

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE PASTURE

In these matters the only certainty is that nothing is certain. Pliny the Elder

A llama breeder of my acquaintance has long held that, when marketing our animals, we tend to exaggerate the degree to which our animals have few birthing problems. The breeder cited believes that many problem births are quietly buried and then forgotten ... at least when we talk to potential first-time buyers.

I do not dismiss this viewpoint. One can argue that camelids have fewer birthing problems than some other species, but that does not mean that birthing problems do not exist. To the extent that we reassure potential first-time buyers that birthing problems are virtually non-existent, we are putting our alpacas and llamas at risk when they are bred by naïve new owners who do not anticipate problems. There is no certainty that all will go well.

We are a relatively small breeding farm (current population is 30 llamas). Over the years we have lost two cria and one mother. Because of potential scarring of the uterus of the surviving mother we have removed her from our breeding program.

Our first, and worst, dystocia occurred very early in our life with llamas. It involved a megalcephalic fetus (a fetus with an unusually large head). My confidence in myself as a llama breeder would have been destroyed by this experience but for two events which occurred as this dystocia played out. First, Hilary Ware attempted (via phone) to talk me through extricating the fetus. I am forever grateful for this assistance even though we did not and could not succeed. Second, we acquired a new (our current) vet who reassured me that bad things do happen to good people and good animals.

This experience affected me profoundly. I tend to be overly protective and must therefore mentally sit on my hands and not intervene unless it is necessary. Fortunately, Jeanne is very good at reminding me that I am overprotective.

We have had several birthing problems that have been resolved favorably. The first was a cria who had problems breathing after he was born. His diaphragm had been pushed out of place during the birthing process. This was easily resolved by grabbing his front feet in one hand and his rear feet in the other and swinging him like a pendulum. He is now a guard llama for an alpaca farm. The other happened this past week when all went well with the

birth until the cria was two-thirds out when he became stuck in the birth canal. After talking to the vet I reoriented the cria by forty-five degrees and with a strong tug was finally able to free him. In both of these situations survival of the cria depended on someone being present to remedy the situation.

In this most recent incident we were dealing with a mother who had a history of easy births. The day before a mother-to-be, that we were concerned about because of a lack of mothering skills with her first cria, apparently had a very easy delivery and has proved to be a superb mother this time round ... re-read the quote at the beginning of this column.

I have several thoughts I would like to leave you with:

- Llamas and alpacas, while being remarkably healthy, are not immune from having birthing problems.
- If you about to buy your first alpacas or llamas and plan to breed them, make sure that the selling farm provides post-sale guidance and help. There is nothing like being able to talk to someone who has some experience in these matters.
- Enroll in one of LaRue Johnson's wet labs. I cannot stress enough how valuable an experience this can be. If the opportunity presents itself I will take the lab again as a refresher.
- If you attend a GALA Conference and Hilary Ware is presenting a session on birthing – attend it!
- Keep the fact that problems can happen in perspective. Throughout our lives we are presented with problems. We should not shy away from something just because a potential for a problem exists.
- Finally, breeding carries with it a lot of responsibilities ... do not breed your camelids indiscriminately.

Enjoy this fall season with your alpacas/llamas,

Lynd