



# The Lure of Versatility ...and the love of Argentines

by Gayle M. Woodsum

In the show ring, judges often talk about winning llamas as being the “complete package.” Since their judging is based on the conformation of the llama, their comments generally reflect an appreciation that the animal moves well, is well balanced, and exhibits overall impressive ring presence.

Back at the ranch, when I think about the complete package I’m envisioning a llama that is built correctly, moves smoothly, grows exquisite fiber and is a joy to be around. And if they also like to accompany me on outings in the Rocky

Mountain backcountry, I’m looking at my llama soul mate.

In the early 80s, the horse world packaged this kind of multiple collection of positive traits into the marketing buzz word *versatility*. It didn’t matter what breed was being promoted—if the horse you were trying to sell was going to be worth anything at all, it had to be versatile. I was the editor of a regional horse magazine at the time, and two thirds of every monthly issue was dedicated to versatility. There was the versatile Arabian, the versatile Thoroughbred, the versatile Appaloosa. Farms were known for producing the most versatile horses in the show ring, on the trail, at the pony club trials.

So I come by my obsession for versatility honestly. And the fact is, the horse breeders and lovers of 25 years ago were onto something. Humans are inherently fickle. In order for them to maintain a dedicated interest level over what would amount to the average llama’s lifetime (nearly a quarter of a century), and for that interest to extend beyond an exclusive club of trend oriented fans, they

need to pair up with llamas who offer a range of positive attributes. Llamas who appeal to knitting moms, hiking dads, obstacle loving kids and a community that benefits from parade entries and nursing home visitors, are more apt to have a home for life than those whose talents are more narrowly focused.



With the herd that lives at my place, we believe in a well rounded basic education. Just about every llama gets at least a little trail time, is introduced to the idea of obstacle negotiation, takes a downtown visit or two, enters the show ring if they are basically correct, and has



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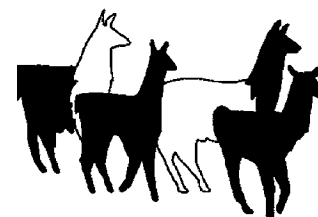
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his or her fiber collected for some use or another. It's all part of introducing the idea that they will forever be sharing their lives with humans, and a means for us to evaluate what will be the most appropriate career path for that animal.

Very few llamas excel in every venue. An incredibly high percentage of those who do turn out to be Argentine and Argentine crosses. Which (in addition to that pounding heart thing

that happens to me when I see a well built Argentine llama) is why I am so enamored of these particular llamas.

The Argentinean people began the honing of certain characteristics in their centuries of llama breeding focus. In addition to color sorting for strong stamping capabilities, they genetically encouraged massive fiber production, extreme body capacity and bone, and supremely gentle personalities. They ended up with llamas that exhibit a rich, true color palette; fine yet dense fiber with a common regrowth rate of 8" a year; a big footed, broad nosed, wide-eyed, teddy-bear look irresistible to the general public; and amenable, laid-back personalities that are happily willing to put up with a range of human requests.

Here in the States, all we have to do is stay true to breeding for correctness, and we've inherited the ultimate in versatility potential. Of course, no animal is automatically suited for everything, but with the Argentine genetic background along with proper training and care, we are given a great shot at it.

The first Argentine offspring to come from the llamas we imported who had started out on the South American altiplano were a great surprise to us. All those complex, patience challenging techniques needed for halter training the typical weanling were overkill for most of our Argentine crias. Those halter introduction sessions ended up going something like: "What is it, a halter? Okay. What do you want me to do with it, wear it? Okay. What do you want to do now?"

We also had to develop a different eye for the growing Argentine than for the rest of the herd. Sure, the basic needs like straight front legs, correctly angled hocks and strong topline were still what we wanted to see. But things like eye-catching presence, exotic style and fiber that knocked our socks off didn't blossom as quickly as they did on our other youngsters.

Our full Argentine Espiritu is experiencing the typical developmental curve of most of our Argentines. He looked like a round, curly brown llama with ears hidden by a puff of head fiber until he was almost 18 months old. He was happy being a popular youth llama until we gave him a lion cut and the cool

*Continued on page 18...*

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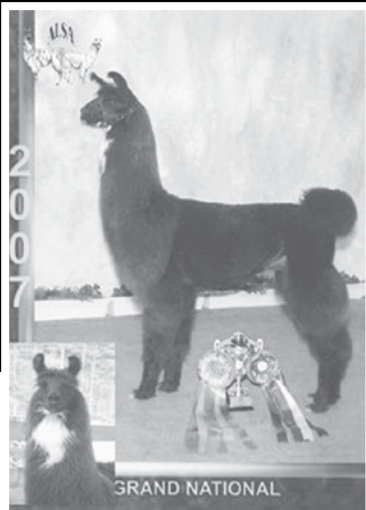
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breeze on his substantial body made him want to strut his stuff. Even then his show career was spotty. He was seventh out of eight at his first show. Little by little he began to work his way up in placings, then won his Celebrity Futurity class and grabbed the vast majority of his grand champion classes in ALSA shows after that.

Spirit was between two and three before we could consistently count on top-of-his-class placings, and three before he began to grab regular firsts and grand championships in his walking fleece classes. Last summer he became the favorite llama among pack trek outings because he never seemed to notice the pack and never lagged no matter how long or steep the trail was. Last winter he surprised me again by being one of the easiest-to-train performance llamas I've ever worked with and in spite of his graduation into popular breeding male, has begun to show and place well in the novice and open performance ring. He steps out willingly and grasps voice commands, so has begun early driving training.

Argentine llamas develop more slowly than other llamas. They continue to grow well into their fourth year, both physically and emotionally. These are not necessarily llamas that will light up the show ring as babies (although there are some happy exceptions). They take their

time shining their light on the world, and need us humans to be willing to wait for them to display their ultimate strengths.

The endearing sweetness of Argentines can also translate into more of a pasture-browsing temperament than that of a working athlete, so lots of exciting trail or public work as youngsters can help overcome that couch potato tendency early on (easier than trying to convince them otherwise once they've grown up).

Maintaining health and comfort for Argentine llamas is crucial. All that body mass is very prone to easy weight gain and potential obesity, especially with the full Argentines. Those who have a show career with us also have a regular jogging and hiking regimen with me when they don't have access to their ridge and canyon summer pasture that affords natural exercise. (In the flat fields of winter, I'll see the rest of the herd gallivanting around while the Argentines stay put at the nearest feed source.)

Equally important to maintaining condition is fiber management. If you don't think carrying around an 8" - 12" incredibly dense coat takes its toll on a body, try it sometime. I've seen these animals sweat and breath hard from heat stress in the halter ring on a 58° day. All that beautiful stuff is also nearly impossible to keep matte free for more than a couple of years. It has to come off regularly. All of it. Which is where the famous Argentine shear comes from. It's a matter of necessity with these llamas.

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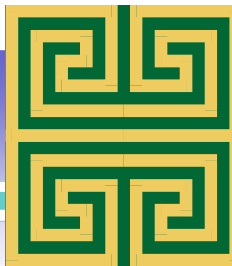
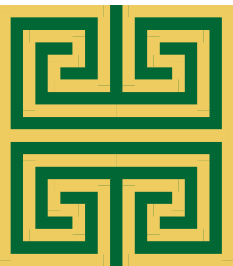
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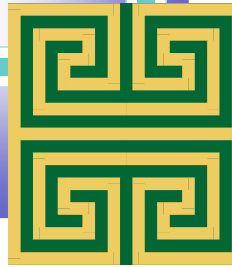
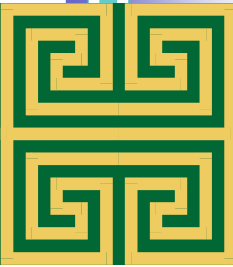


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Unfortunately, it's a hard leap to make. There are still plenty of people who love to make the "poodle" comments, and plenty of judges who can't find their way to placing a body shorn animal over one with comparable conformation and the added beauty of flowing fiber. (That's a hard competition to win in what is—in part—a beauty contest.)

Once all that fiber comes off, the teddy bear look goes with it. We kept Spirit's neck and leg wool on through almost four years of major showing. By this spring, it was time. He was matted underneath, the tips were drying out. He needed to start over. So he got his first Argentine cut. I happen to love that shear, but it was nonetheless hard to see on our star. My teddy bear was gone. He looked all grown up. The crowds don't stop us

now, and halter classes are not automatic wins. Of course, he'll have most of it back by next season and we'll be able to keep it on every other year, which I'm looking forward to (it's fun to get lots of attention). Most importantly, he's happy and healthy.

So, there's a price to pay for the amazing, irresistible versatility of the Argentine llama, and it comes with a little work. But every time one of our Argentines wins a blue or purple ribbon, every time I wear a garment with Argentine champion softness, every time I spend a glorious weekend in the backcountry with a contented Argentine, I remember how much in love I am and remember that all the investment is worth it.

—Gayle M. Woodsum is a writer, llama lover, ALSA Judge and founder of the Llama Welfare Foundation, who lives in Wyoming

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