

U.S. EXPERTS GO INTERNATIONAL: Stachowski & Reed help celebrate tenth anniversary of Blenheim Alpacas, U.K., with alpaca education

by Mike Coghlan

Prologue: I first decided to start out as an alpaca breeder in 1997. During the year, I had received an offer for my small manufacturing business which no one in their right mind could have refused, and had thus ceased employment and with it also lost the fear of being unable to pay the monthly bills. I had also reached my 60th birthday. Having at that time eight acres of land around our house, Blenheim Cottage, I decided that I could now afford to look at buying a few alpacas as a hobby and started visiting potential sources in the U.K. Readers will probably know the feeling; "They cost how much!?" being the first of many exclamations. Passing right through this phase, I moved on to selecting six female Chilean Huacayas from the main importer to the U.K. at the time. Before these were delivered to our hastily fenced paddock, I decided to visit Peru for the 3rd Festival of the South American Camelid.

Having bought my air tickets and planned my trip, imagine my delight when my younger son, visiting my elder daughter in Australia, rang me. "Guess what, Dad; I am getting married in Brisbane this month." Instant change of plans, but the trip meant going the other way around the world, ending in Arequipa just in time. At once I was plunged into a completely different world, in which the alpacas I was seeing bore little resemblance to those I had already bought. In addition, my deep ignorance of the criteria I should be using from now on hit me like a sledgehammer.

Two things happened there in Arequipa which, although I did not

know it, would have a major impact on my future with alpacas. The first was that I decided to take up the offer of a crash course in judging from Dr Julio Sumar. The second was that I



Dr. Anthony Stachowski gives dentition demonstration.

met, very briefly, Dr. Anthony Stachowski, a veterinarian from Ohio who was clearly very much at home in the world of Peruvian Alpacas. I put his card in my wallet. That is what is meant by the term "from little acorns." Incidentally, I also met Don Julio Barreda, and he showed me his show pen of Accoyo stock. More seed was thus sown, and inevitably more food for thought acquired.

So I returned home full of ideas, and our first two seasons of breeding went by. More male cria than female arrived, which seems to be the pattern, at least if the herd is small and new. I did not see a single alpaca in England which looked much like those I had seen in Peru, although on a visit to Australia I found that several of the breeders I met there were already bringing in Peruvian alpacas, and these were well in advance of what we had at home. Then in spring 1999 another chance changed our course. My wife, Kate, who is a classical flute player and also professor of

flute at the Royal Academy of music in London, was invited to stand in for one semester at Bloomington, the music school of Indiana University, as one of her professorial colleagues there was taking a sabbatical.

I accompanied her, and thus was able to arrange a visit to Anthony Stachowski, whose card I was still carrying. After calling him by phone, I drove from Bloomington to his farm in Mantua, Ohio, and there found a herd of about 150 really beautiful huacayas, much more like those I now hoped to breed. Anthony showed me a great deal more about the features I should be looking for and then stunned me by saying that he had recently brought an import of 300 Peruvians, including a small number of Accoyos, into Canada and that the sale day was to be in a fortnight's time. This happened to be a week after I was due to be home in the U.K.

So followed another long drive, this time from Bloomington to Orangeville, Ontario, where Anthony met me and showed me the Peruvians on offer. Again I was shaken by the amount I still needed to learn about alpaca quality, to the extent that I felt bound to ask Anthony if he would select two males and ten females for me, explaining as he did so why he had chosen them. There is only one word for this process, and it is trust.

I can truly say that my instinct to trust the vendor in this case was well founded, and eventually, after a further nine months quarantine on David and Nancy Stewart's farm in Ontario, no less than 17 Peruvian alpacas, including three stud males, ten breeding females and four cria born in quaran-

tine, arrived at London Heathrow and immediately after passing the U.K. veterinary inspection, came by truck to our own paddocks. These were the very first Peruvians to enter our country for many years, if not ever, and the omens were enhanced as the sun went into an almost total eclipse as we were loading them at Heathrow. The chief triumph was CPeruvian Accoyo Albus, number 101, (we gave him the herd name of Don Carlos). This great white male proved to be the foundation of our herd's genetic distinction. Three pregnant Accoyo females completed the group.



Mary Reed provides instruction on fleece preparation for showing and processing.

The 2007 Blenheim Alpacas event.

In 2007 we entered our tenth year of breeding, by which time we were managing a herd of more than 100 huacayas and had enjoyed a string of show successes in the U.K., where our industry is now firmly established and flourishing. I decided to hold a spring event, principally for the enjoyment of my own clients. At once I thought of inviting Anthony Stachowski and his partner, Mary Reed, to come over and be the star attraction, as I knew all my clients would be keen to share some of their special expertise and enthusiasm. I hoped in this way to repay a little of what I owed both to Dr. Stachowski and to my own clients.

This was to take place here in South Oxfordshire on 13th April, which proved to be a beautiful sunny day. On the previous evening Anthony had met with six practicing veterinarians from our local practice, Larkmead Vet. Group, and had generously shared his experience of alpaca medicine and practice with them, with particular emphasis on castration technique and the care of dentition. All of our vets are by now experienced in alpaca care, and this extra insight was much enjoyed by all.

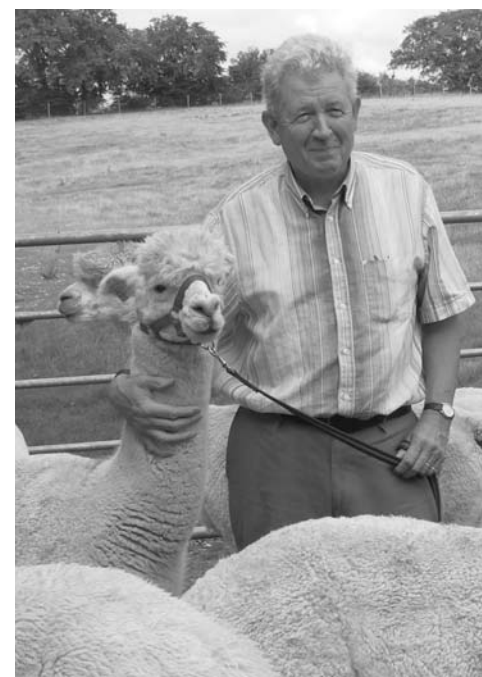
On the day of the event about sixty invited guests enjoyed expert presentations on conformation, general and wide-ranging discussions about all manner of alpaca matters from Anthony, and also Mary's detailed and enthusiastic instruction on fleece preparation for showing and for processing. Then followed a hog roast for lunch and afterwards plenty of opportunity for all to meet our visitors and ask innumerable questions. I can safely say that the whole event was a huge success and very much enjoyed by all, judging from the number of enthusiastic letters we received afterwards.

The fact that after well over 20 years in the forefront of the international alpaca scene Anthony's enthusiasm is just as unbounded as when I first met him must be one of the key reasons for the success of our one-day event. Mary too appears to be completely tireless and just as dedicated. I hope that we will be able to repeat this event in a larger format next year and give a larger audience the benefit of hearing more from these two experts, both of whom are outstanding ambassadors for our industry.

As a sad footnote, the great Don Carlos died suddenly of a perforated ulcer last summer. He left a legacy of

having twice won the Sire's progeny Shield at the B.A.S. National Show, and also a host of splendid sons and daughters. To my immense pleasure, our younger herdsire, EPCambridge Accoyo Cajamarca, imported from Australia in 2004, carried off this year's Sire's progeny Shield in his turn. Indeed, sires owned or bred by us have now won four out of the last six BAS progeny events.

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