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**STRESS IN VENICE**

(Harriet Davison : ILLAWARRA ALPACAS)

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Have you ever been to Europe in winter? It's about 8<sup>o</sup>c, all day; the air is cold and crisp; one feels like a chain-smoker as one can't seem to stop blowing smoke! To brave the streets, one has to wear gloves, a warm coat, warm shoes, and to top it all off, the best thing of all is the scarf... it fills the gaps around your neck, and can be pulled up across your face to stop your nose falling off!

Recently my family and I were lucky enough to be in Venice, about New Year ... and it was cold! But that didn't matter, because we went prepared. After all we are alpaca breeders, and had an ample supply of promotional material on hand in the form of everything from socks to SCARVES!

When in Venice, do as the Venetians do! That is, every minute you are out on the street, look as good as you possibly can! So we did. For my part, a divinely soft, hand spun, and loosely hand knitted alpaca scarf was donned, both to make me feel smug, and to make me feel snug. And I did!

On about the third day , to my horror, I noticed a hole!

And then progressively more; until on day five, there were about 6 holes! How could this be? Had the silverfish had lunch there? Was the spinning poorly done? Was I being too rough with my treasured scarf?

All of these explanations could have applied. They could have worked separately, or hand-in-hand, to destroy my scarf. Except that, on consideration, early one morning

when the effects of jet lag or Italian wine were messing with my sleep, I was suddenly reminded of a lesson we had learned two years earlier.

We had at the time acquired a beautiful alpaca female aged about 10 months. Fabulous fleece. We were excited at the thought of showing this fleece. It was beautiful. We would demonstrate to the fleece world the quality of alpaca we had on our property .....

That fleece went to two shows and was unplaced twice! Hard to believe. It left us a little gob smacked. Neither judge had obviously liked the fleece enough to place it. Then at the bottom of the second judging card, was a note ...'Please see me'! Did that ever bring back feelings of dread?! Yes. So we did. This judge, unbeknownst to them, had actually bred the animal. The observation was that it was "Tender"! We checked the fleece. Sure enough, the 12 month fleece had a 'break', and was therefore 'tender'. This occurred ½ way down the fibre..... on all the fibres.... Across the entire fleece. With a firm jerk, each staple tested broke at the same place. We wondered then about what might be going on. What skullduggery was afoot?

After further discussion with the judge, we revealed the identity of the animal.

"Ah yes", he sighed. "That would fit! With 12 months' fleece the break would have been at 6 months. Exactly the time that animal had not only been weaned, but simultaneously began its education for, and entry into, the show ring!" A potentially stressful time for all of us.

We all know what it is like to be stressed. Sometimes we feel as if we, 'can't cope'. Well we aren't the only ones. Alpacas fall prey to the same emotions and conditions, and if these are not recognized and rectified quickly, they can have a disastrous effect on our product, the FIBRE, and therefore the INCOME that we hope it will generate.

This demonstrated to me exactly how detrimental stress could be. The above sort of emotional stress is not the only form. There are different types, and depending on the severity, with different degrees of damage. These are:

- **Environmental:** Parasite, drought, weaning , weather post shearing;
- **Psychological:** Showing, weaning, education, separation, shearing;
- **Physical:** Giving birth, accident, lactation.
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The fleece buyers test for the "BREAK". As you would expect, the worst place for a 'break', is the center of the fibre. If there is a best place, then it is at the ends. Therefore, in order to maximize our returns from the fibre end of the industry, and to enhance our reputation overseas, we must manage our stock for known times of serious stress, and we must minimize stress half way through the fleece life. We must plan our shearing around known times of stress.

Simple steps can be taken to minimize stress at different times, such as:

- **weaning:** take the mother from the mob, not the cria from the mob;

- **education:** take at least two youngsters away from their mob, and let them settle into a new routine with an older mentor and sensible wether that will make them feel safe. Don't touch them for at least 2 weeks. Let them feel comfortable and unthreatened.
- **drought:** hand feed.
- **parasites:** monitor regularly as your vet suggests &/or treat routinely
- **showing:** never only show one animal, always take a mate for company. You will have to enter that mate, but it helps to make a better show.
- **birth & lactation:** keep a close eye on your 'Springers' ' (those females in their last three months of pregnancy) body condition, and bump up their nutrition after criaing. Don't let the mother literally convert herself into her cria.
- **separation:** always have at least one mate that they know with them when a new situation eventuates.

Most of these tips deal with the youngsters; here, after all, is where our most valuable product is. Therefore it is important. The wethers and young males are easier mobs to manage. Parasites are their major enemy until closer to maturity at about two years. Castration should be done at either end of the fleece life, although sometimes I wonder at the stress level if this is done swiftly.

The main point to remember is that our farms, big or small, will soon be relying on the sale of our precious product for our main income. This fibre therefore, must be up to scratch!

**AND WHO WANTS TO HEAR OF AN OUTSIDER BUYING A SCARF, FINDING IT DOES A GREAT JOB, AND THEN IT FALLS APART ! WHAT WOULD THE VENETIANS THINK ?**