

# In My **Opinion**

## Where's the Breed Standard?

Think for a moment and decide if you can answer this question: "What basis, criteria, theory or breed standard does a llama judge use to pick winners in the show ring?" Having been a judge for much of my llama career, this question has often occurred to me. So, I asked others around the country what they thought llama judges used to choose winners in the show ring, and their overwhelming response was, "It's the judge's personal preference."

It's sad that, in the eyes of many, llama judging has been degraded to the point that decisions are based on personal preferences. It seems as though judges have given us plenty of reasons to believe that the only criteria they use these days is what or whom they like. Why has this occurred?

In the early days when ALSA was formed, what few judges we had got together with Murray Fowler, LaRue Johnson, Bill Able and others and hammered out what was thought to be a good way to judge a llama. At that point there was no breed standard, and we didn't really know enough about the breed to have a standard. I recently looked through some of our (ALSA) original (80's) llama stick figure drawings and judging criteria of what we thought, at that time, was a fairly accurate depiction of a correct llama. Then I looked at the ones in my last ALSA judges' manual and the judging criteria posted on the ALSA web-site; the original stick figures and criteria must have done a pretty good job, because in 20 years little to nothing had changed.

It's hard to believe that twenty years ago we were so lucky as to have nailed it the first time. While those basic assumptions have remained the same, the llama definitely has changed, and refinement to those basic assumptions into a breed standard would have been the next logical step to have taken many years ago.

So, I set out on a quest to find a llama breed standard, or at least a concisely written description of a llama phenotype that judges

use today to pick a class winner.

My first stop was the ALSA (Alpaca & Llama Show Association) website. They should have had everything I was looking for.

After all, they their judges preside over ALSA-sanctioned shows, serve as judges in the LFA World Futurity and the Celebrity World Futurity. On pages 51-52 of the online handbook I found a section named "Llama Judging Criteria" that lists Positive Traits, Negative Traits and Serious Faults. At the beginning and end of the section, it states, **"Judging is to be done on a comparative basis using the lists of positive and negative traits and the list of serious faults. The judging criteria is based on soundness and conformation."**

"Overall appearance" is the first item under Positive Traits and states, "The llama should be symmetrical, well-balanced and



proportioned for its age." What does that mean? The next item, "Substance," states, "The llama should have the length and substance of bone evident below the knee and hock in proportion to the overall structure of the llama." What does that mean?

I looked at each one of the listed positive and negative traits and realized that they were simply a subjective list of general statements.

Take the statement in number 3 of the positive list, "The jaw formation should exhibit correctly align bite." What? Their negative to that statement is, "Jaw Malocclusions:

by Dale Peterson

Either the upper jaw is too short or the lower jaw is too short and the upper jaw is too long". My question is: **What is correct bite?** Further down the list of positive traits, under number 7, Movement: "All limbs should move freely and smoothly in a correctly aligned pattern." My question: What is a **correctly aligned pattern?**

So, what ideal have ALSA judges been trained to compare against? Are they still taught to look at those original stick figure drawings of llamas and compare the real thing to them? With no breed standard or ideal - and in most cases no oral reasons - to compare against, and considering the degree of latitude and subjectivity given in the ALSA judging criteria, it's anyone's guess as to how ALSA judges pick winners. Does the practice of being taught by someone who was taught by someone who was taught by someone who had no breed standard or ideal to teach from - which began in the mid 80s - still continue? Today, it seems the stick figures have taken somewhat of a back seat to the comparison of one llama to the other, or in some cases, one handler to another.

The question that quickly came to mind is: If no breed standard exists with ALSA, then how can their judges determine which llama should stand in first place? Given the absence of a breed standard that gives the ideal to compare against, logic says it is impossible to pick the best llama in a class. Sure, once the first place position had been determined, then the llamas standing behind him can be compared to him and to each other. But, again, with no breed standard how is it possible to determine a starting point?

My next stop was the SLA (Suri Llama Association) website. The SLA is interested only in Suri llamas, and yes they had a suri llama breed standard and suri llama phenotype posted on their site. When reading the SLA's posted breed standard for conformation and movement, I was puzzled about how they concluded that **disposition and intelligence** were part of conformation and move-

ment. I read on to see how they defined disposition and intelligence and became even more puzzled. The SLA said in their breed standard, under conformation and movement, in the category called disposition and intelligence, that the suri llama should express charm.....yes.... charm. What more do you need than a charming suri llama? Oh well, at least the SLA made a stab at a breed standard.

My next stop was the LFA (Llama Futurity Association) website. Surely the LFA's World Futurity Show had a means by which their judges determine winners in their show ring. They did! They had no llama breed standard or llama phenotype, but like ALSA, they did have posted the criteria their judges use to determine placings in the show ring. The LFA judging criteria spelled out that a llama is awarded so many points for conformation, fiber, etc., and the one with the most points is the class winner. OK. That seemed reasonable, but how does the judge determine what is correct or incorrect conformation? How does the judge determine what is good or bad fiber and so on to distribute points, if the LFA uses no breed standard to compare against? Looking back at the previous LFA futurity shows, I saw where the overwhelming majority of the judges used by the LFA were ALSA judges. So, one organization uses judges from another organization that has no llama breed standard or phenotype description either.

Having read the ALSA, SLA and LFA websites and coming up short on any definitive llama phenotype or llama breed standard, I ventured on to the Celebrity website. The Celebrity was the first to have a llama World Futurity Show, before the LFA copied the phrase. Surely they had a llama breed standard, or at the very least some criteria their judges use to determine the World Futurity Champions. Not only did they not have a llama breed standard, they also had **No Criteria** for a judge to use. So, at the Celebrity World Futurity show, what do the judges use to determine winners? The Celebrity posts the results from the three judges score cards, but what does that mean? The judges hired by the Celebrity Word Futurity seemed to have carte blanche as to what their individual tastes dictate in determining a winner - which could mean either the llama, or the handler, or the owner. I

looked back at previous Celebrity World Futurity shows and noticed that in some cases they used ALSA judges, but much of the time they used individuals with no certified judging experience at all. One can only hope that two of the three judges like a certain llama, handler or owner, because that seems to be the only criteria for winning or losing at the Celebrity World Futurity.

Not giving up on my pursuit to find a llama breed standard or even a descriptive llama phenotype, I moved on to the ILR (International Llama Registry) website. One would expect the website of the oldest organization - and, according to them, the most complete and accurate compilation of llama geology in the world - would have a llama breed standard and a definitive llama phenotype. **They didn't!** Even though the ILR bills itself as the largest source of llama information in the world, one critical bit of information is missing: **What is a llama supposed to look like?** Within the information provided on the ILR website, they go so far as to say whether or not a llama is pure. How do they know? Nowhere on their website or their printed materials do they give a definitive llama phenotypic description; nowhere on their website or printed materials do they give a llama breed standard. They do not require DNA from all llamas they register; they do not require micro-chipping of all llamas they register; they do not require proof of parentage of all llamas they register. Yet they proclaim to the world that they can declare llama purity. That is not possible.

Next, I visited the AMLA (American Miniature Llama Association) website. I found they indeed had a miniature llama standard. Their miniature llama standard was very basic and in toto stated a miniature llama is not supposed to exceed a certain height to be registered as miniature llama. They also said that, before a miniature llama could be registered with them, it must first be registered with the ILR. But nowhere on their website did the AMLA provide a miniature llama or standard llama phenotypic description or breed standard. They did, however, make it very clear that they did not declare llama purity. They leave that up to the ILR. Oops!

I further checked regional and state association's websites that I could find. They too

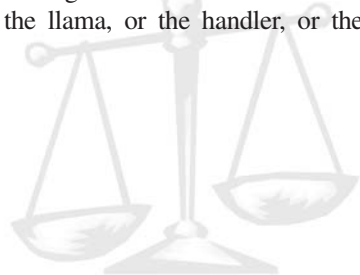
did not attempt to provide any llama phenotype description or llama breed standard.

After exhausting all efforts to find a written description of a llama phenotype or a precisely written llama breed standard with ALSA, SLA, LFA, Celebrity World Futurity, ILR, AMLA or any llama state or regional association, I turned to CLI (Collectible Llamas, Inc.). Under "Registry/ Breed Standards" there was a definitive and concisely written definition of a llama phenotype. Also there was a very direct, concise, understandable, body part by body part, llama breed standard. Little room, if any, was left for subjective interpretation in the CLI's breed standard. At that point I finally had my answer to this article's opening question, "What basis, criteria, or breed standard do llama judges use to pick winners in the show ring?" My investigation found that the only llama organization that has an answer to the question and the mechanism to make it work is CLI - which makes one wonder how organizations other than CLI can pick a class winner if they have no point from which to start.

Some say it is too soon to have a llama breed standard, because the llama industry is too young. Some say it is long past time for a llama breed standard. After all, man's association with llamas has existed for thousands of years. It is the opinion of this writer that, if we llama breeders are going to stand in a show ring with our llamas, let a judge look at our llamas, and then rely on him to pick the best llama in the class and declare it the winner; then there at least should be a standard by which he and we can compare.

For twenty years, judges in the United States have picked class winners without having a breed standard to follow. How has that been possible? That process would be similar to a NASCAR race, where all the cars lined up and then are told to race as fast as they can around a track for an undetermined number of laps, until they are told to stop, whereupon a judge picks a winner.

Maybe now is the time to take a close look at CLI and experience the refreshing difference of being in a CLI show ring. Go to [www.thecli.org](http://www.thecli.org) and click on "Breed Standards" to learn what a llama is supposed to look like.



*“With no breed standard how is it possible to determine a starting point?”*