

PEDIGREE AND PERFORMANCE:

the key to alpaca power!

By Dr Ian Davison, Illawarra Alpacas

Published in *Town and Country Farmer*, Vol 24 No 1, Autumn 2007

There is something irresistibly seductive about the alpaca and its fleece, something no person whose gaze and hands pass over them can long ignore.

Whether it be their enchanting eyes, their gentle but haughty demeanour, their social engagement with each other, or the breathtaking softness of their fleece, they are immediately captivating to all who behold them, be they hardened farmers or pampered socialites.

They demand, and still receive, the instant respect of all who have the privilege of owning or caring for them.

That instant level of respect was once afforded to them simply for their rarity and exotic appearance. There are many who, like me, well remember the earliest Australian shows and demonstrations, when every alpaca was a precious and rare commodity, and every animal exalted for its very existence, without regard for its colour, quality of fleece, stature, or breeding value.

But in the less than twenty years that Australia has shared the custody of this ancient breed, it has evolved in the most remarkable way. A simple comparison of the first edition of the now 14 year old *Alpacas Australia* magazine with its most recent issue reveals the magnitude of this transformation: Australian breeders have relentlessly pursued those features that define quality of fleece and conformation, and new entrants to the industry can now choose animals of a quality that did not even exist 20 years ago.

The drivers for this transformation have been many.

Principal amongst them was the decision to form the Australian Alpaca Association (AAA) in 1992, beginning with just a handful of alpaca owners and a national herd that was not much larger. Today, that association boasts a financial membership approaching 2,500, and has defined the breed and showing standards which lead the industry.

In that same year of 1992, the founding members had the vision to establish the International Alpaca Register (IAR), arguably one of their most prescient decisions. That register records the pedigree which defines every registered alpaca born in the country, tracing its roots back to the foundation stock of the 1992 Australian herd or to more recent imports from South America and the USA,. Today, the IAR includes over 80,000 registered alpacas, making it the largest alpaca register in the world.

Australian-registered alpacas have been exported to New Zealand, Canada, USA, South Africa, Britain, France, Italy, Switzerland, China and Germany.

Owned by the AAA on behalf of its members, and operated independently under contract for ethical reasons by the Agricultural Breeding Research Institute at the University of New England, Armadale NSW, the entire alpaca database is continuously available to all members through the AAA website, where members can also register and pay for entries on-line.

If the IAR is the rock on which the Australian alpaca industry is founded, it is the jewel in the crown of the AAA, and perhaps its most valuable asset. It has, for example, enabled the implementation of the Across-herd Genetic Evaluation program (AGE), which offers to breeders the opportunity to establish Alpaca Breeding Values (ABV's) for individual alpacas, predicting their genetic value in passing on desirable traits to their progeny. The program encourages breeders to identify those traits which they regard as commercially and genetically desirable, and to measure and record those traits in *individual* alpacas. Using the IAR to establish genetic linkages with *other* alpacas in the Australian herd, the prepotency of a particular male or female in passing on such attributes as fleece weight, fineness, follicular density, body weight, evenness of fleece, and early sexual maturity can be scientifically predicted, and purchasers of animals or male services can then seek out those alpacas which are most likely to fulfil their breeding objectives. The AGE has been embraced by forward thinking breeders. New Zealand breeders and those promoting SRS® (Soft Rolling Skin) fleece types have been amongst the fore-runners in taking up this technology.

As well as producing better alpacas which produce more valuable fleece, the AGE may have other important consequences. By the application of scientific method, Australian alpacas should make faster genetic progress than their foreign competitors. Australian alpacas may then come to benchmark the international standard for alpacas. Overseas breeders may wish to compare their own progress with that of the Australian industry, and may seek to enrol their alpacas on the AGE. To do so, their alpacas will need to be registered on the IAR, which will improve both the international standing, and the value to the Australian industry, of the IAR. Conceivably, the IAR could become the dominant registry for alpacas internationally, and the Australian bred alpaca the international benchmark.

All existing Australian breeders will benefit from these initiatives, which deserve their strong commitment. All aspiring breeders will benefit from a careful study of the pedigree of their prospective purchases, and by seeking the breeding values attached to those alpacas and their relatives. As the AGE advances with each passing year, superior alpacas will be marketed according to their measured Alpaca Breeding Values, and those lacking ABV's risk being overlooked.

In the 21st century, as at the beginning of the 20th century, Australia may find itself once more riding on the back of a fleece developed overseas, but refined in Australia. But this time it will be Australian Alpaca, and not Australian Merino, providing the ride.