

In My **Opinion**

What is the Suri class SUPPOSED to be?

by Debi Garvin

A lot of discussion is still taking place at shows, on chat lines and at all llama gatherings regarding the "new suri llamas" and the recently formed ALSA class. This year, ALSA emphasized that the suris not only have lock structure to the skin, but the fiber must have no crimp or loft. Although the new definition fits well for the suri huarizos (which have been promoted and registered as suri llamas), it eliminated most if not all **true llamas** with suri fiber (those who do not carry the alpaca suri gene).

The "traditional llama" with suri fiber is well represented by King Crimson of East Fork Ranch, JLL M'Halo of Juniper Lane Llamas and Silluette of Hinterland. These animals are a result of several generations of selective breeding. JLL M'Halo was the 2004 Western Regional Grand Champion Suri Male, Top 10 suri male at the 2004 ALSA Nationals, and second in his heavy wool class at the 2002 ALSA Grand National. In addition to his obvious llama body type, M'Halo also possesses traits common to the traditional llama with suri fiber. According to his owner, Sherry Halligan, "M'Halo displays more lock structure and suri characteristics than **either parent**. Neither of his parents would be considered "suri", although his sire, LW Marcellus exhibits some "ropy type fiber" on his neck. Silluette of Hinterland is also typical of the traditional llama with suri fiber, exhibiting a true llama body type and more suri characteristics than either parent.

Silluette is an ALSA Halter Champion, has earned her ROM (obtained showing in nonsuri wool classes), was second in a class of 75 females at Celebrity, and was 2004 Western Regional Reserve Champion Suri Female and placed 2nd in the 2 yr Suri Female class at the ALSA Grand National. According to Kay Patterson-Sharpnack, neither of Silluette's parents have suri fiber, although Whist (her sire) has produced a number of "suri fiber type" get. However, both these Champions exhibit some crimp and/or loft and thus would not qualify as "suri" under the now stricter enforcement of the suri fiber criteria.

The "new suri llama" (which many are promoting as "true suri") appears to be the result of a cross between llamas and suri alpacas. Virtually ALL of these animals have one parent of "unknown ancestry." In the "suri llamas" with known ancestry, one can trace back and find that the first "greyhound body type llama with suri fiber" is the result of a breeding with at least one "unknown ancestor." Notice that they all have a similar "look and body style", which happens to coincide with the sudden appearance of suri fiber. Looking through many catalogs and magazines, I find it often difficult to differentiate between the suri alpaca studs being advertised and the "suri llamas" (the huarizo type currently being heavily marketed). Phenotypic changes this significant, and

over numerous unrelated bloodlines, do not occur in a single generation unless there is a common element. The abrupt change in phenotype is quite similar to crossbreeding horses and donkeys, which produces an easily identifiable offspring – the mule.

Due to previous problems and admitted screening errors, the ILR has placed a moratorium on screening and registering imports until 2008. It is not a secret that many suri huarizos have passed ILR screening and have been registered as llamas. Interestingly, these all appear to be the same phenotype, the one currently represented in the suri classes (slab sided and narrow with low tail sets), and mandated as the present criteria set forth by ALSA."



This year, due to the enhanced and more closely enforced criteria, suri classes are comprised primarily of the

huarizos mentioned above who have been registered as suri llamas. One will be hard pressed to find a true llama with suri fiber (one with no suri alpaca genes) that does not have at least a little crimp and loft. Therefore, ALSA has rewarded the practice of crossbreeding and unethical registrations by eliminating “real” llamas from competing in these classes.

It is well documented that the suri alpaca gene is an autosomal dominant gene. Alpacas have no “in-between” coat types – they are either suri or huacaya. Llamas, however, possess a wide range of coat types with differing amounts of crimp, loft, and lock structure. One has only to look at the fiber of the offspring and/or parents (not to mention body type) of the suri huarizo to determine whether or not they are carrying the suri alpaca gene. Although the 3rd and 4th generation huarizos are beginning to display many more llama characteristics than their ancestors, the fiber is still clearly an alpaca suri fiber.

The suri class fiasco is just one of the shortsighted moves by the ALSA BOD which benefit only a select few. Unfortunately, those select few happen to have the most money and obviously the most influence. As long as the show circuit rewards unethical behavior and fads, we will never have consistency. In the early days of the “suris”, several judges who were themselves breeding,

and/or importing these animals consistently put these huarizos at the top of their class although they were not as conformationally correct as the “regular” llamas. These judges became branded by many of us as “fiber” judges, often disregarding conformation and placing animals based on their personal preference (and possibly financial gain). Newer judges, wanting to “play the game”, simply followed suit.

The show circuit (regardless of which one it is) must employ judges of the highest ethics and accountability. Many of the “old school” judges have either retired or simply turned in their ALSA judging licenses, primarily due to the politics and pressures of the show association – much, which resulted from the suri issues. As such, ALSA has lost its most valued resource – the experienced, unbiased judges. That, combined with the efforts of recent BODs and judges committees to legitimize huarizos is compromising many long-standing reputable breeding programs. Somehow, we must find a way to getback to basics – llamas with elegance, style, and outstanding conformation. To do this, we must find a way to bring the older, most experienced judges back and also utilize their vast knowledge in training new judges. The suri class should be defined by llama suri standards (requiring lock structure to the skin but allowing some crimp and loft), instead of by alpaca suri

standards. Also extremely important is the continuation of llamas being judged upon the original judging criteria, which is based solely on soundness and conformation, not monetary gain or fads.

Debi Garvin has a Masters of Science Degree in Animal Science with emphasis in Population Genetics and Animal Breeding from New Mexico State University. During her High School and College careers, she served on numerous 4H and FFA judging teams, gaining a critical eye and invaluable experience in how and why animals are placed in competitions. She has been breeding and raising various animal species (including horses, dogs, rabbits, sheep, pigs, goats and llamas) all her life, and currently raises llamas, Boer goats and Pembroke Welsh Corgis under the farm name Cabernet Creek Farms. She owns and bred the 1999 ALSA National Grand Champion, Cabernet's Pinot Blanc, and most recently the 2005 Western Regional Grand Champion MW Male and Grand Champion HW Female. She considers herself a small breeder, with 10-15 cria born yearly. Professionally, Debi is President of Pacific Rim Consulting and Director of the West Coast Quality Training Institute, providing consulting, auditing, and training services to pharmaceutical, animal health and pesticide manufacturers and research laboratories. She was the President of the Society of Quality Assurance, a multinational non-profit organization, and sits on the editorial board of the QA Journal.

“ALSA has lost its most valued resource – the experienced, unbiased judges.”

