

# Constant Genetic Improvement is Essential for Success

## By Adrian Stewart

When I arrived in the USA almost three years ago now, I went around many alpaca farms and noticed that with some farms there were always two (or even three) stud males on each farm. It reminded me so much of my childhood on a dairy farm. I can just remember the days before artificial insemination arrived where every farm had its own bull. This wasn't great from a breeding perspective and some of those bulls were dangerous to handle. Anyway I digress because this letter isn't about AI.

The point is, I was surprised at the number of active males but wasn't sure if this was an accurate picture. I surveyed about 40 farms in Oregon, California and Washington. Together they had about 700 alpacas and of those over 90 were intact males actively being used on the farm and offered for outside breedings. Some of those Studs were of a high quality but many were average at best and this was reflected in the overall quality of their progeny. I have no reason to believe this picture is any different throughout the USA.

Why is this happening? There is no one answer to the question but after digging around and putting the pieces together the picture that started to emerge looks something like this.

People put way too much of their hard earned equity into the initial livestock and kept no where near enough back for advertising & promotion and most importantly future breedings.

So here is what has been happening, and I will exaggerate somewhat to make the point...

### Year One

A couple with five acres see the TV commercial for alpacas, look around a few alpaca farms then finally take the plunge and buy five pregnant female alpacas using most of their financial nest egg. If they can get finance on the alpacas they don't use it to hold back some of their cash for top flight breedings, but instead they simply buy more alpacas on day one. That's the main reason big farms offer finance, but you knew that already, didn't you?

### Year Two

Five cria arrive and everyone is so happy. For a number of reasons but most often to do with keeping the females and adorable cria at home they purchase a junior herd sire. Almost certainly unproven and probably with no ribbons to his name. They breed their five females to the junior herd sire, a stroke of genius! In addition they offer him out to other farms having factored some stud income into their original purchase decision....there are no takers. The fleece is stacked neatly in the barn. That winter they build a web site.

### Year three

Five more cria arrive courtesy of the junior herd sire and they are not quite as stunning as last years but they are okay. Cash is now getting tight. This year they really must try and sell some of the year one cria and do some outside breedings with their now proven junior herd sire. They have three farm visits but sell no alpacas and no outside breedings. Again they breed to their junior herd sire. Again the fleeces go into the barn. That winter they buy a spinning wheel.

### Year Four

Another five cria arrive. They now have twenty alpacas and it's getting to be quite a handful. This year they have eight mature females to breed and again they use their junior herd sire. They put all their alpacas onto an online sales site and eventually sell their very best year one cria, but not for a great price as she is now pregnant to their no name junior herd sire. The fleeces are stacked neatly in the barn. That winter they spin some of the wool into roving.

## Year Five

Eight cria arrive. They now have 27 alpacas and not a spare inch of property. They are thinking about doing their own shearing to save money. At weekends they are so busy with the alpacas they have no time for marketing and promotion. The online sales information is 9 months out of date. They send almost all their fleece to the fibre cooperative and sell some alpaca roving at the farmers market.

Meanwhile many other herds have enjoyed five years of genetic improvement by using selective breeding to superior males. So in comparison their own herd now looks distinctly below par.

In this short and overly simplistic story it can look like there were many problems. But there is only one problem and that is by not using selective breeding to superior males they unintentionally put their herd into a genetic limbo relative to those who do use selective breeding. In the current market that quickly makes such alpacas undesirable. Without sales you have no income, mounting costs and the vicious spiral into disillusionment begins.

Take a look on [www.alpacanation.com](http://www.alpacanation.com) there are about 17,000 alpacas for sale, some have been there for almost 7 years....who knows if those alpacas are even still alive? The market is awash with average, no name, alpacas and I am sorry but the facts are no one wants to buy them.

Is the alpaca market in trouble? Not one bit of it, in November 2006 a friend of mine had his best ever month and sold \$700,000 worth of alpacas, of course he only ever breeds his females to superior males.

If you haven't already done so sit down and think very carefully about those 2007 breedings it is the most important decision you will make all year and if you are just thinking about getting into alpacas, make sure you budget for future breeding costs. If in doubt get some advice from someone with several years of alpaca breeding experience....as the Native Americans say, "A wounded man should look for a man with scars."

Adrian Stewart