

evaluating shorn suri alpacas

it's easier than you think

Article and Photos By Andy Tillman

*i*t is surprisingly easy to evaluate the fleece of a shorn suri alpaca. AOBA rules require a suri with less than three inches of fleece length to show in a conformation class. Staple length three inches or greater can show in a full fleece division. This rule is entirely in keeping with industry norms which prefer a 7 cm (2.75 inch) staple length. AOBA's 2002 rule book permits a maximum fleece length of 12 inches. This encourages shearing and is slightly more than a mill which specializes in long staple processing can handle.

Most suri alpaca breeders delay shearing their best show quality suris until their second, or even third, summer. While these over-mature fleeces may look dramatic in the ring, the weight of a twelve pound blanket of cotted fiber adds environmental stress which may lead to sub-fertility in the male, lack of milk production in the female, and lack of normal weight gain in both sexes. The fiber itself is cotted, too long to process, and has no commercial value. So why do we do this to our favorite animals?

Once breeders and judges both learn to confidently and accurately evaluate shorn suris, it is likely that more breeders will shear their animals. The conventional wisdom is that exhibitors who shear are at a disadvantage compared to those who do not. Unfortunately, this is probably true. How can judges learn to evaluate suris unless they shear themselves? The same is true for exhibitors.

As you can see from the following photographs, it is relatively easy to evaluate a shorn fleece just two months after shearing. This is easy with an exceptional fleece like the 20 micron fancy with fawn saddle (Fig. 1). The exceptional staple length of this suri has helped its second fleece gather into well formed locks in just sixty days (Fig. 2). Note the uniformity of the fleece throughout the neck, hip, barrel and britch.

Now take a look at the rose grey with his head down, eating (Fig. 3). This suri has a narrow, flat lock, with great luster. After just two months regrowth, you see the same narrow flat lock (Fig. 4). This suri showed again in full fleece just six months after being shorn and won his class. The fleece type is the same in his second fleece as his first.

This medium brown male (Fig. 5) has exceptional coverage and a bold, uniform, corkscrew lock on his neck. Despite having a much shorter staple length on the neck as the barrel, the corkscrew lock has reformed into an identifiable lock with great density just sixty days after being shorn (Fig. 6).

It is somewhat more difficult to judge a narrow twisted lock so soon after shearing, like this dense black male (Fig. 7). Look closely and you will see his barrel is forming into a pencil lock, but the neck has not yet grown enough staple length for the fleece to gather into a lock (Fig. 8). However, you



Fig. 1: 20 micron fancy

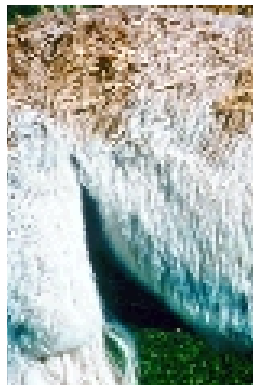


Fig. 2: 20 micron fancy
60 days after shearing



Fig. 3: Rose grey w/narrow,
flat locks and great luster

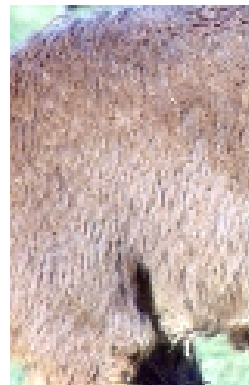


Fig. 4: Rose grey 60 days
after shearing

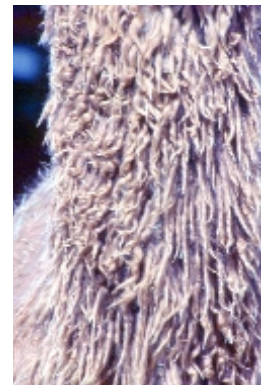


Fig. 5: Incredible coverage
and corkscrew locks



Fig. 6: Lock reformation just 60 days after shearing



Fig. 7: Narrow twisted locks in a dense fleece



Fig. 8: Density can be felt before locks reform



Fig. 9: Virgin fleece on a very fine LF female

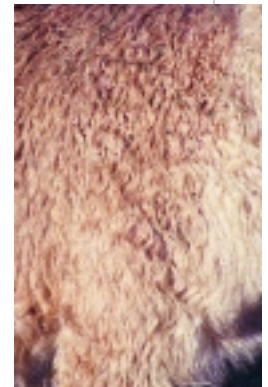


Fig. 10: Better lock formation on a second fleece

can feel how very dense the neck is on this suri. The hairs stand upright perpendicular to the skin and resist any compression on the neck. This is the suri equivalent to a dense “spongy” fleece on a huacaya.

The very fine LF female (Figs. 9 & 10) came back with much better lock on her second fleece than her virgin fleece. This is not uncommon with very fine fleeces. I did not show this female because she was locked on the surface of the fleece but not underneath where she was cotted. Yet, her regrowth came back with excellent independence of lock. We have a saying on our farm that, “You don’t really know a suri until you shear it.”

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The handsome LF male is an example of a fine, yet dense fleece (Fig. 11). His barrel came back beautifully (Fig. 12), but his neck is too short to gather into a lock and shows a lack of uniformity (Fig. 13). In this case, you are probably getting a more accurate picture of his genetic capabilities being shorn than in full fleece.

Compare the previous LF male to the MF pictured next (Figs. 14, 15, 16). His virgin fleece is well formed into a narrow, twisted lock. He has a part down the back of his neck which is indicative of good suri character. His regrowth is too short to show at just sixty days but is already forming into well defined locks with good luster, especially for a MF. By ten months, he is ready to show with a 3–4 inch regrowth over his entire body.

Some animals maintain the integrity of their lock, staple length, and handle throughout their life. This dark gray male shown with his second and third fleece is indicative



Fig. 11: Unsheared LF male with fine, dense fleece

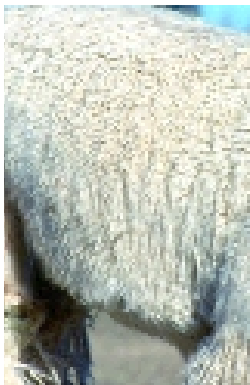


Fig. 12: After shearing, the barrel resumes locking

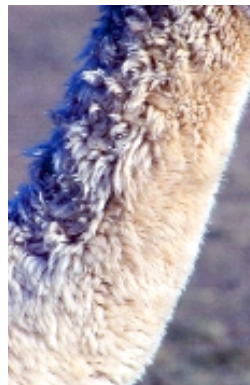


Fig. 13: Shearing can reveal a lack of uniformity



Fig. 14: Virgin fleece with narrow, twisted locks

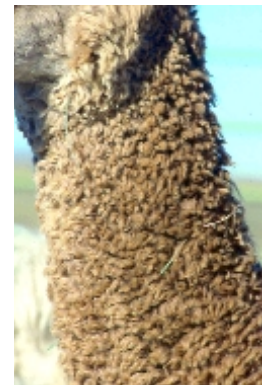


Fig. 15: Regrowth shows well defined locks & luster



Fig. 16: Ten months after shearing with 4" regrowth



Fig. 17: Second fleece on a superior dark grey male

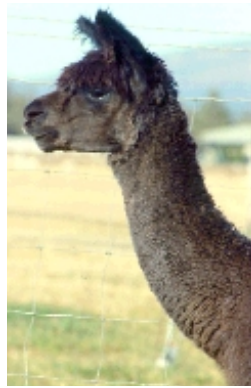


Fig. 18: Penciling on his 3rd fleece 60 days after shearing

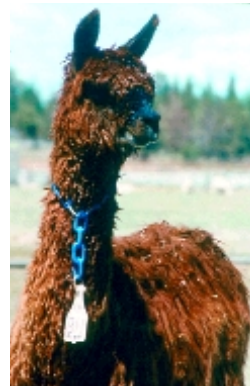


Fig. 19: Lack of staple length in a virgin fleece

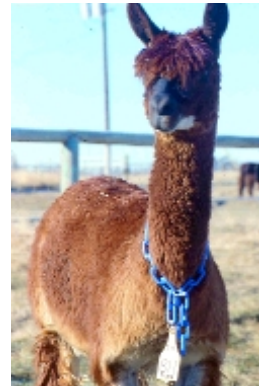


Fig. 20: Still no staple length even 5 months after shearing

of a superior animal (Fig. 17). The slick, cool handle is evident in his second fleece as is the uniformity of lock in his neck and barrel. The second photo shows penciling after just sixty days on a third fleece (Fig. 18).

Staple length is a very important component to fleece weight. It may be as important, or more important, than either density or body size. You can see that the dark brown male lacks staple length in his virgin fleece (Fig. 19), particularly in the neck, and he also lacks it five months after shearing (Fig. 20). A buyer is at no disadvantage at all evaluating this shorn suri.

With an exceptional suri, it is possible to show in full (virgin) fleece in the spring, shear after the Futurity, show in conformation classes during the summer, and show again in full fleece with a 3–4 inch staple length in the fall! It may even be a good way to stand out in a crowd of over mature fleeces.

If there is a downside to shearing a show animal, it may be that the handle of the fleece does not feel as fine as a virgin fleece. There is probably some environmental damage to the tip of the fiber from shearing, particularly when using electric clippers rather than blades (hand shears). As an experiment, I sheared one side of a suri with blades and another side with electric clippers. It took 4–5 months for the two halves of this male to feel identical. We shear nine to twelve suris an hour standing, and I don't plan on switching to blades, but there is a noticeable difference in handle between the two methods.

Conclusion

Have fun learning to evaluate shorn suris. It is relatively easy to evaluate an exceptional suri just sixty days after they have been shorn. Due to the shorter staple length on the neck, most animals will not show the same degree of lock regrowth on the neck as the barrel or hip. Any indication of locking on the neck should certainly be given credit as being a superior animal. Density can be accurately evaluated on the neck where the fibers will stand upright prior to gathering into a lock. Individual lock types can be identified within three or four months on most animals. Luster does not appear to be affected by shearing at all. A lack of luster will be seen as a "warm" chalky fleece the same as it is on a virgin fleece. Judging relative staple length in a class does take experience but is quickly learned. Older animals have noticeably less staple length than younger ones. ❖

**Andy Tillman and his wife, Dr. Cheryl Tillman, have been breeding alpacas and llamas as their primary business for 28 years. Andy and Cheryl imported Bolivian suri and huacaya alpacas in 1996. The Tillmans initiated the tradition of donating a female alpaca to the annual AOBA auction in 1996, and contributed again in 1999. Andy is a former Suri Network vice president, co-editor of Purely Suri magazine, and member of the AOBA Long Range Planning Committee.
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