

## **2005 BVCS CONFERENCE**

- Venue

Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire

- Speaker

Eric Hoffman, California, USA

- Topics

Phenotype, anatomy and conformation

Screening

General evolution of camelids, their natural history, development and behaviour

- Other presentations

Topics from the 2005 international camelid conference

Internal parasite control

Female reproduction

BVD

TB

Ectoparasites

Anaemia

Chronic dermatitis project

Spinal problems

Hindlimb paralysis in two crias

Norfolk wenn in an alpaca

Investigating anaemia in adult camelids - Cornelia Bidewell

- Practical sessions

Cambridge Vet College - Post mortem examination and sampling techniques, Anatomy

Collingwood Alpacas - Camelid screening, farm walk/talk



Participants in the 2005 conference

- Reports

I

Pre-dinner drinks kindly sponsored by Vetquip had been followed by a delicious meal and a fiendishly difficult animal-based musical quiz but it was only when our honoured guests had to be ushered to their waiting taxi at 2.45am that we knew our annual conference dinner had been a success. They had courageously welcomed 30 vets to their farm for the afternoon and gave us the benefit of their extensive research and ideas on alpaca farming which led to them importing several hundred all white animals from South America. During the same session, we could not have had a better exponent on screening prior to purchase than Eric Hoffman. Creator of the US Alpaca Registry, he has screened tens of thousands of alpacas, refining the criteria he had a key role in putting together and which are now used throughout the world. Amongst his helpful tips was how to use a very simple template to objectively assess variation in leg conformation.

This session followed on naturally from his morning talks on phenotype, anatomy and conformation as well as a fascinating discourse on the general evolution of camelids, their natural history, development and behaviour. The latter showed clearly that camelid management can be very simple as long as natural behaviour is taken into account and demonstrated how ignoring natural social structure can lead to health problems.

The conference had begun the previous day in the post mortem room at Cambridge Veterinary College. Several camelid cadavers provided ample material for a demonstration of post mortem and sampling techniques by Nick Woodger and led on to some interesting discussions. That evening, back at the conference hotel, we enjoyed a Spanish/South American buffet and demonstrations of salsa dancing. Some (we have the photos 'G'!) joined in enthusiastically but others preferred the relative peace of the bar.

The final day began with our informal AGM and rapidly continued with a series of presentations from members. Topics included BVD, TB, skin diseases, spinal problems, anaemia, a new IgG test and reviews of the International Camelid Conference in Oregon in the spring of 2005.

Overall, the weekend provided further insight into current problems in camelids, which will be reported in detail in the forthcoming proceedings, as well as an excellent social occasion and a chance to catch up with other vets who are working with camelids.

## II

### Saturday Practical sessions

The Saturday afternoon was spent at Collingwood Alpacas, near St. Ives, by kind permission of Mark Andrews. He put a lot of time and effort into advance preparations and on the day overcame his reluctance of speaking in public to share with us the benefits of his extensive research and ideas on alpaca farming which led to the importation of several hundred all white animals from South America. He comes from a farming background and decided in 1995 that camelids were his future. Reports from Australia indicated that alpacas should be a financially viable enterprise, with the major demand being for animals with white fibre.

These animals were selected in May 2003 but did not arrive at the farm until January 2005, having spent 6 months in quarantine in Switzerland on the way. This route is no longer used, instead camelids are imported into the UK via a French-owned island off Canada. Unfortunately, due to a break down in communications, many of the females were bred whilst in Switzerland, which led to them giving birth soon after arrival in the UK in the worst of the winter weather. Despite valiant attempts, including using a hair dryer for rapid drying of the new born animals, followed by the use of heat reflecting coats, about 40 crias died of hypothermia. One valuable lesson was to return the cria to its mother as soon as possible, leaving the head and tail still wet to allow for scent bonding. He also made a point of storing the afterbirth, so that if there proved to be problems with the mother accepting her new offspring, it could be wiped over the cria to reinforce bonding. Mark maintains that even though in Europe it is possible to breed from alpacas all the year round, he feels it is best to mate in June so that the crias are born in April/May when climate and pasture conditions are optimum for survival.

Pasture control is something Mark takes very seriously. He feels that many UK alpacas are kept on pastures which would be ideal for other animals, but which are too rich for camelids who thrive best on a high fibre, low protein diet because of their very efficient digestive system. Determined to start as he meant to go on, he had to pay 50% more for seed so that he could grow coarse grass. Even so, in the spring when grass is growing well, he puts his alpacas on the poorest fields, using his richer pastures for making hay, then for the pregnant females over winter. His medicine field contains a mixture of herbs and clover and this is reserved for any animal which needs a bit of a boost. He also tracked down a supplier of zero-endophyte rye grass to prevent the possibility of ryegrass staggers. This was being overwhelmed by New Zealand clover which bales well as it has long stalks, but a nitrogen top dressing should restore the balance. Weed control is by periodic topping, and he finds that the alpacas particularly relish the weed tops as they start to wilt.

When his alpacas arrived on the farm, Mark said that they were worm free after treatment in quarantine and as there had been no other stock on the land for years, is assuming that internal parasites should not be a problem. We discussed the need for regular monitoring via faecal floats as any introduction of endoparasites to these naïve animals could be disastrous.

There were further discussions on the need for a DNA database, observed matings, good records, management of the breeding males, body condition scoring, foot trimming, fibre assessment and stocking rate – he works on 6 alpacas to the acre.

Overall, a very enjoyable session enabling us to see alpaca management in action

The other half of our afternoon practical session was spent with Eric Hoffman, who, together with our chairman Robert Broadbent, demonstrated exactly how to screen alpacas. It was good to see how the theory we had learnt earlier in the day could be applied to the live animal, especially the use of acetate templates to objectively assess variation in leg conformation.

Although most of the alpacas presented to us were perfect specimens, for teaching purposes our host Mark had bravely included some of his problem animals including:

Animal 1

Low body score - estimated at 1. The ribs could be palpated as they articulated with the spine and the muscles of the spine, thigh and chest were concave.

Luxating patellae

Deviated tail

Only 1 testicle in the scrotum

Collapsing pasterns

Overall comment: Eliminated. Possible Vitamin D problem (feel for exostoses of the growth plates of the ribs) and general emaciation which requires investigation

## Animal 2

Good body score 3.5 – 4 but at 39" tall, right on the maximum height limit. Slightly bow legged when walking away from the observer, but may walk normally when more relaxed. Also gait may be affected by overgrown nails

Overall comment: Trim nails then re-assess

## Animal 3

Acquired damage to a foreleg had led to amputation. Unfortunately, instead of taking off the leg in the mid-humerus region, leaving a reasonable stump to allow comfortable sitting whilst cudding, only the damaged foot had been removed. This meant that although the animal had no difficulty getting around, the metacarpus touched the ground, leading to further trauma and probable infection

Helpful hints which came out of this session:

Good handlers can make the screening process much easier and more rapid as well as less stressful to animals and screeners

When first confined to a race, alpacas are often very tense (and vocal). This can make them appear to have a broad-based stance, but after a while they will relax and stand/walk normally

Use a sliding gauge to measure any discrepancy of incisors and dental pad and callipers to measure testicle length

Body score about 2" behind the shoulder blade at the thoracic spine as the lumbar area always feels bony

The microchip is traditionally inserted at the base of the left ear

Fighting teeth are routinely removed with obstetric wire at gum level

Mature males are often sensitive around their hindlegs. For restraint when cast, the hindlegs can be tucked into a rope tied around the alpaca's waist - chuckering