

Preparing a fleece for an ALSA Shorn Llama Fleece Show

~ by June Black

Why enter a shorn fleece contest?

Want to sell llamas, fleeces, or products made of llama fiber? Showing your fleece in competition is an excellent form of advertising. Want premium prices for your llama fiber? Show fleece sales often bring premium prices and repeat customers. Entering your fleeces is also a great way to educate yourself on what makes a quality product.

What is the judge looking for?

Although 20% of the final score is on cleanliness and preparation, other categories are affected by proper skirting and cleanliness. Here's what the fleece judge is evaluating, listed by Category (# points): Cleanliness/Preparation (20), Fineness and Hand (20), Guard Hair (10), Style/Architecture (15), Luster (10), Overall Impression/Uniformity (10), and Tensile Strength/Condition (15). While many characteristics of a llama's fleece are determined by genetics, you will get the full potential from your fiber herd with good practices in the areas of feed, pasture, barn, veterinary, manure, and stress management. After that, you need good fleece preparation, which is what this article is all about.

How do I prepare my llama fleece to compete in an ALSA Shorn Llama Fleece Show?

1. Choose the fleece before shearing
2. Pre-shear grooming
3. Shearing
4. Skirting
5. Storing
6. Pre-show primping
7. Sending to the show

Choosing....

The best time to choose your show fleeces is while they are still walking around the pasture. (If you have already shorn your herd, it is not too late! You may have a winner in your fiber room!) Begin by looking through your herd for fleeces you admire for their luster, color, fineness, etc. The ones you can't take your eyes off and can't wait to get your fingers into are the best ones! Another reason you may choose a fleece because you just want to know more about it by reading the judge's notes on the score card.

If you've already sheared, you can still choose a great show fleece. Open up your bags of fleece in your fiber stash. Ask yourself questions about the fleeces as you examine them. Close your eyes and put your hands into each bag to experience the handle or feel. Take them out of the bags and analyze the cleanliness – is it a fleece clean enough (or easily cleaned) to enter? Is the color appealing? Does the fleece smell like a llama (ah!), moth balls (ew!), or grooming aids (oh no!)? Is there any (gasp!!) insect infestation (if so, throw it away immediately!!)? Is it fairly consistent in staple length throughout the entire fleece? It may not look very lively after being in storage. If so, try leaving it out to air for a week, and see if it becomes more sparkly.

Choose those you like best, and set them out next to one another for several days. If you can't pass them by without wanting to touch them, prepare them for the next fleece show!

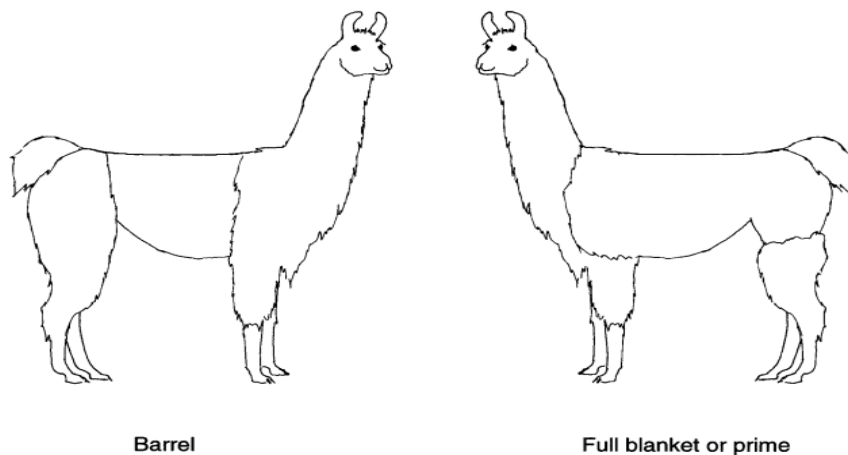
Pre-shear grooming...

Because brushing and blowing temporarily destroy the lock structure, you will want to begin your pre-shear grooming a week or two in advance. You do not have to do it all in one session. It will be less stressful for you and your llama if you spread the grooming over several sessions. The judge will be looking for the lock structure to be intact, as it reveals much of the fleece's character. Remove large pieces of hay and other vegetable matter by picking it out with your fingers. If the tips are only slightly stuck together, open them up by brushing lightly. If the tips are matted, leave them alone – these locks will have to be skirted out. Avoid brushing pencil or suri fleeces. Use a brush, wand and blower to remove dust and small debris. *Grooming products are helpful to remove vm, but use them only if you will be bathing your llama prior to shearing.* If the judge notices grooming aids on the fleece, it may be disqualified.

After you've removed as much debris as possible, bathe your llama with shampoo and water. Unscented biodegradable shampoo is best. Washing is recommended as it removes more of the dirt and fine debris, but most importantly it *restores lock structure*. Mix the shampoo with water, and gently squeeze it over the llama using a sponge. Remember not to agitate, as this will cause felting. Let the soap soak on the llama for about ten minutes. Rinse gently, always allowing the water to flow in the direction the fiber drapes. When completely rinsed, allow your llama to drip dry on a clean area (I set up some panels in the yard). Once your llama is completely dry, look over the fleece again to see if there is any debris you can easily pick out with your fingers without disturbing the lock structure.

Shearing...

Decide on the haircut you prefer. For ALSA fleece shows, it is preferable to use the entire prime area (it also provides the maximum fiber harvest). However, anything from a barrel cut to the full prime is acceptable. While volume and weight of a fleece are not currently judging criteria for llama fleeces, they may become so in the future. Higher volume and/or weight of a fleece may also be a plus when the judge is considering the fleece's overall impression.



Picture from the ALSA Llama Fleece Judging Manual

Whether you use a chute, a small pen, or tie the llama to a fence, use a clean sheet or cloth under the llama so you have a clean shearing area. In the interest of cleanliness, take the llama by the potty pile before you begin.

As you shear the fiber, and it comes off the llama, place it on a skirting table. Place the fleece cut side down, laid out in the same arrangement it was while still on the llama. Immediately skirt off sections such as the lunch box (area where the neck meets the shoulders), backbone, and belly hair, as you shear, placing them in a separate container.

Once you have your show fleece all on the skirting table, you can go back and smooth out your llama's haircut. Discard (or use as mulch) these second cuts.

Before you let your four legged friend go play in the pasture, you will want to give him some sun and/or fly protection. I have discovered washing the sheared area helps cut back on flies – they seem attracted to the oil from the clippers. You may also wish to use a sunscreen and/or fly spray. Baby powder or cornstarch can be used to prevent sunburn.

Skirting...

It is helpful to have a skirting table and grading screen. A grading screen can be made inexpensively using 4' long thin boards (lath would do) and some fencing (e.g., chicken wire or snow fence) or other material with one inch openings. You may want to double the fencing material, with a board around the perimeter between the two layers. This type of surface makes it easy to shake debris and second cuts from the fleece. Set your grading screen on your skirting table, so it is at a convenient height.



Grading Screen – Picture from ILFG web site Photo Gallery (2004 Ohio State Fair album)



Skirting Table – owned by June Black

Skirt as you shear, and you will have less work. If you haven't done so while shearing, now is the time to remove belly hair, lunch box, and possibly the backbone hair (if it is damaged). These can be saved in a bag labeled "2nd quality." You may want to use them for rugs or other items not worn next to the skin.

Lay your fleece out on the skirting table, cut side down, in the arrangement it was on the llama. If this is not possible because the arrangement is lost, that's okay. Just lay the fleece with fiber cut side down as it is. Now gently shake the screen. Debris and second cuts will fall through the holes. Examine the fleece carefully. Pull out any debris, coarser fiber (but do NOT pull guard hair!), shorter (less than 3") or longer (more than 8") locks, matted locks, excessively dirty fiber, etc. Locks with 1" to 3" staple lengths can be put aside for use in felting projects. *Do NOT pull guard hairs or trim tips!* Guard hair is part of what will be judged, and any cut tips (no matter how long the lock) will be counted as second cuts. Shake the fleece gently again, allowing debris and 2nd cuts to fall through. Turn the fleece over, picking off any vm or 2nd cuts as you go. Turn it over again (cut side down), and gently shake it one more time.

Storing...

From the skirting table, roll your fleece loosely, cut side out. You may want to lay the fleece on tissue paper and roll it up with the fleece to help preserve the arrangement. Place the fleece in a storage bag.

If you are storing your fleece for some time before it will be shown, it is recommended it be stored in a paper bag or pillow case. Moths that eat protein fiber cannot chew through cellulose. If your fleece is very clean and completely dry, you can probably store it in a plastic bag.

Pre-show primping...

If your fleece will be shown within a few weeks, you will want to make sure it is in its best condition. Take it out of the storage bag. Lay it out, cut side down, on a flat surface where it can breathe. You may put it in a sunny spot. Keep it out of the wind and weather. Leaving the fleece out will allow it to fluff up again, and it will look more vibrant and alive when the judge sees it.

Sending to the show...

As when you stored it, roll your fleece loosely, cut side out. You may want to lay the fleece on tissue paper and roll it up with the fleece to help preserve the arrangement. Place the fleece in a clear plastic bag. If the fleece will not stay together to be rolled, (it may be young, short, or especially fine), just pile it loosely in a clear plastic bag. Make sure you enclose a copy of the llama's ILR certificate and a completed entry tag. You may also enclose a business card and/or picture of the llama as these can be used when the fleeces are put on display.

Why indeed...

What a lot of work! Why am I doing this? How will I benefit?

1. I'm educating myself,
2. getting exposure (aka cheap advertising) for my llamas, and
3. making sales!!!

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