 2 - Shampoo



Figure 3 - final shear

As an owner wanting my llamas just to look at their best, I see no harm in following such practices. It might be a waste of time, if after all this preparation, your llama decides to go and roll in the dust bath, or worse still on straw bedding, but, even then it is still easier to bring back the fleece to looking smart again when they need to. Some may argue that we have been conditioned to prefer the aesthetics of manicured appearance and in so doing lost the ability to value the natural look. This is what I may say about my own appearance but not sure I approve of that excuse in my llamas.

For many years, I thought I simply had to live with my llamas having matts/felted clumps of fleece but you certainly don't. My proven practice has come to be a two year cycle for those who's fleece has a tendency to matt naturally after it has reached a certain length. I am sure that breeding, nutrition and lifestyle have a part to place but as many of you will already know, young short fibre is much more vibrant than long, old fibre. With heavy woolled llamas shearing generally starts around 2 years of age. The main barrel alternate years with front and back. I use hand shears which may give the

appearance of an uneven cut but this is soon cancelled out with grooming and as the fleece starts to re grow in only a matter of a few weeks. This is my preferred look and way of doing it but I equally accept some of the more stylistic cuts and grooming of those sufficiently skilled and equipped to do a good job. I think climate and time of year also need to be considered since llamas living outdoors heavily cropped in the Autumn living in the far North of England would suffer as would those with heavy coats living in the South of England at the height of summer that have not been sheared.



Figure 4 - 7 Show stoppers prepared to look at their best





So far, I have only really talked about fibre from a look/appearance point of view. Submitting fibre for competition will evaluate more than simple appearance on the animal. Judges will be looking at:

- length of fibre (important in spinning)
- consistency (again important for processing)
- crimp (essential for producing garments that need to retain shape/spring back into shape when washed and worn such as jumpers.
- cleanliness - speaks for itself.
- handle or feel, softness (nice to touch-important if it is to be used in garments worn close to the skin).
- lustre (shiny)
- volume (measured in terms of weight)
- absence of the courser guard hair when judged off the hoof.
- Coverage (if judged on the hoof)

All of which can add value to the price paid for fibre, important for the commercial llama enterprise.

Most of these qualities are largely genetic and not radically changed as a result of preparation which again raises the question of why not sanction use of grooming products, it not the equivalent of using black shoe polish on horses hoofs, talc on white cats, rollers in long haired dogs etc. where there may be a significant ethical or welfare issue.

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For anyone interested in more detailed description of fibre structure, the old BLS website has an interesting section at: <http://www.britishllamasociety.org/Activities/Fibre/Fibre.html>