

Do You Know Where You're Going?

Llamas, 1995 Herd Sire Edition

By Andy Tillman

To get somewhere, you have to know where you are going. The same is true of breeding llamas. If you have a vision of what the perfect llama looks like, then you will recognize that llama when you see it. If you are not producing this kind of llama yourself, then it will help you select that kind of llama from other breeders. It has never been more affordable to buy a true, national class llama. The reasonable prices which are being asked for these well bred animals makes it possible to selectively purchase a group of llamas that have a uniform type. A uniform type is the hallmark of a successful breeding program. This might mean having a tall, balanced llama which is 45 inches to the withers and six feet tall, or it might mean having a single color scheme like the ever popular appaloosa llamas. Or it might be a collective group of llamas which come from a single country of origin, such as Bolivia, Chile, or Peru.

Whatever your goal as a llama breeder might be, there are several ways to reach that goal, and all of them require thinking ahead to get ahead.

Archetype

An archetype is the original pattern or model after which a thing is made. In genetics, this is known as a phenotype; the genetic characteristics that are physically expressed. Identifying an archetypical llama will suggest at least one or two appropriate bloodlines to investigate, and the ranch to buy them at. During the 1980's there were a number of influential archetypes in the llama business. These included, approximately in order of their appearance: Chief Sitting Bull, Dr. Doolittle, Lopez, Eclipse, Federico, Macho Camacho and The Fiduciary. These influential studs have probably had more of their pictures clipped out and hung on the llama breeders' refrigerators than their owners will ever know. These are the archetypes.

The Distaff

An archetype can be either a male or a female llama. As breeders we often forget the importance of the distaff, or maternal side of a pedigree. Federicka was an extremely tall, rangy female that contributed the change of body type I was looking for. Lopez contributed the wool placement. They both had extremely fine wool, especially for the early 1980's. Many experienced breeders will tell you that a female llama contributes more to a cria's body type than the male. This would make the dam's body type a sex-linked characteristic. There is a precedent for this in other species of livestock. Dairy bulls have been bred for milk production for so many years that sixty percent of a heifer calf's maternal ability comes from her sire. When selecting a new stud, look closely at the dam of the sire as the sire and the paternal grand-dam. Type comes from the dam as much (or more) than the sire. If you have a favorite female, keeping one of her sons is a way to breed your entire herd to that female.

End Use

All purchases are emotional purchases on some level, even for the most pre-meditated breeder. The most important question you will ever ask yourself as a breeder is, "What am I buying this llama for?" It is important for you to identify your end use, because that will determine what the llama looks like, and even who you purchase it from. Llama uses are almost endless, and almost all of them make excellent companions. A companion animal need not be expensive or well bred. An inquisitive personality, willingness to learn and coming from a ranch that spends time with their llamas may be

much more important than how the llama looks, or what the sire's stud fee was. Keep in touch with people who enjoy your specific llama end-use, whether it be national class sales and shows, or backcountry travel. Keep in touch with like-minded people, but don't get barn blind. Show quality llamas can also carry a pack and pack llamas can stand out in a halter class.

Identify Goals

Identify goals, then go beyond them. In the mid-1970's, many of us had a goal of owning 20 female llamas. We then stopped their. Many breeders quit buying and upgrading. During the boom years of the llama business, from 1982-1990, even entry level females were still worth \$4,500-\$12,000. Breeders who did not re-invest in their herds could still sell relatively "old fashioned" llamas for extraordinary prices. Many of these breeders are having difficulty selling their llamas today. You can't just blame this on the economy or the fact that we have a llama population of 75,000 animals. These breeders had a goal. A small llama herd. Then they quit setting goals. The bottom end gets better every year. If you doubt this, come to Central Oregon and see how good looking a gelding is. Their beautiful. Keep your mind open and keep learning.

One of the most important questions you can ask yourself is this: Is your investment in llamas for business or pleasure? If it is a business, then you must re-invest in your herd to keep competitive, just like you would in any other business. If your llamas are companion animals, and you enjoy the llamas you have, don't worry. Breeding the perfect llama is someone else's idea of a good time! Just enjoy your llamas, and keep current on training and health care.

Re-invest In Your Herd

It's never been more affordable to upgrade your herd. If you sell the lower third of your herd every year, in three years you will have an entirely new herd. If you sell two or three llamas that are not quite what you want and buy one perfect (archetypical) animal to replace it with, you have accomplished much the same thing. Re-investing in your herd is an on-going process of buying animals, of continuing to fine tune your herd, or entirely changing its direction.

Upgrading your herd may sound a lot like culling, but there is a significant difference. Culling begins when the llamas you produce do not meet your expectations for either type or soundness. This is where gelding comes from. Culling is deciding not to breed a female, or gelding a male. Iris Christ made a profound observation when she told Cheryl and myself, "I don't want to breed a female just for the sake of breeding it." Only about 50 percent of the mares in the United States are bred every year. That comes as close to culling as you can get with a companion animal like a horse or llama. As important as culling is, it is not a substitute for re-investing in your herd.

Starting Over

Once you have raised llamas for a while, you may find that your taste in llamas, or even your end use, has changed. I originally purchased llamas because they were exotic pack animals. After my first couple of babies, I was hooked, and found that selectively breeding llamas was even more fun than hiking. If you change direction, it will probably be more effective to simply start over and purchase an entirely new group of llamas, than it would be to try an dup-grade your existing herd. If you enjoy showing llamas, this will probably mean trading in your 1975-1980 era pedigrees for a slightly different style of llama. Some of our best breeders have decided to start over, rather than up-grade slowly. A change of direction might mean changing from a performance class to a halter class, from a short wool to a long wool, or from a North American herd to a South American herd. One exception to this rule would be if you wanted to move

from a short wool class to a medium wool class. Simply buying a national class woolly stud, and breeding him to your short wool females, will probably produce an acceptable medium wool llama. But if you want to make a drastic change of direction, then starting over is worth considering.

Buy What You Want

When was the last time you regretted buying the best? If you buy what you want, rather than just purchase "a good buy," then you are well on your way to becoming a successful llama breeder. There is a temptation to wait for that "best buy" at an auction rather than follow a specific breeding goal, and buy from a ranch. (This often occurs near the front of an auction). If you do this, you will purchase a reasonably priced indicative group of llamas, but it might not have a specific look or theme. Ask yourself if you want a herd of llamas whose common theme is that they were good buys! The longer you raise llamas, the more often you will wait and buy exactly what you want rather than a good buy. For me, a good buy is having exactly what you want.

Hybrid Vigor

Most crias will look pretty much like you would expect them too. This logical blending of characteristics is known as regression to the mean. But sometimes it is possible to breed two dissimilar animals together, and produce an archetypical llama, even though neither parent possess the type you are looking for. This is known as hybrid vigor. As mentioned earlier, a female llama may contribute more of her body type to a cria than the sire. So it is possible to breed a smaller, woolly male to a tall, elegant female and produce a tall, woolly cria. When a test-cross produces a beneficial example of hybrid vigor, we are always pleased, but the best way to continuously produce what you want is to have as many ancestors in your pedigree look exactly like you want as possible. This will help you guarantee consistent results. When you breed dissimilar llamas together, their production may produce a throw back to either parent, and you will lose the type you are looking for. This is yet another reason many breeders prefer to start over rather than upgrade slowly.

The best known example of hybrid vigor in the llama business can be seen by studying the production of some of our well known imported males. Many of these llamas are only 38 inches tall to the wither and 240-260 pounds. Occasionally you'll find a giant who is 40 inches to the withers and 280-300 pounds. This does not mean these llamas are hybrids (the production of an alpaca/llama cross). It just means that on a macro scale, llamas are a lot smaller and woolier than we thought they were in the 1970's. Due to the founder principal, many of the llamas that I grew up with were either hybrids of the guanaco/llama which were propagated in zoos, or relatively rare examples of the non-wooly llamas. We thought this was what a llama looked like. We were wrong. In South America, llamas are about as tall as a typical American woman. This accounts for much of their popularity. Who doesn't like to look their companion in the eye? When you breed one of these small woolly llamas to a slightly taller North American body type, some interesting things happen. You usually get "The best of both worlds."

Don't tell anyone, but llama breeding is easy!

Stud Service

It is surprisingly easy to upgrade an entry level female by breeding her to a national class stud. But don't expect miracles, more likely than not you'll see a text book example of regression to the mean. But that is progress. Most experienced breeders would probably agree that the real test of a stud is whether it can upgrade a nearly perfect female, rather than stay the same or even go backwards. During the 1980's,

national class studs were so expensive that many of us chose to pay \$2,500 to \$5,000 for a stud service rather than \$100,000 for a great male. Today, a decent male can be purchased for the cost of a stud service, and a national class male costs one-third to one-fifth of what it did only seven or eight years ago. This has swung the pendulum away from stud service, and towards the purchase of a new male, or a back up male that few people could afford in the past.

The ration of cost between a stud service to the value of your cria suggests that you are probably going to keep the production of your outside breeding. If you really believe in your female, by all means book her for outside stud service. Before doing so, be sure to ask yourself, "Can you buy a llama by this male?" The same breeder you are getting stud service from probably has babies by your favorite male already on the ground. And if he doesn't, some of his previous customers will. This will put your breeding program at least 18 months ahead. (one year to have a baby, and six months to wean it.) By the time you figure what you could have sold your female's production for, and applied that to the purchase of a new llama by your favorite male, you might be surprised how little it costs to actually buy a "new" llama. And unlike stud service, you can choose the cria's sex.

Keep Your Best?

The best time to keep your own production is when you can't buy it, or can't afford it, elsewhere. It takes a very advanced breeding program to justify keeping your own production. Are you there yet?

There is one exception to this rule, and that is simply personal attachment. We have all probably kept our first baby llama, and we all have our sentimental favorites. Keeping one or two ranch favorites will not spoil anyone's breeding program and makes owning llamas personally rewarding, but it is not the fastest way to accomplish your goals. If you sell a six month old baby, and replace her with one that is 12-18 months old, you have gained six to twelve months, upgraded your herd, and added a new bloodline to your collection of llamas, while still staying within the type you have selected for. You can now depreciate that llama, which you can't with a llama you have raised yourself. There's a lot to be said for purchasing a replacement rather than raising it yourself.

Taxonomy

Taxonomy is the classification of animals into genus and species. To be a responsible llama breeder, you need to have a fairly sophisticated knowledge of taxonomy. The llama, alpaca, guanaco and vicuna all have 74 chromosomes, making them inter-fertile. In the past, to breed for a pure llama, you had to travel to South America and see for yourself what a llama looked like in their country of origin. With eleven years of imports behind us, there is a representative group of llamas in North America from which to make this assessment. If you have not visited a friend or neighbor who owns alpacas, you owe it to yourself as a breeder to study these woolly relatives of the llama. Guanacos are raised by more than twenty llama owners, and are displayed in many zoological institutions. Vicunas, being a protected species, have not been hybridized in either North or South America. If you study the llama, alpaca and guanaco, you will soon learn to identify characteristics which are unique to them. There are at least ten characteristics which differentiate a llama from a guanaco, and a dozen which distinguish a llama from an alpaca. The study of llama taxonomy is one of the many enjoyable aspects of breeding llamas. As a breeder, you have a moral responsibility to maintain both the purity and naturally occurring variation of the species.