

# Managing SLA Bloodstock

By Daniel Powell

Published in Suri Llama Magazine 2007

Every breed has a beginning, a point from which an idea, a need, or a mutation caused a breeder to take note and take action, and in so doing shape the future. The suri llama was thrust into our consciousness not many years ago. At first glance it was obvious that they were a breed apart – so much so that some of the first to appear defined what is still the pinnacle to which we aspire.

As was the fashion at that time, these magnificent animals were intended for the collective soup the American llama market had become. Soon, breeders were diluting this burgeoning breed by indiscriminately crossing them with llamas of every style and every fiber type.

## Just in the nick of time

It seemed suri llamas were to be boiled down into a tasteless silky-suri sort of bouillabaisse. Enter the SLA with its *kuering* process and its dedicated members and presto, like a phoenix from the flames, the suri llama rose from the broth to take its place among the first up-and-coming purebred llamas to set foot on this planet in hundreds of years. Throughout this process of squandering and subsequent reclamation it became clear that not only were the suri llamas too few in number, but that some non-suri llamas were of value to the suri gene pool while others seemed almost harmful to it.

Overall, the North American llama herd is a genetically rich and phenotypically diverse group. The suri llama, having been one of the more recent additions, represents a mere fraction of this group.

As such, suris are too few in number to stand alone as a viable population. For this reason the Suri Llama Association has undertaken the arduous process of recognizing and grading those animals from the general llama gene pool that are most likely to broaden the suri llama genome while further refining the type.

## To breed true

With so few suri llamas having been initially imported, the need for additional genetic variability was obvious. But also evident was the potential to create distinct, distantly related lines of suri llamas from familiar, proven lines. For many, traits like wool coverage, ear shape, wither height, and even color were reasons for the addition of

certain llamas to the suri gene pool. While these are relevant considerations when considering an animal to be used for potential bloodstock, it must be understood that such uses must be *short-term considerations only*. The ultimate goal must be to create animals that breed true, and therefore create a sustainable investment for breeders.

Before selecting a potential bloodstock animal, the suri llama breeder should be very familiar with the SLA Breed Standard. It is also very important that he be able to evaluate accurately his suri llama herd and determine whether a well-planned outcross to a non-suri will strengthen or dilute his program. If that breeder determines, for example, that his suri animals are lacking in wool coverage, or density, or wither height, then introducing some scrupulously chosen non-suri animals may very well be a worthwhile investment.

However, arbitrarily breeding a suri stud to a plethora of low-grade non-suri females in the hopes of mass-producing suri llamas will result in devaluing the national suri herd and the suri llama breed in every regard.

The function of SLA *keured* bloodstock is to choose animals that will increase the quality of the suri llama and at the same time create a genetically viable self-sustaining population.

### **Overcoming the unknown**

Little is known about suri inheritance, particularly when it comes to this allele's interaction with the varied fiber characteristics prevalent in the current North American llama population. It is apparent, however, even in the F1 generation, that the expression of some traits like presence of forelock, fiber density, leg wool coverage, and staple length can be positively affected by an outcross to a carefully chosen non-suri that positively expresses these traits.

It is possible that many non-suri animals actually carry alleles that *hamper* the expression of the ideal suri fleece, or suppress it completely. For this reason, the SLA allows only those non-suri llamas that have produced a *keured* suri offspring to be admitted into the database as bloodstock. With the understanding of suri inheritance still in its infancy, the use of bloodstock should be limited to special circumstances, such as an improvement to phenotype or the introduction of a necessary new bloodline. As the breed becomes more developed, the bloodstock component will by necessity become more restrictive.

### ***Keuring*: revealing the essentials**

The *keuring* process of inspection used by SLA has been adopted from the Dutch inspection of warm-blood horses. As such, it is intended to be an aid to breeders in their breeding decisions that serves well beyond what a mere show-ring judgment might

offer. The *keuring* process makes traits quantifiable against a written standard. The bloodstock animal who has been a consistent producer of high quality suris is accredited as such and is worth a premium in the suri marketplace.

Bloodstock plays a critical role in the foundation of the suri llama breed. Improperly implemented, however, the use of bloodstock has potentially far reaching and detrimental effects. As we move forward in our understanding of what will produce the best suri llamas, we must remember to choose bloodstock for traits that push suris ever closer to the *ideal* as set forth by the breed standard. Whenever possible, of course, suri breeders will breed suri to suri, but when the use of a non-suri animal is indicated, that llama should be selected for the pedigree—as the introduction of quality new blood is their primary function.

### **Obligation to the breed**

Finally, it cannot be overstated that in the selection of bloodstock, special attention must be paid to the quality of their suri offspring—as this is ultimately the ‘proof in the pudding.’ The suri llama is emerging as a pure breed llama the likes of which has not been known for centuries. It is our obligation to see that the process is accomplished with forethought, knowledge and the best of intentions. The following checklist may serve as a helpful summary and guide.

#### **The role of SLA Bloodstock:**

- Genetic diversity
- Valuable traits (color, wool coverage, ...)
- Creating new lines of distantly related suris
- It’s short-term role

#### **Selection:**

- What to select for (style, type of fiber, conformation...)
- What to avoid (silky, medium wool, light bone, bad temperament ...)
- Introduction of specific valuable bloodlines
- Importance of selecting bloodstock from among your best male and female producers

#### **Genetics:**

- Why some might be more reliable suri producers (suri suppressor, etc.)
- Why some might consistently produce suris with better fiber (a “base fiber” phenotype)
- Will they “dilute” the suri gene?
- When to breed suri to suri, and when to use bloodstock.

#### **The *kuering* process:**

- How the kuering process aids in selection of bloodstock
- How the kuering process adds value to bloodstock
- Marketing bloodstock

**Conclusion:**

- Bloodstock plays a critical but limited role in the foundation of this new breed.
- Breed suri to suri whenever possible.
- Bloodstock is intended to improve suri quality and genetic diversity, not just increase the number of mediocre suris.