

In **My** *pinion*

What has caused the quality of judging to deteriorate?

by Dale Peterson, Birmingham, Alabama

What's become of the ALSA we used to know? ALSA shows used to be fun. The camaraderie with friends meant just as much as winning a ribbon. By and large, exhibitors felt they received a fair evaluation in the show ring. They could "size up" the animals in any given halter class and make a fairly accurate determination of class placings. When the judge gave oral reasons to explain class placings, the reasons made sense. They matched the animals being described. Even if their animals didn't place, exhibitors left the ring feeling their llamas had been judged by a knowledgeable, competent judge without bias.

These days, my wife, Kathy, and I rarely exhibit at ALSA shows. From what I can tell, a lot of others attend fewer shows than in the past, or they don't attend any. Winning, placing or losing at an ALSA show doesn't carry the significance it once did. From what I hear, most who attend shows choose them with care. The first criterion is the judge and whether or not (s)he is consistent and fair.

In the past, because of their knowledge and skills, judges would make like or similar placings in any given class. Not so today. Many of you have noticed this and have complained to each other. You also realize it does no good to complain to the ALSA board of directors. Whether on the judges' committee or board of directors, many judges take care of their circle of friends at the expense of ALSA's reputation and

members. To a large degree, integrity in judging has fallen by the wayside. So, winning or losing at any given ALSA show carries little significance. The likelihood that another ALSA judge would do the same placing on the same animal – even at the same show - is now unlikely.

As an example, use the ALSA quad show held at this year's Spring Celebrity sale. Four judges, judging the same animals, in most cases had four different sets of placings. This would not have been so bad if each judge had used the same llamas in the top end of the class and the same llamas in the bottom end of the class. That's not what happened. There were too few similarities among the judges. If you take the time to examine results from other shows with multiple judges, you will find more of the same.

Where's the consistency and fairness that exhibitors should rightly expect? What has caused the quality of judging to deteriorate? What can be done to fix the problem?

Kathy and I originally earned our judges' credentials over 15 years ago. And, we really did have to earn them. I still remember giving oral reasons over and over again to Dr. Bill Able at two o'clock in the morning. He made the students do them until they got them right. Kathy and I took a sabbatical from llamas and judging for about six years when our

son died. When we returned to llamas and to llama judging, we had to take a refresher course (advanced judging clinic) to get recertified. There were 10 or 12 people in this class and most were there for re-certification. I did OK, and finished second in the class, but I do not think that I did well enough to pass. Kathy finished first in the class. In my opinion she's the only one who should have passed. Not the case; everyone passed. I suppose that should have given us a hint of the quality (or lack thereof) of ALSA's judges' training program.

It seemed then and now that no one has the courage to tell people that they do not have what it takes to be an



ALSA judge. Not only do they not tell them, they promote them. Today people are elevated to a higher level of judging and placed on the judging committee not because of their abilities, integrity, and keen sense of justice, but because of

the perceived benefits the elevators might obtain in another organization where these persons may have some influence. How sad that all the hard work that many hundreds of people have done over the years to create ALSA is being sacrificed for the benefit of a few. It casts a dark shadow over the handful of judges who are competent and do not play favorites in the show ring

To fix the ALSA judging system would take a board of directors and a judges' chairperson with backbone, integrity and the ability to get things done. The chairperson needs to be respected as a judge, a leader and possess unquestionable integrity. He/she must be respected as a person who will make the tough decisions for the good of all, not the good of a few. Personal agendas must be set aside! That is what it would take to assemble a great team of judges who would be respected by the llama community and would bring back the pride people once had in being a member of ALSA.

If recent history is an indicator, do not expect that to happen or expect any kind of real quality control for judges. Do not expect anyone from the judging committee to be sitting in the audience

observing the judges to see if they are adhering to the rules and not giving preferential treatment to their friends - and most of all seeing if the judge in the show ring has the ability and integrity to continue to occupy a judge's position. Until the ALSA judging system in particular and ALSA in general are completely overhauled with the goals of integrity, fairness and strict standards for judges, there will be little value in winning at an ALSA show. Admittedly, persons of integrity, drive and a sense of fair play are often unpopular; they just get the job done. So, which matters most: popularity and status quo, or less popular and a great ALSA organization?

Kathy and I received an email from the chairman of the ALSA judges committee on June 12, 2005, addressed to Judges and Apprentices. The first paragraph reads, "As you know, the BOD is requiring that all judges who do not have fiber training (either fleece judging or alpaca judging) attend a fiber seminar. This seminar is designed to help provide you with the tools to make judgments about proper placement of llamas in the various wool divisions."

If the chairman is remotely referring to suri fiber training, then he must have realized the brief overview, accompanied by a page of true/false questions and some photos of various kinds of suri fiber mailed to all judges last summer to make them proficient in judging suri fiber, wasn't going to cut it.

Nonetheless, judges, armed only with this mail order training, performed suri fiber judging throughout the year and at the 2004 ALSA Grand National. Of the three judges at the 2004 Grand National, only two had some training in judging alpacas and fleece in an ALSA show, but none are qualified to judge alpacas or fleece at an AOBA show. Wonder why?

In other livestock industries, including the Alpaca industry, individuals take great pride in their animals' winning show records. Winning in the show ring makes the animals more valuable and is a great marketing tool. ALSA can be returned to this stature if proper judges' training, leadership and fairness for all are reinstated.

Food for thought.....there is some reason why the Alpaca folks pulled away from ALSA and trained their own judges.

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