

How to Prepare a Suri Fleece for Showing

By Fran Soukup, February 19, 2007

Why? Showing fleeces should be done for all the same reasons that llamas are shown in halter classes: Marketing, publicity, validating the quality of your llama's fleece, evaluating your breeding program, earning a fleece recognition with your llama. One of the best reasons to show llama fleece is to learn more about the fleece itself. Showing fleece is also a way to get an objective review of the quality of fiber your llamas are producing.

What is needed? A skirting table or a window or door screen; tissue paper or a white paper tablecloth (preferably without vinyl or plastic backing), a clear plastic bag, and good lighting. Also, have the dates of shearing, age of the llama at the time of shearing, and ILR information available in order to complete the entry tag. Also needed are time and patience.

When? Select your llama with the show fleece in advance of shearing day. Look for fineness, eye appeal, luster and consistency. The llama's fleece should be at least 3 inches long up to 8 inches long for an adult. It can be longer than 8 inches in length for a llama less than 24 months of age.

Preparing the show fleece begins before shearing. It is far easier to clean the fiber before the llama is shorn, rather than after it is shorn. Clean the fleece as if preparing for a halter show – without using grooming products. However, clean the entire portion of the fleece that will be shorn, not just the surface. This probably means lifting the locks/fleece in layers and grooming to the skin.

Some owners find it helpful to wash their llama. Wash the llama a week or two in advance of shearing with an odorless shampoo, and place the llama in a clean, grassy pasture. When the fleece is shown, the llama's fiber should retain the natural llama smell, individual lock structure, and appearance. Ideally, there should be no matting or cobweb appearance of the locks. However, the fiber should continue to be locked to the skin.

Ruth Elvestad's article on Fiber Power has an excellent description on how to prepare for shearing and the order of shearing. Before shearing, set out the screen or skirting table. Please refer to Graphic A for the prime fiber locations. With step one, in the order of shearing, discard the top line fiber. This part of the fleece tends to have breaks and/or show more weathering than the prime fiber. The top line fiber is also the dirtiest. As the prime fleece is removed from the llama, lay it out on the screen or skirting table. Lay the fleece out in locks or handfuls, if possible, to retain the structure and integrity of the fleece. The right side, away from the skin, should be the side lying face up on the screen.

How? After the fleece is shorn, move to a work area with good natural lighting. The goal is to prepare this fleece so it appears just as it does on the llama. Even though fleece entry descriptions are for the complete or entire blanket of the llama, the portion of the fleece that is entered in the show should only be the very best of the prime fiber.

Proper skirting, or preparation, of a show fleece will affect the overall score for the fleece. To

skirt the show fleece is to remove all except the very best of the prime fiber. However, skirting also affects overall impression, uniformity, lock style and architecture, hand, guard hair, and even fineness.

Carefully examine the fleece. Start with the right side of the fleece (the side away from the skin), as it has been laid out, after shearing. All of the fleece should appear the same. Therefore, remove any locks that are not consistent. Each lock should have the same lock structure. For instance, if the majority of the fleece has spiral lock structure, discard any locks that are straight or not equally spiral in structure. Remove any fiber that is coarser. As a suri fleece, remove any fiber that contains loft. Aim for fleece that is all the same length. Remove any locks that are stained or discolored. Remove any portion of the fleece which has cob-webbing or cotting (strands of fiber stuck together). Ideally, the show fleece would have no cotting. Realistically, there probably is some.

The next step involves a more difficult decision. Many judges absolutely love fleece which is multi-colored. However, the fleece needs to be consistent in fineness. White tends to be coarser than the colored portion of the fleece. If this is true of the fleece being prepared, and, not too much of the fleece will be discarded, remove the coarser colored fleece. Be sure to remove all of this different colored fleece, or points will be deducted for color contamination.

By now, you have a lot less fleece, but it is truly the prime fleece. There should be enough fleece left to cover the majority of a poster board, or approximately 15 inches by 20 inches. If this is a juvenile, there may be less. The amount of fleece for an entry should reasonably approximate the amount of fleece which could be expected to be produced by a llama of the age and size, at the time of shearing. But, it can be a small llama. For example, a 15 inch puddle of fleece would not be the normal expected amount of fleece production for an adult llama. But, a 15 inch puddle of fiber from a young juvenile could be an expected amount of fiber production.

The time has come to again clean the fleece. Turn the fleece to the wrong side. Each short cut or second cut should be removed. Look very carefully. A fleece judge can almost always find a second cut in a fleece. So, examine that fleece critically. Also, remove any and all debris. Some producers take a clothes hanger and whack the fleece to remove dust, sand, coarse debris. Others sit with a tweezers and spend hours removing each and every bit of chaff. The cleaner the fleece, the better. Turn the fleece to the right side, and remove chaff and debris again. When removing the chaff, be very careful not to separate the strands of fiber. The locks should remain intact and not appear fuzzy.

Final preparations: Layout the tissue paper or paper table cloth. Transfer the prepared fiber to the tissue paper. Use several layers, to pad the fleece. The fleece should look as close to possible as it did on the llama. Arrange those locks to their full length. Then, cover the fleece with several more layers of tissue paper. The fleece is next placed in a clear plastic bag. The tissue paper covered fleece could be loosely rolled up into a tube shape, or gathered to a loose bunch. The goal is to not squash the fiber. When the fleece is removed at the fleece show, it should look just as it did before it was covered with tissue paper.

If you are mailing the fleece to a fleece show, use a large enough box to prevent compression of

the fleece. If you are not immediately showing the fleece, then, store the fleece in its tissue covering in a cardboard box or large paper bag, to allow the fleece to breathe.

Finally, prepare the entry card for the show. Some judges consider the completeness, accuracy, and appearance of the entry card in their points for preparation. Include a copy of the ILR, if appropriate. A good marketing idea is to also include a good picture of the llama, before shearing, with the entry. As fleeces are displayed after the judging is complete, many exhibitors do check out the fleeces and photographs. A good picture enhances marketing for your farm.

After the fleece show, remove the score card. The judge may have found many second cuts that you did not first see. Or, there may be a few long strands which were not skirted out - or, short ones. If you again examine that fleece, follow the judge's suggestions so the quality of the fleece can improve for the next show. Maybe the fleece was so well prepared there is nothing to improve. Congratulations! In any case, be sure to take the fleece out of the plastic bag and store it in paper bag or cardboard box. Fleeces can be shown for up to two years, after the date of shearing.

Lastly, keep a log on the judge, the show, and the fleece. Some judges write better comments than others. Some fleece shows are kinder to your fleece than others. Some judges have color preferences. Just as you may keep a log for halter shows, you may wish to also keep a fleece log. The log is also a way to track placings for publicity and marketing.

Showing fleece is a lot of work. It is also a lot of fun. Where else can a show be entered, without travel expenses? Try it. You'll learn more about your llamas' fleece and your breeding program, and increase your farm's marketing potential.