



The Ideal Alpaca: Suri & Huacaya

By Mike Safley

The alpaca breeder's idea of type is created by their visual picture of the characteristics that are considered ideal for the breed. An ideal breed type is often based on the details of conformation and color that are not necessarily related to the economic productivity of the animals. In alpacas, examples of this might include the exotic colors or patterns, fleece coverage on the face or legs, eye color, pigmentation, or a particular style of lock or crimp.

Breeders pay attention to breed type mainly because it is, in a sense, a trademark offering additional evidence that the animal in question conforms to the ideals of the breed. For example, Don Julio Barreda says that "the heads of Accoyo's alpacas are my trademark." Breed type is a matter of beauty to the breeders who have long been breeding and admiring a particular breed. But beauty is subjective. Most of us can bring ourselves to think that any particular type is beautiful if we work with it long enough, have our money invested in it, and find it profitable. The breeders of other breeds may not share our enthusiasm for alpacas, but that will never diminish our devotion to the beauty of our animals.

Breed type often originates unconsciously with breeders who embrace the traditional animal or their perception of the ancient purity of a breed. It is easy for breeders to persuade themselves that the best animals of the alpaca breed with the purest blood are thus and so, and to believe that any deviations from that description indicate impurity. This happened, to a certain extent, in the U.S. alpaca industry with the introduction of Peruvian imports, which come primarily from a select few alpaca co-ops and ranches in Peru.

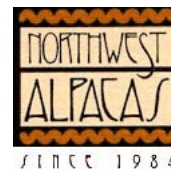
WHY IS BREED TYPE IMPORTANT?

Breeders pay attention to outward appearance or type in making their selections for two reasons. First, the breeder may want to breed a certain type because it has a market value. If a market demand exists for a certain type, the breeder may not care whether that type really will furnish the maximum production profit. The fact that the buying public wants it and is willing to pay for it is the thing of immediate practical importance. Second, breeders may believe that type and productiveness, in fleece or breeding, are closely correlated: if they select for type, they will get productivity. Type has some sale value in all classes of livestock. In extreme cases, beauty may be the main object. This is often encountered in pet and fancy stock, such as dogs, and is an important feature of horses. If breeders' customers center their demand on type, breeding for productivity becomes secondary. If breeders' customers are looking for productivity, breeders may only be interested in type if it helps them achieve productivity.

THE IDEAL ALPACA

Everyone would like to buy, breed, and sell perfect alpacas. To do that, we must first have a vivid picture of "perfect" in our mind's eye. The ideal alpaca will always be a goal that moves away as we come near. That is the way animal breeding is; founded in evolution.

First and foremost, an alpaca is a production animal. The product it creates is fleece. An alpaca's ultimate value flows from its ability to create fine, dense fleece that is coveted by the makers of luxury garments.



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It also so happens that the fleece characteristics which make an alpaca valuable are heritable. When mated properly, alpacas pass these fleece traits on to their offspring. At the end of the day, the ideal alpaca produces an elite fleece and quality cria with high breeding value. I found the following quote in the classic sheep breeding text from Australia, The Merino Past, Present and Probable, 1943, by H.B. Austin:

"If the sheepbreeder, then, goes to his woolbroker for advice; distrusts, on principle, all stud "sales talk" and other propaganda; heeds the scientist; endeavors to buy rams that will breed truly, and feeds his sheep properly, the increased profit collectively, to the whole industry, may well be 'hundreds of thousands of pounds a year.'"

If you simply substitute the word "alpaca" for "sheep" or "merino," you will begin to see what it takes to create the ideal alpaca. In other words, avoid the hype, use genetically sound selection and breeding systems, always use impact herd sires, and feed your herd correctly.

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An ideal alpaca's look begins with the head, a dense top knot, and well-covered cheeks converging with the wool cap to form a close V at the eyes, which are brown. The ears are shaped like an arrowhead and erect. The muzzle is soft and wedge shaped. The jaw should fit together correctly, with the lower incisors meeting the upper dental pad. The head and neck make up about one-third of an alpaca's height, the body makes up one-third, as do the legs. The neck connects to the shoulder at approximately a 45° angle to the back, which is straight, dropping off a bit at the tail. When the alpaca is alert, the neck and back form almost a 90° angle with the head slightly forward. The perfect alpaca has a squared off appearance, with four strong legs setting squarely under it, giving it a graceful stance which translates into a fluid gait. The ideal alpaca has a soft, dense fleece, which is completed with abundant coverage down the legs.

The alpaca's head is a window into its quality and type: both huacaya and suri. The head of the ideal suri should exhibit well-covered cheeks and a bearded chin. The suri's fleece should begin independently locking at the forehead and continue uniformly down the neck, across the body and down the legs, finishing at the toes. The head of the ideal huacaya should exhibit a dense top knot which is crimp. The cheeks should be well covered, and the bridge of the nose, clean. The crimp in the top knot should continue down the neck, across the blanket, and into the tail, finishing down the belly and legs.

The stars of any herd will catch your eye with an alert, erect appearance. Their fleece opens into well-organized locks or staples of soft, bright, and lustrous fleece, which handles like silk or cashmere. Above all, an ideal alpaca will never be mistaken for a llama.

THE IDEAL SURI FLEECE

The primary characteristic which distinguishes a suri from a huacaya is the phenotype of its fleece. The suri's fleece falls close to the body, moves freely, and gives the animal a lustrous, flat-sided appearance. The luster found in the suri's fleece is the primary indication of the animal's quality. In addition, the fiber should be fine, and have good handle (a more slippery handle than huacaya) with a well-nourished, almost greasy feel. The locks or ringlets that make up the fleece should be round, form close to the skin,

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and have uniform twist to the end. Ideally, the style of lock should be uniform from the top knot to the hock; particular attention should be paid to uniformity and independence of lock across the mid side. The legs and underbelly should be well covered.

A more rounded or fluffy appearance can indicate volume rather than density in a suri's fleece which is undesirable. There should be no crimp in the staple, but a low wave is desirable along the length of an individual fiber. Due to the compactness of the fleece, suris often give the appearance of being smaller than the huacaya, but this is an optical illusion. The suri should be every bit as big and robust as a huacaya. Think of the ideal suri as producing a curtain of silk to grace its sturdy frame. Suri alpaca fiber is woven into cloth and made into coats or jackets that exhibit a warm, luxurious luster.

The suri's locks should have a well-defined architecture, which relates to the degree of twist or curl and the solidity in the lock. Locks should be compact, independent (swinging out freely from the skin when the animal is in motion or the fleece disturbed), uniform, and start close to the skin. Locks may be twisted, curled, or penciled and should start from the forelock and continue through to the hocks. Spirals in the locks may twist from either left or right. Locks can be with or without a wave which should not be confused with crimp, which is a fault. A suri, when compared to a huacaya of similar age and fiber micron size will have a longer lock (staple in huacaya) in the fleece. The locks should hang straight and hug the body, giving a curtain like appearance. When the fleece is opened, the inside locks should be as well-formed as the outside layer and exhibit luster at their base.

THE IDEAL HUACAYA FLEECE

The ideal huacaya's fleece should be: fine, dense, uniform, and grow perpendicular to the skin. The fleece, which grows from individual follicles in the skin, should be made up of defined staples of crimpy "bundled" fleece. These bundles should organize themselves into staples which create a dense presentation across the animal. The huacaya alpaca should be well covered with a soft, uniform fleece, except on the ears and the bridge of the nose of mature animals. The muzzle and ears should be soft to the touch. The elite alpaca has a well-defined crimp in their top knot, which continues down the neck, into the blanket the belly, and on to the tail. There should be very little medulation. The fleece should be well-nourished, exhibit a brightness or sheen, and be void of dull, dry, chalky fiber. The ideal huacaya will produce fleece as soft and as fine as cashmere. Huacaya alpaca is spun into luxury garments that can be worn close to the skin.

Study the pictures of the suri and huacaya alpacas that appear in this journal. Examine the pictures of their fleeces. Burn these images on your mind and make them part of your quest when you search for or work to breed the ideal alpaca. Always remember that an alpaca is valuable for both, its fleece and its ability to produce excellence in its progeny.