

The Argentine

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This is a very exciting time to be involved with llamas. Since joining the llama community just five years ago I have seen so much change, and by far most of what I have seen has been for the good. There has been a shift from the trend chasing, chaotic breeding free-for-all that once prevailed towards a more focused, more sophisticated, and more ethical approach to llama breeding. I have witnessed the genesis of groups like the American mini Llama Association (AMLA), the Suri Llama Association (SLA), and the Argentine Llama Aficionados (ALA), as well as the burgeoning of a group devoted to Classic Llamas. Very exciting stuff!

When I first stepped onto the “llama scene” I was dismayed by what I saw. With my education in genetics, background in animal husbandry, and passion for breed development and breed preservation I was disheartened by the rampant out-crossing and “mix and match” approach that the typical llama breeder employed. Few breeders seemed to appreciate the value of breeding like to like. Fewer still appreciated the usage of such well established practices as line breeding and upgrading. While it was immediately clear that llama breeders studied the pedigrees of their charges, few seemed to even have a handle on what truly constituted “a line.” It was as if llama breeders existed in a vacuum, isolated from all other livestock industries as well as from the breadth of knowledge these industries had to share.

With the advent of ALA, SLA, and AMLA this is all about to change. The very existence of such specialty groups encourages sound breeding practices, sharing of knowledge, and most importantly, sustainability. These organizations inadvertently or directly encourage breeding like to like, proper selection practices, and the development of a “standard of perfection” that represents the idealized animal. Such groups unite people under a common goal and diffuse much of the frustration and anger that trend chasing hitherto created. An exciting time to be involved with llamas indeed!

There has been some indication that some consider Argentines to be just another ingredient for this mongrel soup that our North American llama population has become. I can understand the attraction that such a notion has. As a result of their having been selected from a regionally distinctive population on the Argentine altiplano, the US population of Argentines exists as a fairly uniform and likely highly homozygous population. This high degree of homozygosity for the very traits that define them - namely heavy bone and a profusion of fine fleece - is what has earned them the reputation of being such pre-potent producers.

Crossing Argentine studs to light boned light wooled females may produce spectacular progeny – crias that bear little or no resemblance to their more dowdy dams. However, the heterozygous nature of the resulting progeny will ultimately impart these mixes with the reputation of being inconsistent producers – the antithesis of what is so special about the Argentine. As I see it, indiscriminately making such crosses will ultimately dilute the distinctiveness of the Argentine just as has happened with the Chilean and the Peruvian - two predecessors that have added much to our national herd, but whose assimilation has robbed them of their distinctiveness and in many ways their future.

That is not to say that the breeder of non-Argentines should be discouraged from dipping his ladle into the Argentine gene pool as he see fit for his breeding program, but rather that the Argentine breeder be extremely judicious in the use of his own ladle. As stewards of the Argentine llama it behooves ALA members to fine tune the Argentine population as well as safeguard it – shaping it into a stable population that is even more consistent in type and reproducibility. By doing this the Argentine llama will sustain its reputation and value – in the show ring or in the breeding pen. In this way the Argentine may come to be held in an esteem likened to that of the Frisian horse - an animal distinctive and valuable in its own right, but also an animal sought after for its value as a pre-potent outcross in the production of outstanding F1 progeny. I for one would like to see ALA members begin the work of promoting the Argentine as a burgeoning breed of llama. Only in so doing can they safe guard these gems from becoming just one more ingredient in North Americas mongrel llama soup.

If I had the wherewithal I would be actively involved in the SLA, the AMLA, and the ALA, for these folks are the vanguard of llama breeders. However, because of the distinctive nature of the Argentine llama population - namely uniformity throughout the population for those distinctive traits that define them - I am particularly excited for the ALA. The ALA has a huge advantage over other specialty organizations in that their charges quite consistently conform to a type that is uniquely “Argentine” and in that these animals quite consistently reproduce themselves! The same may very well be true of that population of working Pack llamas bred exclusively for the trail – though I have not yet had the good fortune of happening upon an organization devoted to these elegant utilitarian treasures.

I urge all ALA members to please stay united and educate themselves that they better protect and develop the genepool that is uniquely theirs. Its distinctiveness and high degree of homogeneity will be lost to trend chasing, unskilled breeding practices, and poor stewardship. Respect your compatriots the Pack Llama, the Suri Llama, and the Mini Llama for they like you are at the forefront of llama breed development here in North America. Never has an Argentine looked so striking and so beautiful as it does standing alongside these, its distinctive brethren.