

WHEN TO OWN A STUD MALE

Before commencing an article on selecting stud males to use over your alpaca females, I'd like to preface my remarks by saying that I believe that the single most important purchasing decision you will make when you embark upon alpaca breeding is the selection of the best quality female or females that you can afford.

If you are going to breed alpacas with a purpose in mind, not only is it preferable to have good conformation and quality fleece in your chosen female, but also it is imperative that this female is reproductively sound and capable of breeding on. It won't matter how scientific you are in selecting the correct male for her if she has any problems in the reproductive area. At the risk of writing an article stating the bleeding obvious, I am nevertheless constantly amazed at the number of newcomers who wish to breed alpacas, but have no basic understanding of the practicalities of reproductive soundness and mothering abilities in their females, but therein lies a whole different article.

So, let me take you back to the topic of selecting the right stud male for your female. Accepting that you have a reproductively capable female, ready and receptive, waiting for Mr. Right, the question arises how best to choose Mr. Right?

How best to choose Mr. Right?

Should you buy your own male to service your herd? Will you use Green Gully Gus who is owned by the lady down the lane because he's handy and cheap and she's such a nice person? Will you choose that gorgeous rose grey male you saw advertised in the glossy magazine because he's so pretty? Or what about trying that young male with all those wonderful show awards to his credit, but no progeny on the ground yet?

Perhaps I should also state that I'm assuming you have a business plan. That you are actually going to farm alpacas with the end goal of receiving some sort of return on your investment, whether it will be through making beautiful garments, selling alpaca products or selling livestock. If you are purely looking for the lifestyle that farming alpacas brings (and most of us who've been around for a while will testify that those rewards are substantial), then there is probably nothing wrong with using good old Gus down the lane. However, once involved with these animals, it's surprising how many people want to become more involved as they learn more and develop more confidence around their alpacas. So why not establish the basis for ongoing success right from the start?

Starting out, you don't need your own male.

I believe that when you initially set forth down the path of alpaca breeding, and have defined your breeding goals, you don't need your own male. On the contrary, it's better not to purchase your own male, especially if you are starting out with a small herd and want to effect genetic improvements.

Assume you start with a herd of four young, non-pregnant females and a male. It's possible to box yourself into a genetic corner using this one male. If you are fortunate enough to breed four or five female crias in your first couple of years, you will still have to look elsewhere for a mate for them. Apart from your original four females who can be re-mated to him forever after, plus any possible future purchases, it's unlikely that you will use him again in your breeding programme, unless of course you are doing some line breeding and re-introducing his genetics at a later time in the programme. Even so, it's a long time away, and chances are he will become genetically superseded by the next generation of up-and-coming males.

Use the very best males available.

If you are not experienced in this industry, a much better alternative is to use some of the proven top quality stud males that are available for outside services. These males are usually owned by more experienced

breeders, who would be happy to suggest the best males to complement your particular females. Select a stud farm with good ethics and with whom you feel comfortable working and don't forget to communicate your desired breeding goals.

Once again, assuming you started with those same four females, you may decide to breed them all to one sire, to try and develop particular lines. Over the next couple of years you might breed all the daughters from this first years breeding to another particular sire and so on, in an endeavour to stabilise particular traits in the herd. Or you may decide to use four different males, to increase the diversity in your herd. In this way, if you are fortunate enough to breed a stud quality male, he can be used later on over about three-quarters of your herd. Either way, the key to success is to use the very best outside sires available, to meet the breeding goals you have set.

In the same way, Green Gully Gus, who resides close by is probably not going to be of any great use to your breeding programme. His advantages are purely that he is conveniently located and he is very cheap, or even free. If you want to move ahead in this industry you need to have a very clear picture of the direction in which you are heading. And my guess is that old Gus is not going to take you anywhere.

Not purchasing a stud male to begin with often flies in the face of sensibility to more traditional farmers whose experience dictates that if you are breeding cattle you need a bull, or raising sheep requires a ram. But alpacas are a relatively young industry, even here in Australia, where we are just 20 years old, and improvements are rapid. If you are going to own a stud sire, you must own one that will take you forward, and that usually requires a substantial investment. Why not take advantage of the sires available for outside stud duties where someone else has already made that investment on your behalf?

From a marketing point of view, if and when you decide to sell some of your precious offspring, they are much more marketable if you can advertise that they are by a well-known male with a reputation for quality offspring and super fleece production, than if they are sired by Green Gully Gus, of whom no-one has ever heard.

So, when starting out with alpacas, one of the key elements to your business plan should be to factor in outside matings for your females for a number of years. It will prove to be a solid platform in the success of your programme if you select those males wisely. Even if you have started with some of the cheaper, average quality females, factoring in the cost of outside matings is of paramount importance.

If those same four hypothetical females were all pregnant when you bought them, you would still be faced with choosing a sire for them in the second year. Think very carefully before being persuaded by a persistent vendor about buying a young unproven male to go with the four females as part of the package, unless the male has many outstanding credentials. Consider the fact that you may not have a use for him for some time to come and by then, you will have more knowledge and can make an informed decision as to what male will be most suitable.

So when to buy a male?

Planning when you will buy your first stud sire will depend largely on how many females you started with, and how many female crias you breed in the first few years. There will come a time when it will become economically viable to purchase a sire, rather than sending a larger number of females off farm for mating. The arrival time at this critical mass of females will be different for everyone depending on farm size, location, time available and budget. Nevertheless, in the interests of genetic diversity, you may still choose to obtain outside breedings for some of your best girls.

We purchased our first three alpaca females in 1991, and didn't own a stud sire until 1997 and even then it was only because (and I state this quite immodestly) an opportunity to own one of the best sires in the business, Purrumbete El Dorado, was presented to us. Our small herd at that time still didn't necessitate for us to own a male, particularly because we had unfortunately, in the early years, been very successful in producing male crias! This fact combined with some sales of females along the way, meant that the female component of our herd had not grown exponentially.

A word of caution.

Do not fall into the trap of believing that all the males you breed will have stud potential. Wrong. I believe that a figure of something less than 5% of males born will or should go on to become future stud sires. Yes, you will love all your little boys that are born and yes, you might even take them to shows and win some ribbons, but that doesn't necessarily mean they will become good stud sires.

What makes a good stud sire and how to choose him?

Well there are many well-documented papers and articles on this subject. Apart from superior fleece qualities, excellent conformation, very good libido and testicular size (do not underestimate the importance of these), any relevant show results and progeny performances; we now have in Australia, the AGE Programme (Across herd Genetic Evaluation). This is a voluntary programme that will, over time establish some industry standards or EBVs (Estimated Breeding Values) for particular traits. It's early days yet and the data collection is cumulative in order to make meaningful outcomes available but it's a project that is leading the way forward to help breeders make carefully considered and independent breeding decisions.

The very best stud sires to use are the ones that have all the qualities stated above. There should be no compromise in choosing a good stud sire. Arm yourself with knowledge, understand the male certification or import screening requirements, obtain objective fleece measurements, have breeding goals set, observe and listen, ask pertinent questions, seek a trusted mentor for advice and mix it all with a little common sense. Be mindful of the fact that you are outlaying your hard-earned cash on what may be quite an expensive transaction and, as such, you have the right to expect and receive reliable service like every other consumer of goods and services.

Remember too that the mating of males to females in any area of livestock production, including alpacas, despite all the scientific rigour you can muster, is by definition a random event, an inexact science, therefore requiring a sprinkling of good fortune to achieve those extra special results.

Special pleasures.

From a personal point of view, one of the lasting legacies of being involved with breeding alpacas, and both owning and using outside stud males, has been the many friendships we have made along the way. Sharing the joys of each newborn cria with both clients and service providers, who all have become personal friends, transforms the business of raising alpacas into a special pleasure quite unlike any other enterprise. Enjoy the experience.



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