

Article by Wes and committee submitted to Llama Life on February 14, 2005.

Classic Working Llamas: Structure and Characteristics.

There has been some speculation recently as to what a Classic Llama is and what it is not. Many suspect that our llamas in general are a mixed breed of Llama and Alpaca now. When it all boils down to it I believe breeding for characteristics that constitute an ideal pack llama will get you where you want to be. There is a lot of fancy talk about what a classic llama is, but a classic llama is simply a llama bred with structural characteristics for packing. That is what the Incas did 3000 years ago and that is what we pack llama breeders need to do now.

Fancy (wooly llamas) today are bred for show. There has been an effort to separate the medium and long wool llamas from the Classic wool llama which seems a noble thing but I feel it has become an obsession and tangent that is potentially very damaging. To base a working llama definition on one thing (such as wool) which does not coincide with athletic ability would be a tragedy. Some folks even say you have to brush llamas to tell if they have proper wool. When in reality many Classics that have ample guard hair don't ever need to be brushed. The guard hair keeps the other fibers straight and untangled.

I have spent a lifetime of studying form and function from time I was a little child watching my dad's work horses work. I was involved in many livestock judging events in 4-H and FFA which taught how to visually pick the best animal for a particular need. When I got into the llama business I used my farm and animal husbandry background to pick potential packers as I brought hundreds of them home to Pocatello, Idaho to train and sell for packing. When I started the Classic 2000 I outlined all of these characteristics I found to make a good packer that I learned in buying and training literally hundreds of pack llamas. In the Classic 2000 we watched hundreds of packers perform in actual pack trials to see what they could accomplish. Now it seems some folks talk in vague structural terms (not understood by the lay person or expert) and continually blow off those things that I and others have learned actually packing with hundreds of llamas. This is a huge concern to me not as much for myself but for the structural integrity of the llama in general.

There is agreement among pack llama folks that some original llamas that came to the US were purebreds. The Ccarra breed is recognized in South America by international judge Dr. Julio Sumar from Peru as being one of two major llama breeds. The other breed is the Lanuda. Confusion exists because there are so many in between structure and fiber types from cross breeding. Now we are trying to get back to the ideal by finding and selecting llamas for our breeding program that have the structural integrity for working and are genetically prepotent.

Certain people have been passing around the notion lately (in my opinion bunk) that tall llamas can't pack and won't hold up and it has infuriated me to the point that I have written this article and opened my web site www.Classicllama.info. My stud Black Thunder, his many offspring, and other tall llamas have disproven this a hundred times over now but deaf ears are turned to my findings in super pack llama genetics. I first learned larger llamas can hold up best from Stan Ebal in Colorado who has had more experience working pack llamas than probably anyone in the world. Still Stan's findings are ignored by some of those llama genius types too. The problem with us people is that we think too much. Take the llamas into the mountains and see what they will do.

Also this ILR Classic Llama committee. What is this? A pack llama that's based on wool? What llama walks on its wool. I got off the committee. I will have nothing to do with it. I already spent a good ten years of my life defining the Classic (Classic 2000). I'm afraid for this wonderful Classic Llama that the Incas invented 3000 years ago to work for them. We new Americans are great at screwing up about anything we touch that is natural and good. Many dog breeds and horse breeds have been ruined by breeding them for show judges. Getting too involved with the wool only aspect is going to leave some folks thinking that they have a good pack llama if they have the right wool.

To give you an idea of how far off we can get listen to this. When I first got into this business the Webster dictionary listed the llama as 48 inches tall (they must have got their info from someplace). After I brought the height thing into the limelight we bought a new dictionary. I looked at llama in there and it had llamas listed now at 3 feet tall. Alpacas are three and a half feet tall. Where did that come from? How misleading is that? Lets not let this wonderful Classic Llama be lost forever through llama shows and opinionated super brains that don't know what they're talking about. This misinformation is a total insult to those folks that have been out packing in the mountains and know what their llamas will do. Ya - I want my llamas to have guard hair. But if I have one that is a super packer and he doesn't have guard hair - am I going to shoot 'im? No he'll be in my pack string - or yours if you're smart. Who cares if he's in a show.

At the Llama Connection I am breeding for and selling what llamas can do and training the folks that buy them to get what they are capable of. Folks are buying great pack llamas but more importantly they are buying expertise and getting results they paid for. Llamas are my life and I want to be fair to the llama first and strive for genetics that make them consistent. I believe we need to be as factual and scientific as possible but also with strong opinion. Please don't let the political llama world steal the real definition of the Classic (packing llama) that goes back to the Incas. Fifteen or so years ago I tried to wake up the llama world as to what was happening here. I wrote my booklets "Intro to Llama Packing" and "What About Conformation". Then I started a Classic llama registry and wrote guidelines and published the Classic 2000 Directory (now called "The Working Llama"). Many folks were quite annoyed with me saying their show rejects probably weren't adequate packing animals.

Sometimes it is the truth that hurts. At the same time some are passing around opinions as facts that are really just nonsense (like llamas over 46 inches tall are weaklings). Some are trying to pass off this fantasy brand of junk science as valid scientific research. How insulting is this to the average packer who knows his llamas, knows what they are capable of, and chooses his stock on the basis what he sees them doing on the trail? It seems though that now there is a new interest in saving the real llama and defining what it really is. Several folks have asked me to write a definition of the Classic and make available more objective information about Classic llamas. So I am making a renewed effort to save the ideal pack llama which in my mind is the same thing (at least should be the same thing) as the ideal Classic or Ccara llama. And it has to work.

Here goes: Classic Working Llamas - -

1. Have longer legs than depth of body.

Most very athletic animals have long legs proportionally. Short legs might be good on plow horses but most pioneer horses and all my dad's work horses had relatively long legs because you get endurance from longer legs and long tied muscling like that of Thoroughbred horses and Arabians. Even smaller llamas should have longer legs proportionally. That is why baby llamas can keep up with their moms. Their legs are about twice as long as depth of body.

2. Good conformation is assumed. But no bulldogs or long sloping pasterns. Llama pasterns should be more upright and short. They don't have the bone structure to support long sloping pasterns like a horse and will break down. They don't need the shock absorption. They have it in the pad and toe where the horse doesn't.

3. Are relatively narrow tracking to avoid a wobbly inefficient gait.

Many llamas are pacers (Black Thunder and his offspring never pace, they walk). But still, narrow tracking is advantageous on narrow trails and also indicates strong shoulder carriage. Llamas with weak shoulder carriages widen out in the shoulders and their legs spread out because of inadequate movement and balance. This brings up another point.

3a. Llamas should have noticeable chest muscling and an upside down V'd chest that indicates good chest muscling tied into the forelegs (which is common in good horses but untalked of in llama circles). Forearm muscling should be noticeable also. Chest muscling is the foundation for secure shoulder attachment.

4. Should be less than six inches between the foreleg muscling.

to avoid a duck walker gait and indicate a strong shoulder attachment

5. Should have a long stride and be able to reach straight forward with their front legs.

This indicates proper front shoulder angulation and shows there is no restriction in the front end. Shoulder angulation is discussed to great lengths in horses (and more easily observed). It also applies to llamas. The wool covering up the shoulder of llamas makes it nearly impossible to see shoulder angulation. It has to be observed in their movement and performance.

6. Are relatively tall to give them a long efficient stride on the trail and get over logs and obstacles smoothly.

Try walking for a while with half your normal stride and see how far you get.

7. Have a long enough neck to balance the length of their back and body

Llamas with short necks and long bodies can't get around side hills and over logs easily. They lack balance and fluid movement.

8. Have adequate size with a low body mass index (not too heavy) to pack a normal load over many years of packing without breaking down.

We want our llamas to be built more like basketball players than football. Maybe a running back or a tight end but no linemen. They're so heavy they can't get their own weight up the trail. I love those power forwards and athletic centers.

9. Have an inverted V shaped back that holds a saddle like the withers of a horse (though the withers of a horse are obviously much farther forward)

Some show judges will tell you your llamas are skinny if they don't have round backs. Not so. Good pack llamas never have a round back.

10. Should not be gelded too young.

Growth plates don't close properly and can be crippling in later years due to inappropriate growth.

In Regards to Wool:

11. Have relatively little or preferably no leg wool.

Leg wool is a nuisance while packing. Always full of sticks and burrs.

12. Have relatively little or no head wool or wool on their ears.

Sometimes cockle burrs are head high. Why have it? What does it signify genetically?

13. Shed the longer wool on their neck before they are two years old which often leaves a noticeable mane of guard hair.

When I first got in the industry and some folks were deciding whether to breed to Alpacas to keep up with the llama Joneses it was common knowledge that classic llamas had short wool on their necks.

14. Have a mixture of finer wool and coarser wool called guard hair.

Guard hair keeps the fibers straight and untangled. How much and what kind of guard hair varied greatly in classic llamas. The Lanuda type actually seems to have more guard hair than the Ccara.

Thanks for looking at our classic llama guidelines.