

# BREED STANDARDS

*by Dick Walker*



## WHAT IS A BREED STANDARD?

A breed standard is a document that delineates the physical attributes of an exemplary Suri Alpaca. In the most basic terms a breed standard codifies in words what breeders see in their minds when they visualize a beautiful Suri. In one sense a breed standard describes in some detail that "close to perfect" Suri that we all strive to produce. In another sense, however, it describes a Suri that does not yet exist as there can always be improvement on what already graces our pastures. A breed standard takes into consideration both breed Type characteristics as well as commercially valuable attributes relevant to fleece production. A breed standard will, over time, result in a gradual shift/improvement in the phenotype of the North American Suri Alpaca. It is therefore important for a standard to be forward looking and anticipatory of future uses of the suri's unique fiber.

In essence a breed standard is a collective/consensus goal for breeders as well as point of reference to measure progress.

## WHY IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF BREED STANDARDS AN IMPORTANT STRATEGIC PROCESS FOR SURI BREEDERS?

The industry will gain focus and cohesiveness as breeders have a common set of goals to focus their breeding decisions. That said it is important to understand that achieving those goals can, and should, be accomplished by a number of different breeding styles and philosophies. The existence of this goal/standard will propel the industry into a more rapid and purposeful advance in the quality of all suri alpacas. Such a focus will help tremendously to assure the long term viability and prosperity of our industry.

The unique genotype/phenotype of the



Photo courtesy of Andy Tillman

Suri Alpaca will be protected from adulteration by other camelid breeds. Over time this will naturally lead to the evolution of the North American Suri into a purebred breed of livestock, something that has not happened on an industry wide scale in South America.

Breed Standards will bring increased objectivity to the show ring. Judges could now be trained to judge on a comparative basis relative to an accepted written standard. This is how virtually every other livestock breed is judged.

Our current show rules are inadequate to accomplish this, and yet they have come to serve as a 'defacto breed standard'. This has placed too much emphasis, authority, and control on the shoulders of the judging community.

It is time to give our judges a clear and objective standard by which to judge Suris.

## HOW IS A BREED STANDARD DEVELOPED?

Pertinent information is gathered and disseminated to all interested parties. A preliminary 'Type Conference' is held at

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which all interested breeders can participate in formulating a preliminary draft of the breed standard.

Areas requiring more information are identified. The preliminary draft is circulated for comments and a final draft is written. This may require a second Type Conference to work out any conflicting issues. The final draft is circulated for review by all suri breeders and if acceptable is adopted as the North American Suri Alpaca Breed Standard.

### **WHO DETERMINES A BREED STANDARD?**

The standard should be developed by a broad based coalition of breeders with input from veterinarians, judges, fiber processors, and other interested parties. It is the breeders who have the biggest stake in this industry and acceptance of a standard will only occur if breeders are in control of the process.



Photo courtesy of Andy Tillman

There are those who feel that a standard should be developed by an 'unbiased panel of experts'. Such a group will never exist. There is simply no way of avoiding the time consuming work of consensus building amongst all interested breeders as we chart the future of the Suri.

### **WHY IS SURI NETWORK LEADING THE WAY IN DEVELOPING THE SURI BREED STANDARD?**

The Suri Network is the most appropriate organization to coordinate this effort. The Network represents a large and growing number of dedicated Suri breeders both large and small. Through the network, broad participation by a cross section of breeders can be facilitated to help insure that the views of all interested parties are represented.

Developing this standard is a natural evolutionary step in defining the Suri as a separate and distinct livestock breed. The very process of developing the standard will bring about changes in our industry that will propel the Suri breed forward at an accelerated rate. Setting goals and then striving to achieve them will set in motion the next era in the development of the North American Suri Alpaca. Preserving, promoting and advancing the quality of the North American Suri is the purpose of the Suri Network and a breed standard serves this purpose well.

### **IS A BREED STANDARD STATIC OR DOES IT EVOLVE?**

As our young industry first develops a standard, that standard may be less a description of an ideal and more a delineation of what is acceptable as a representation of the Suri breed. As breeders become more knowledgeable and discerning in their attitudes and

understanding of Suri the standard will evolve. As information is gained from research such as the upcoming Suri Network Fleece Study, refinement in the standard would be expected.

A breed standard is always a work in progress, it therefore will evolve. It is not something that changes from month to month or even year to year as that would describe a fad and not a standard. As knowledge accumulates and understanding advances a standard will by necessity change over time. There are few if any commercial livestock breeds that have not changed significantly over the past 20-30 years as research has provided insights enabling breeders to better select for desirable traits.

Once an initial standard is established a periodic review and amendment process and schedule will be established. It would not be unreasonable to anticipate that first review in 2-3 years with subsequent updates say every 5 years.

### **WILL A STANDARD PUT SMALL BREEDERS AT A DISADVANTAGE IN THE MARKETPLACE?**

A breed standard will affect breeders of all sizes in the same way. It will give them a target, a goal to strive for in their programs. Many established breeders already have such a goal fixed in their minds eye. For the inexperienced breeder a standard will help them to develop this vision. Even for the experienced breeders having a standard will sharpen their focus. The size of one's herd is not the most important factor in determining the quality of suris produced. The selection of breeding stock, some understanding of genetics, and special attention to selecting superior males are much more important. Our industry can point to numerous examples of small breeding operations that are producing

exceptional suris. There never has been and never will be a short cut to success in breeding livestock. The presence or absence of a breed standard won't change that reality. A breed standard will not make a poor quality Suri worth less, nor an exceptional Suri worth more. They are what they are.

### **WILL A STANDARD RESULT IN LESS GENETIC DIVERSITY?**

To a certain degree this is unavoidable as a decrease in genetic diversity is a natural consequence of selective breeding with or without a written standard. An intelligently written and sensibly implemented standard would minimize the long term consequences while allowing the industry to experience the benefits a standard will bring. When problems have occurred in other breeds relevant to this issue it has usually involved a significant degree of tunnel vision with too narrow a focus on too few traits. These pitfalls can be avoided.

### **THE MARKET FOR SURIS IS GREAT RIGHT NOW, HOW WOULD A BREED STANDARD MAKE IT BETTER?**

The standard is not for now. The standard is to ensure the future success of the Suri breed. Now, when the market is great, is the ideal time to expend the effort and get a standard in place. For lack of a vision, a goal, a strategic plan, many industries have faltered. The Suri Network is determined not to let that happen to our industry. Taking a proactive stance on standards now will produce benefits for years to come. ●

