From SABLE to Fleece Show Entry

By Sharon Beacham, ALSA Certified Llama Fleece Judge (Retired)

Fiber artisans -- spinners, weavers, knitters -- are all notorious for accumulating more fiber than they can ever expect to use. Hence, the acronym SABLE: Stash Accumulation Beyond Life Expectancy.

Many llama owners also could adopt this acronym. Are you one of them? Do you have bags of shorn llama fiber stashed in your barn, basement, closets -- where ever you can store it until you get around to doing something with it? Only you're not quite sure what? You have great intentions, and save the fiber because you know it's valuable and there's a market for it, but what must you do to it first in order to have it processed or made into something? If you've read about, or seen, the Shorn Llama Fleece Show at the ALSA Grand National, you may also wonder if there are some show entries in those bags. Help is here.

Take advantage of this slower time of year to evaluate what you already have. It's the first step in reducing SABLE and a logical thing to do before shearing again this spring. For maximum efficiency, begin by sorting the bags. Put everything that was shorn more than two years ago in one pile. Long-term storage compromises the quality, especially if you live in an area with hot weather and/or high humidity. Come back to the older fleeces after you finish with the ones that have been off the llama less than two years. A fleece entry must be shorn within two years of the date of the show.

Please be aware that there are differences in preparing a fleece for processing and one to show. These are included in the information about cleanliness, length, guard hair, weathering and washing. If you read to the end of this article before working on a fleece, you'll know to prepare for each.

A skirting table is helpful (directions at end), but use any surface with good lighting and weather protection. If a fleece comes out of the bag in sections or by handfuls, instead of two intact sides, it's ok. Spread it out with as much of the cut side down as possible. Check the following:

● Did you use a blower to remove dust, debris and vegetation before shearing? Would a reasonable person take the time to shake and pick out the majority of it before shipping the fiber to a mill? As a general rule, the more debris you send, the more comes back to you in the yarn. A show fleece should be as clean as possible and may require the use of tweezers to remove the smallest pieces.

● Does the fiber feel soft and "alive"? Is it lustrous? Dry, rough, dull fiber is "dead" and in poor condition. If sealed in plastic bags, there's a possibility of mildew. In a warm, damp environment, it can grow on the fiber, staining and then eventually rotting it. If there's only a musty smell, it will wash out and the fiber can still be processed.

● How good is the tensile strength? Use these tests: Pull out several locks of fiber -- about the diameter of your little finger -- from different areas of the fleece. Hold them firmly by the ends and snap them. You should hear an almost musical "twang" that indicates good condition. "Thunk" does not. Another test is to hold a lock close to your ear and pull hard on it. Breaking fibers sound like Rice Krispies. A carding machine exerts even more pressure and causes weak fibers to break and form neps -- small fuzzy bundles -- which make lumps in the yarn. There's no sense in paying freight to send fragile fiber to a mill. A fleece judge subtracts points or may even disqualify a fleece with weak tensile strength.

● Are there sections of matted fiber? Solid matts can't be carded by machine. Pull off and discard them before processing or considering the fleece for show. While you're at it, skirt (pull away from the edges of the fleece), or pick out, any neck, backbone, leg and belly fiber. This is

almost always coarser and dirtier than the prime fiber from along the llama's sides. Separate what you remove into second quality fiber or trash.

● How long is the fiber? The ideal staple length for hand or machine spinning is three to six inches. A show fleece from a llama twenty-four months or older must be between three and eight inches. There is no maximum length limit for show fleeces from younger llamas, but they must also be a minimum of three inches long. Remove and reserve fiber less than three inches for felt. Discard anything less than one inch. If this is a show fleece, turn it over and inspect for second cuts -- short pieces caused by shearing an area twice. Pick them off and discard. If the fleece is processed, carding will remove most of them so they don't lower the quality of the yarn. Overgrown fiber may be cut into shorter lengths, but it produces a rougher-feeling yarn due to the extra cut ends.

● Are there two distinct textures and lengths of fiber within the fleece? Guard hairs are longer, coarser, and straight. They come out easily if you place one hand on the cut end and pull on the tips with the other. Left in the fleece, they'll cause the finished yarn to feel prickly. People who tie fishing flies like to use guard hair. It also makes great doll hair. Undercoat fibers can be quite soft, fine and have a crimped appearance. There's a visible correlation: the longer and thicker the guard hairs, the softer, finer and more crimped the undercoat. Due to human intervention, many llamas now have nearly homogenized fiber -- the guard hairs are similar in diameter and length to the undercoat and don't need to be removed. You must always leave them in a show fleece so the judge can evaluate their texture and ratio to the undercoat.

● Is there a dark coating on your fingers after skirting a fleece? Suent is a term, borrowed from the sheep-wool industry, that describes a combination of perspiration, dust and the natural oil in llama fiber. It appears as a stained band on light colors and can be felt on all colors as a slightly sticky, greasy residue. A mill can wash it out, and so can you before shearing. It compromises the quality of an already shorn show fleece.

● Do you see anything moving? Clothes moths try to hide when disturbed. Unlike regular moths, they aren't attracted to light. They're one-fourth inch long, beige, and have a narrow, triangular shape. Egg cases are thin tubes about one-half inch long. Larvae excrement looks like dark brown grains of sand. If you find any of these signs, return the entire fleece to the bag, seal it and either put it in the trash or burn it.

● Do any areas of the fleece appear to have been salted? If all the grains are the same size, and pale beige in color, they're actually lice nits (egg cases). They stick to the fiber as if glued on. It takes magnification to tell if they've hatched. Since they're species specific, they won't transfer to you, but washing doesn't completely remove them. Mills do not accept contaminated fiber and it's grounds for disqualification in a show fleece. Unless the infestation is limited to a few small areas, discard the fleece in the trash.

● Is there any weathering? Trim sun-bleached tips with scissors before sending the fleece to a mill. They're usually weak enough break off in the carder and form neps. You shouldn't trim the tips off a show fleece. Extra cut ends adversely affect the evaluation of hand -- the tactile qualities. If the weathered tips pass the tensile strength tests, you can enter the fleece.

A fleece that passes all the above is worth your time, effort and expense to have processed. If you bathed the llama before shearing, and did not use any fiber conditioners, you probably have a show-quality fleece. A mill can wash out dust and dirt, but it's too late, after shearing, to wash a show fleece.

The fleeces that were shorn less than two years ago should now be in five separate piles:

1. Skirted fleeces that passed all the tests: Group these by color to send to a mill for processing into yarn. If there are hand spinners in your marketing area, request some be made into roving.

2. Second quality fiber: Reasonably clean, unweathered skirtings from the neck, legs and backbone, and fiber between one and three inches long, can be processed into batts for making felt.

3. Entire or partial fleeces that failed the cleanliness and strength tests: These can be used for insulation or padding, cut into small pieces to mulch your garden, washed and enclosed in a cover for a pet's bed or put out for the birds.

4. Trash: Discard all matted and excessively dirty fiber, chunks of coarse leg and belly hair, short guard hair and fiber containing moths, lice, dung tags or anything else that shouldn't be there.

At this point, go back to the bags of older fiber and take a quick look at each fleece. You now have the experience to tell if it's a candidate for processing. Test for tensile strength first. Add these older fleeces to the appropriate piles above.

A list of mills, recommended by the ALSA Fiber Committee, is available at www.midwestfiber.com. Check the internet for fiber artisan guilds in your area. Their members are potential customers. You might also arrange for a member to create garments for you to wear or sell. The more you do with the fiber from your llamas, the more you increase their marketing value.

5. Exceptional quality fleeces to enter in a show: These consist of all the prime fiber, minus skirtings, from at least the barrel -- the section between the llama's shoulders and hips. Include shoulder and hip fiber if it's the same quality. Barrel, shoulder and hip together comprise the blanket mentioned in the ALSA Handbook. Neck and leg fiber is not entered. As a final check, here are the criteria used by an ALSA Llama Fleece Judge when evaluating an entry:

Cleanliness: No dust, dirt, debris, vegetation, suent, mildew, shearing oil, insect contamination or unnatural odor (including fiber conditioners). This doesn't mean that you can't enter a fleece with some of these present, but they lower the score for cleanliness.

Preparation: Skirting of any matts, leg, belly and backbone fiber. Removal of second cuts, color contamination from other fleeces, fiber less than three inches long or more than eight.

Fineness and Hand: The finer the fiber, the more comfortable it will be to wear against the skin. Hold a lock of fiber by the ends and draw it across the skin between your nose and upper lip. (Lots of nerve endings there.) The smoother it feels, the finer it is. Hand is the tactile feel of all the fiber characteristics combined: fineness, softness, flexibility, density and strength. The better the hand, the more pleasant and comfortable the fiber is to touch and wear.

Guard Hair: The texture and ratio of guard hair to the undercoat is assessed by removing several locks from the fleece, pulling out the hairs, if any, and examining them.

Style and Architecture: Style refers to the evenness and depth of the crimp in the undercoat. If present, it appears as a pattern of little waves, only it's not as pronounced as that seen in sheep's wool. Suri fiber should not have any crimp and is judged accordingly. Architecture is defined as the general structure and lay of the fibers within the locks which make up the entire fleece. How visible and consistent are the locks? Architecture is damaged or destroyed by grooming.

Luster: As with your own hair, the ability of llama fiber to reflect light is a desirable characteristic. It's especially important to the garment industry.

Overall Impression and Uniformity: Overall Impression is also known as the "Wow" factor. Does the fleece attract your touch like a magnet and cause you to say things like, "Wow" and, "Incredible"? Uniformity: Are all the judging criteria consistent throughout the fleece?

Tensile Strength and Condition: A judge uses the tests described earlier to evaluate the strength of the fiber. Condition is an assessment of the general health of the fleece.

The judge awards points for each of these criteria and may also write comments on the score card. Each fleece is evaluated on its own merits -- comparisons are made only to break a tie. This professional evaluation can help you produce and prepare even better entries for the next show. Be sure to follow show management instructions about bagging and labeling. Check the current ALSA Handbook for additional details.

If you've enjoyed this process and would like to learn more about llama fiber, contact the ALSA Fiber Committee for information about an Educational/Beginning Level Shorn Llama Fleece Judging Clinic. There, you'll learn every aspect of producing quality fiber and evaluating it. Your herd management skills and breeding decisions will benefit from the application of this knowledge. The clinic is also the first step in becoming a certified llama fleece judge.

SABLE can be reduced now and avoided in the future. I hope you found several show entries while dealing with your stash.

Directions for making a skirting table:

A skirting table frame may be constructed from scrap lumber or 2 x 4's purchased for that purpose. The minimum size is 4' x 4' -- large enough to hold at least one side of a shorn fleece. Staple plastic construction barrier or chicken wire to one side of the frame. The openings in the skirting surface should be at least one inch across, but less than two. This allows dirt, debris and second cuts to fall through when the fleece is gently shaken. Support the frame on saw horses. You may need to put them on concrete blocks to raise the frame to a comfortable working height. This simple construction is portable, and you can store the table out of the way when not in use.

Bio

We purchased our first llamas in 1982 as a source of fiber for dying, spinning and knitting. My interest in fiber led to conducting learn-to-shear clinics, and then to the establishment of the Rocky Mountain Lama Fiber Pool in partnership with Karen Kinyon.

In 1998, based on fiber pool experience, I was asked to become one of the five original ALSA Llama Fiber Judges and to help create the training and judging programs we have today. I retired from judging in 2006 but remain active with the ALSA Fiber Committee.

We still have two of our original llamas, plus fifty one others. The herd now features Peruvian and Argentine bloodlines for genetic diversity and quality fiber. Our breeding program has produced twenty five Top Ten placings at ALSA Grand National shows, including two Grand and two Reserve Grand National Champions.

John, husband of forty six years, and I live on a ranch in a beautiful Colorado mountain valley. The South Arkansas River runs through it. We often take a break from raking and shoveling to appreciate the view of a 14,000' peak, llamas grazing in the meadow, and to count our blessings.