

# Chew on This!



# Let's Level the Playing Field

By Cheryl A. Cave

Several years ago when I first heard Garth Brooks' song "I'm Much Too Young to Feel this Damn Old," I thought I had surely found my theme song. However, with some somber reflection I had to admit that I was old enough to feel this damn old. We've all heard and espoused the clichés such as "you're as young as you feel" or "age is only in your mind." But when I attempt physical activities, my mind tells me that I'm not only old, I'm nuts. This is especially true when I compete in llama or alpaca performance classes.

To be honest, one of the first things that attracted me to camelids was the ability to interact and compete in performance classes. Prior to owning llamas I raised and showed Arabian horses. My late husband and I were always contenders, but to win the really prestigious or meaningful competitions, you had to hire a respected and renowned trainer to ride your horse. The more respected the trainer, the higher your horse placed, but also the cost went through the roof. I wanted to be able to show the animal myself and still have a good chance at placing. When watching llama performance classes at the Fort Worth Stock Show, I found what I'd been looking for, an area in which I could compete on an equal level without having to have Bill Gate's income. This had every

appearance of being something that, if I read the rules and really practiced, I had a good chance of doing well. It certainly didn't appear to be as political. What I didn't realize at the time was that there was another factor to consider...physical ability of the handler.

I'm in reasonably good physical condition for my age, but I am not at a level of conditioning that is equal to that of someone twenty or thirty years younger. I can perhaps jump

---

**But when I attempt physical activities, my mind tells me that I'm not only old, I'm nuts.**

---

the jumps and climb the bridges, but I will certainly lose sleep due to the resulting muscle and joint pain. In fact, by the time I've pushed myself to compete in the first two performance classes, I am no longer agile or fluid for my performance in the third

class, even if I've only entered one animal.

Regardless of how well or poorly I place, I do have a blast doing it. But wouldn't it be nice to come home with some substantial ribbons to keep me encouraged as I endure two or three days of aches and pains made all the merrier by the essence of Ben-Gay that permeates the air around me?

As I look around at the exhibitors at the llama and alpaca shows I attend, I observe that the majority of the participants are 40-something. I've often wondered why so many of this age group are "into" showing camelids. I think that probably, like me, they are empty-nesters (or almost empty-nesters) who finally find themselves with a little spare time and disposable income. Regardless of age, these are people who love spending time with their animals and like showing them off to their colleagues.

I certainly understand that the prevailing ALSA classes and rules were established after much discussion and consideration, and I applaud their early efforts. I understand that the performance classes, especially obstacle and pack, were designed to replicate conditions one might experience while hiking/packing with llamas. I understand that some of these more difficult obstacles are designed



to illustrate the mutual trust and respect between animal and handler. However, I think the folks who put this together had done little hiking with the "older" crowd. If they had, they would have learned that this "over 40" crowd didn't reach this age by jumping off bridges, climbing through bushes, and jumping obstacles; they did so by planning ahead and making wise choices. Sure, once in a while we had to jump or climb, but if we did that once, we took an alternate route the next time. All of this is just to point out that the original rules were a good starting place, but not developed out to their full potential. I've often thought it was ironic that the only age divisions for performance classes are for the young people. I seriously doubt that my maturity and life experience give me an advantage over a 14-18 year old competitor in performance, though it might play a small role when competing with the 8-14 group! Even so, the youth and agility of these age groups probably give them the greater advantage by far. I believe it is a good idea to have classes for these age groups, but I also feel they should be restricted to these classes.

I would like to encourage the show associations to consider adding performance classes that offer age group divisions that help to level the playing field for our mature exhibitors. The obstacles for these classes could be designed with the "arthritic competitor" in mind. I am aware that the performance classes take a large amount of time, and that in practical application as well as the administration it is something that would require some thought and planning. I also know that there are many quadragenarian to octogenarian camelid owners who would be happy to volunteer their time in a committee to address and design a plausible solution.



It is difficult these days to pick up a newspaper or magazine...or to tune in to television news or talks shows...without being reminded that the "baby-boomers" are becoming senior citizens. I have read that as of this year, someone is turning 65 years old every minute. Politicians are painfully aware of the power that organizations like AARP wield at election time. wouldn't it be nice if our camelid show organizations had board members who were equally aware of this changing demographic and were forward-thinking enough to address it? Those of you old enough to remember a movie called "Network" which debuted in the late 1970s will remember that Peter Finch won an Oscar for playing a network newsman who encouraged

New Yorkers to throw open their windows and scream "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any-more!" I think it's time for the "mature" camelid competitors to adopt the mantra "I'm sore as hell, and I'm not going to take it any-more!"



#### **Biography of the author:**

The first time Cheryl Cave saw a llama (outside a zoo) was in 1987 in Corvallis Oregon. While visiting Corvallis for bank software training, Cheryl was instantly drawn to a pasture of llamas owned by the Oregon State University veterinary program. From that moment, she was captivated. Cheryl and husband, Tom, began researching the llama lifestyle, reading everything they could find and visiting llama farms across the country. In 1998 they purchased a home with acreage and bought their first two llamas. By the end of that year, their herd was up to twelve, and by 2002 the herd size exceeded 60. Cheryl became actively involved in many facets of llama care, shearing and consulting professionally. She often attended surgeries and procedures at the local veterinarian's office. In 2001 Cheryl traveled to Chili to select and import several Argentine llamas. She has enjoyed a great deal of success in the show ring, with a national champion and several ALSA hater champions to her credit. Cheryl is currently writing a book intended for new llama owners. She also writes a column for an international software publication.