

Boys on the Side

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Boys, boys! What to do about all the suri boys in our herds? They are all 'related' to our super suri herd sire or the very prominent studs being advertised in the magazines. After all, these boys are all sons or grandsons of Kantu, or Maximo, or Radical, so they hold no value in our breeding programs! And the suri breeder down the road has offspring from the same studs! I guess we have two choices: geld them or take them to one of the 'dumping sales' and sell them for \$500.00.

Sound familiar? Let's explore this 'problem' a bit to see if there might not be another way to think about "the boys," a way that will ultimately further the goals of our breed association *and* lessen problems for the breed in the future.

One of the stated goals of the Suri Llama Association (SLA) is to raise suri llamas to the level of breed status. To accomplish that goal, suri llamas must become uniform in phenotype and predictable in their production. What will set the suri llama apart is not its exquisite type or the occasional superior fleece, but rather its reputation for uniformity in both.

The importance of being highly selective with any male population is a necessity if suri llamas are to make the genetic gains necessary to become purebred livestock. A herdsire's genetic contribution to the herd is immense, and rapid progress can be achieved by utilizing the very best males. On the other hand, maintaining *too few* breeding males in a herd poses considerable risk to the genetic integrity of a breed still in its infancy. By culling (selling or gelding) 70-80 percent of male production based solely on their genetic relationship, breeders are inadvertently laying the foundation for an eventual genetic bottleneck, which necessitates the introduction of "new blood for the herd" down the road.

This "new blood," likely an import, and invariably a wild card, introduces many unknown factors into a carefully managed gene pool. While importations of new suri bloodlines would certainly broaden the genetic base and help avoid a genetic bottle-neck, such a proposal is short-sighted and runs counter to producing more uniformity. South American suri llamas are not bred to the high standard now expected here in the United States. As such, relying on imported animals to "infuse new blood" is akin to relying on a junkyard dog to beef-up a line of King Charles Spaniels!

It's a vicious cycle: selling too many males, over-utilizing the few that remain, and then importing a "genetic minefield" to broaden the depleted genetic base. As a breeding

program chases its tail, the suri llamas produced become less uniform, less useful, and thus less marketable. The over-utilization of a handful of males and the resulting reliance on importation to correct that blunder will not and historically has not created a healthy and viable llama business climate.

By limiting (or eliminating) the steady flow of genetic unknowns from South America and breeding SLA *keured* and registered suri llamas, can breeders begin to create predictability and sustainability in their herds. This will necessitate retaining a broader base of second and third generation breeding males to maintain adequate genetic diversity.

Breed these “boys,” in turn, to other reliable producers and –*voila!*– another crop of suri cria, sharing only 25 percent of their genes with the original herd sire, are grazing in the pasture. These incorporate all the best phenotype of familiar bloodlines while diversifying the suri genome. It is a “win-win” scenario.

Going forward, the breeder works with familiar bloodlines, *known quantities*, and can safely begin to establish a *line* of consistent producers of high quality suri llamas. In short, with each generation the breeder reshuffles genes known to “work” together without introducing genetic unknowns or continually reducing the genetic diversity by overuse of a single male.

This utilization of a broader base of males from within an already carefully selected gene pool will work toward preserving genetic viability and circuitously create more uniformity and predictability with each successive generation. *Reducing the use of imported animals and broadening the number of males used will necessitate the implementation of more intelligent breeding systems.* Even a slight shift away from the traditional “love affair” with the total out-cross will tilt the balance in favor of steadily increasing uniformity and predictability. This is the stuff of which breeds are made.

A treasure trove of untapped genetic resources is available to all breeders, and travel to South America to obtain it is *not* necessary. That treasure is to be discovered right in our own back yard in young suri llama males of proven bloodlines, most of a type exceeding the best imported animals. The time has come to realize the value of keeping a few more boys on the side.