Some initial reflections on my trip to the USA 2018-too many wines!

Breeding

For the second year in a row I was fortunate enough to cross the pond to see llamas in both their homelands and in show.

Last year, I was blown away by the wonderful llamas I saw along the West coast courtesy of some well known breeders such as Mary and Rick Adams, Ken Austin, Linda Boyd, Betty and Gene Moe, Sherri Tallmon, Jim and Adrienne Parker, Ron and Gail Wilkinson and Marilyn Wynia.

I returned home enthused and inspired by what I had seen. These llamas were of a quality I have never seen in the UK and I decided there was no turning back. I had to tone down my existing breeding programme and get hold of some of these genes. Two of my herd sires were castrated and as some readers will already know I have since been trying to improve matters in the UK by attempted to renew some of the pioneering ET work of Paul and Sally Taylor.

My eulogising and attempts to replicate some of the ways of the US is not welcomed by some in the UK but there is no getting away from the fact that some breeders in the US through selective breeding have moved llamas on to new heights (no pun intended).

This April 2018, I attended the MLM Sale of Champions in Cloverdale, ID. and saw with my own eyes that these fine animals were not restricted to the West coast, they were spread out across the whole Union. As well as re kindling some acquaintances from 2017, I met breeders and judges such as Darrell and Marlene Anderson, Aspen Rayne and Ken Auld, Sonja Boefs, Larry Christen, Tami Lash, Mary-Jo Miller, John Ollandick, Jenny Olsen, Mark Smith, Sally Rucker, Ali and Fran Soukup, Michael West, and many more who showed me marvellous specimens of the species not to be forgotten in a hurry and as well as teaching me a thing or two.

In terms of confirmation, what is especially noticeable about US llamas, compared to the UK, is the stronger looking legs (more bone) and size (limb length and overall height) of some of these animals. As you might expect, there were no serious faults to be found in any show animals but also very few even in those I saw out in the fields earning their keep as guard llamas. Similarly with temperament,
all those I met were friendly and well behaved, knew how to stand and walk in the show ring. I am assuming much of this is related to the attention they receive. Few, if any, were overweight compared to those, including my own, I frequently see in the UK, but I do wonder if some of this is related to the more lush meadows we have here as a rule.

Beauty, as we all know, is in the eyes of the beholder but I also believe conditioned by what we are led to believe is good form and so it is no surprise that some of my initial thoughts were soon modified by what I learned from the breeders. Although my initial thoughts were not as extreme as some of my fellow countrymen/women – ‘it looks more like a giraffe than llama’, seeing the very tall, long necked llamas took a bit of getting used to and it was not until explained to me why such traits had been selectively bred for that I warmed to these characteristics. As for Argentines, there was no such transitional phase, I loved the look of them immediately. As for Suris, I am still trying to find the taste. I am told it is an acquired one but I am still not so sure it will ever come. As for Silkies, then so long as they are well prepared and in good proportion they have an obvious appeal for the quality of their fleece.

Starting from a clean slate going forward, I have been pondering ever since on the best way to proceed. Steve Rolfin offered me some advice when he told me to breed for what I wanted and if it had wider appeal others would start to follow and is the road he took as I understand it. He wanted to breed a llama fit for purpose as a major trekker that could be well packed and tread difficult terrain with relative ease and efficiency. I guess most people in the llama world have been impressed with the results he has achieved and his Silver Tone is one I hold up as the best I have ever seen. GNLC genes are at the helm of many breeding programmes across the US today with llamas such as High Tower, Crocket, Merlin, Caspian, etc. leading the way.

A number of breeders having achieved good bone structure, height and neck length, seem to be now focussing on adding quality fibre, especially silky fibre. I am not sure exactly why but I assume to
produce a multi-purpose llama that as well as making it fit for purpose is easier to maintain and produce a fibre that looks good and there is a demand for.

Figure 2 - Silkie Fibre

The question I am asking myself in helping me to determine future direction is to what extent is this a base for going forward and how much of it a trend. How much of it is for the show ring and how much of it for the benefit of the llama species as a whole. Will the llama of the future be tall, with a triangular shaped head, long neck and silky fleece and a new X-factor or will it flip and voluminous fleece, roman noses, for example, be back in demand? Argentines, despite being a firm favourite of mine, do appear to be falling out of favour to the extent there are so few 100% Argentines remain and prices so low. Likewise, Miniature Llamas no longer appear to be in vogue although when I enquired as to why often heard this was because of the means used to breed this type. Perhaps a bit like the rise and fall of micro pigs in the UK.

Figure 3 - Trending head shape

So, having tasted the Argentine wine and liked it, is my palate still in need of educating so I know how to appreciate the taste of a finer, more select and subtle one?. Is there a way of bringing the Argentine wine to one of an equal standard? Is there a way to improve on the tall, silky wine or will it always be down to just a matter of taste, novelty, rarity, etc. I guess it might help if I were a drinker which I am not and no wonder a number of top llama breeders are vineyard owners!
Showing

I had already been working on developing show standards in the UK before my return visit to the US aimed at recognising the qualities and objectives of some of the breeders I had met in 2017. I felt there had to be some way of recognizing traits other than in the classic type which predominates here in the UK if greater diversity were to be encouraged and possibly new owners attracted to keeping them. Influenced by the Alpaca fraternity here in the UK which can boast quality on a par with anywhere else in the world, I was moving towards introducing classes, standards and scores for fleece coverage, volume and quality.

Talking to judges in the US, I detected quite marked differences of opinion. Historically, categorisation into manageable numbers at shows had been determined by fleece - heavy, light, etc. wool. There were some who felt this inappropriate and campaigned for categorisation along breed type, believing there was, for example, an approximate genotype for Argentines that justified their place in a separate category. This would allow for type specific features such as head shape to be introduced into the scoring. There were some judges who said it was as good as impossible to judge a young light wool against an elderly one and so sought more age divisions. Some wanted fleece types to be totally disregarded and judgements made on confirmation only. Fleece competitions, on and off the animal could be run in parallel, after all, so long as the animal was healthy it did not really matter what they looked like. I guess it will and should always be an evolving set of criteria and standards. I think what is important for show judging is that it should reflect first and foremost, what are important traits for llamas, ignore what are likely to be passing fads and dissuade breeders from trying to achieve what some may see as attractive features to see in llamas but not necessarily desirable from a health and welfare point of view. I am not aware of any such traits yet, that we have seen in the dog and poultry world for example, but one way of discouraging them would be to score them down in the show ring. To ignore them and just focus on other but desirable traits would do nothing to discourage them. I could not help but think from listening to the judges’ comments at Cloverdale that the differences between place and unplaced entries came down to preferences for a particular type – the number of times I heard ‘I liked the long stretch’!

![Figure 4 - Top Dollar - the two top seller at auction](image1)

![Figure 5 - My personal favourite](image2)

In terms of llamas fit for purpose, of course, this is tested in the Performance classes at US shows and from what I witnessed made demands on llamas beyond what I even realised they were capable
of. I was impressed by the different traits identified, the means of assessing these traits, skills and abilities by various challenges set llamas in the different classes.