

INTERVIEWS

WITH EXHIBITORS AND JUDGES

by Dolores Gardner

Raising llamas for the past twenty years has been one of my most enjoyable experiences. My husband, Donley, and I had equal interests in these unique animals. When we obtained our first one in 1986, Donley said, "I will have these, but I will NEVER go to any shows. Don't ask me; I won't go!" His perception of llama shows was based on dog shows. He felt dog shows were rife with politics and did not want involvement in another show association.

We attended shows as observers for several years and in 1994 we attended our first show as exhibitors. We loved the atmosphere, camaraderie and just plain fun. The judges seemed fair and apolitical. Our decision to attend a show was not based on the judge or the location of the show. We knew we would be judged without prejudice and traveled as far away as Florida, Colorado, Kansas and Tennessee. We wanted to validate our breeding program by showing in shows outside our "normal" circuit.

The number of sanctioned shows grew. In Texas alone, the show count tripled. With the growth of shows came new judges. And, oh, what a difference!

Our show association, ALSA, was founded by judges who were trying to get llamas the kind of recognition as other livestock with shows. They had the same basic tenets for judging and taught clinics the same. Conformation was the basis for all judging. Somewhere along the line, that changed.

One of my first interviews was with L, a judge. She attended an advanced clinic in which fiber was stressed as part of the judging criteria. She was appalled by this as were the other attendees, but none would speak up against the instructor. Why? They were all afraid they wouldn't pass the clinic if their views weren't the same as the instructor's. I heard this same kind of comment from several other judges.

Another interview with B, a judge, told me this: "I don't agree with much of what is taught, but I keep my mouth shut. I say what they want to hear, pass the clinic and go out and judge the way I want. Nobody's ever done anything to stop me and I keep getting asked to judge. Are they right or am I? Who knows? But, I'm going to keep doing what I've been doing until someone makes me stop and then I'll quit judging."

When the first regional shows appeared, a judge was sent to oversee the judging, to ascertain if it was fair and unbiased. The regional judges had no problem with this. They were doing what they were supposed to be doing. In 1999 a proposal was sent to the board of ALSA by three judges to institute a peer review system for the judges. The peer review system is in place everywhere: businesses, industry and healthcare. A person doing his/her job doesn't care if peer review is required. Only those who do not do the job according to the job description, care. The board NEVER responded to this group of judges, but they heard through informal channels the board felt it would make too many

judges uncomfortable and what if some of them actually quit rather than submit to peer review?

In interviewing other judges, I have heard with regularity the following comments:

There is little or no consistency among the instructors. It is difficult to change your mindset to fall in line with a particular instructor.

The material, which should be interesting, is presented in a boring way. There are almost no visual teaching aides.

The clinic didn't help me. I found it to be the same as my apprentice judging. If I could think like the teacher, I could pass.

I judge without bias and favoritism, but more and more I see other judges who don't. This makes me mad as it gives all judges a bad name. It makes me sad too for the exhibitors and the future of ALSA.

COMMENTS

from specific judges:

From J – I became a Level III judge the hard way; I earned it.

Now I see judges who come out of an advanced clinic as Level II judges and within a year petition the judges committee for Level III status and the board approves them. Why does this happen? I judged literally hundreds of llamas before I became a Level III judge and now someone can judge two or

three shows and be where I am. I can see politics rearing its ugly head and I don't like it.

From D – I wrote the chairman of the judges committee in August 2003 asking to consider me as an assistant instructor. I have years of teaching experience and years of showing and judging llamas. I have

NEVER heard a word from him, not one word. This is the same person who took nine months to tell me I was re-certified. I have to wonder why he is so responsive to some judges and not to others.

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Being a pro-active sort of person, I asked each and every one *if (s) he were the ASLA king or queen, how would (s) he fix it?* If you complain, then you must bring a solution to match the complaint.

the answers:

- All judges must be certified the same way.

Everyone must be treated equally so that the person coming out of the advanced clinic must come out as a Level I. If it is felt there are those that aren't ready, then the instructor must have the fortitude to require the students do more apprenticing, attend another clinic or whatever is needed. And, not all llama folks are suited to be judges. Some don't have the eye and won't ever have it no matter the clinics attended. Be kind to the exhibitors and do the right thing—don't pass them.

- All instructors must instruct the same material.

So, there should be a class for the instructors so that everyone teaches the same principles. In 1997 there were numerous tapes and slides to present in classes and show perspective judges winging, calf knee, sickle hock, etc. What happened to these?

- We should encourage our exhibitors to attend a clinic and we should encourage our exhibitors to host clinics. I offered to host a clinic. I heard from the education chair, “I am waiting for the board to approve your clinic.” I suppose she is still waiting, as I have heard nothing more for two years and four months.

- We should have a peer review system for our judges. Another judge usually attends most shows. I would not be opposed to this judge listening to my oral reasons, watching my placements, etc. A peer review system strengthens an organization and keeps everyone on the same page of the book. I would be happy to steer an ad hoc committee for this purpose.

- The judges committee and the board need to be more responsive to its judges and members, all of them, not just a select few.

I interviewed exhibitors from different parts of the country during this same time period. Here is what I heard about ALSA and the judging system.

M said, “We have always picked our shows based on where they are and could we get there without too much trouble. No more. We pick the show based on the judge now. There are some judges out there that we won't show under again. We know they

place fiber above conformation. We think fiber is nice, but judging fiber in a non-suri class is not appropriate.”

J said, “Three or four years ago, we made a trip to Estes Park. We had heard one of the judges was really “into” fiber, but we went anyway. We had some nice llamas and we had never picked a show based on something we had heard about a judge. In one class we placed fourth and fifth, but the animal I followed out of the

ring was so cow-hocked his legs rubbed together when he walked. I do not mind placing behind a nicer animal, but for sure neither of my boys had leg problems, but neither did they have the suri fiber as did the first three places. The suri fiber classes have helped, but that kind of thing should never happen. And, it's very frustrating as an exhibitor. A protest letter won't help; it's viewed as “sour grapes” and there is no rule as such to protest. Judges should be “policing”

themselves. It's not up to exhibitors to do this."

From T I heard, "Well, one thing is sure. There is no consistency with the judging system in ALSA. The last two times I took a particular juvenile female in the ring, the judges said, "Sorry you missed your class. She should have been in the suris." Now at this show I put her in suri, and the judge says, "Bring her back. She's not suri." So, does anybody really know? And, then, you have these guys who will push the button every time for the regular wool classes—medium in light classes and heavy in medium classes. It burns me to see this, but what is even worse, most judges won't do a thing! And, some of the guiltiest about doing this are judges! So, they'll keep doing it. Thankfully, at this show the judge had the guts to bump and if you notice it's the same people who get bumped. I'm almost to the point where I want to quit showing."

K said, "We go to shows to promote our llamas. We have no other way to promote them. We are in a part of the country where there is a big demand for horses, but not for llamas so we have to leave to sell. Our sales have come primarily from the shows. We do sell a pet quality male every now and then to a 4-H student looking for a project, but not often. I wish there was some kind of national advertising program which would bring in new people, sort of like the A people, you know? (I think she meant alpaca). We do pick and choose which llamas we show based on what we know of that judge. Does he like tall and stretchy, big and athletic, puffy or not? We should be able to bring straight llamas and have them judged. We should not have to leave nice llamas at home because it is not the "type" a particular judge likes."

I did not quote everyone I interviewed for this article. I saw no reason to state the obvious over and over. I did hear time and again exhibitors are not taking as many llamas to show as they once did and

they're not having as much fun as they once did. These two factors can have great impact on the llama community as a whole.

By not taking as many animals, shows are smaller and revenues are down for the show and for ALSA. Many exhibitors will not attend the regional shows, as they are already qualified for the national show. Plans have been submitted to the ALSA board to make the regional shows meaningful once again and still maintain the revenue needed for both the regional and national shows. The board ignored these. Now the rules allow unqualified llamas to attend the national show. So, the board has successfully diluted the regional show results in an effort to increase revenues and now they will dilute the national show results in the same manner.

A show organization exists for the exhibitors and as an avenue for promotion. From it should come increased value for our llamas. If you can advertise on a national level to a diverse target market, show results could be a valuable tool to use. They do not maintain their value if the same level can be reached by almost any llama.

I personally find that I am going to fewer shows. I also find that I sometimes pick and choose judges—not always, but sometimes. I did attend a show recently in which I knew a female I was taking would not place well because I knew the "type" the judge liked. I took her anyway. I wasn't surprised when she placed seventh in her class. She had been shown twice before and placed first in both instances. Was I upset? No, I knew going in what would happen. Had I not known, I would have been plenty upset. But, as an exhibitor I should never be placed in a position to decide whether or not to take a llama based on the judge.

I have no pat answers for the challenges in ALSA right now. I think if the board would really listen to the

exhibitors and the judges and act on their recommendations, it could be a vital force in the future of the llama industry.

I also believe any show association should conduct itself as a business. As such, it should have a one-year plan, a five-year plan and a ten-year plan. There should be no mid-year rule changes in response to some perceived wrong and the organization's goals and objectives should be reviewed yearly and revised as necessary.

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About the author:

Dolores Gardner has been a member of ALSA since the early nineties. She became an ALSA judge in 1997. She earned the Level III classification in 2001. Attending shows as an exhibitor or a judge is in her words, "Just plain fun! And, I love to look at llamas. Of course, it's more fun if the animals are straight and wonderful or if I walk out of the ring with a blue ribbon, but it's always fun. If attending shows becomes a chore or the delight in showing leaves me, then I will quit going."

She and her husband, Donley, attended as exhibitors or judges approximately 17-20 shows per year until his unexpected death in October 2003. She now finds it somewhat difficult to enter as many shows as an exhibitor, but still attends six-ten shows per year.

She lives in Daingerfield, Texas with her llama herd of 32, Bob, the dog, Mr. P, the peacock and several cats and guinea fowl.