

Mobile Mating

By Mike Safley

Explaining "Mobile Mating" to a new acquaintance at the local Parent Teachers Association meeting might be a bit difficult. But, as I discovered on a recent trip "down under", it's a great alpaca breeder's business opportunity.

Jude Anderson and Alan Cousill of Pucara Alpaca Stud found that an alpaca owner who desired outside stud service for their female didn't necessarily want to ship mom and her new cria off to someone else's farm for sixty days. They responded by creating mobile mating.

Jude and Alan are two of the most enthusiastic alpaca entrepreneurs you'll ever meet. Big Al, who stands 6' 6", started life as a surfer, searching the world for a big wave. After several years as a professional basketball player in Australia's version of the NBA, Al got a real job as a building contractor. Jude was an elementary school teacher in Geelong (near Melbourne) where England's Prince Charles once learned his ABC's. Then one day, the two of them discovered alpacas.

Together they have established Pucara Alpaca Stud on eighty acres of lush ocean front property not far from the world famous surfing haven, Bells Beach and downtown Melbourne. The farm, which supports about 200 alpacas, is a big operation by most standards. But, after spending a week "down under" with Al and Jude, I realized that they were actually running a series of small business opportunities. They agist more than 150 alpacas, Al brokers animals for many of his customers and Jude runs the mobile mating service. No wonder they both quit their "real" jobs.

The phone rings - a small breeder, about three hours from Pucara, announces the birth of a new cria. Jude is used to receiving this kind of good news and, after the usual alpaca chatter, "Is it a girl or a boy? What color is it and how is mom doing?", she books an appointment for two weeks later. On the appointed day Jude loads Snowman in the white cargo van and heads off to her friend's ranch for the scheduled breeding. While her male orgles his way through the day's labor, Jude has a cup of tea and catches up on the local alpaca gossip. Mobile Mating - what a great way to make a living! During the twelve months ending in November of 1995 this scene was repeated 73 times by Jude and her four machos - 29 times for the pure white Snowman, 22 times for the shiny black Pacific Beethoven, 10 times for the dark fawn Carmel Chris, and 12 times for prize winning Jack Flash. Not bad for a business that grew out of the simple realization that most small breeders didn't want to send mom and her new cria off the ranch to breed for the first 60 days of the baby's life.

When I first suggested doing an article on Pucara's unique mobile mating operation to *Alpacas*® editor Linda Livengood, she informed me that a friend of hers had actually been doing the same thing in the llama business for many years and suggested I call and interview her for additional insight.

As it turns out, Marilyn Milton of Highland Llamas in Grants Pass, Oregon, was also an acquaintance of mine. Marilyn started her mobile service when she had only one male and three females. She saw the opportunity to market herself and her male to small breeders by going the extra mile that the larger breeders were not willing to travel. The idea was an instant hit. She averaged 46 breedings a year, with Bogart her senior herd sire. "He bought and paid for my cargo van many times over," says Marilyn, who just traded for a newer model after putting 237,000 mobile mating miles on the old one. She has been running her door-to-door llama breeding operation for nine years.

Marilyn and Jude, half a world apart, have each come up with remarkably similar business plans. Both had many of the same suggestions for a successful operation, which I've listed below:

1. One male can do a maximum of two successful breedings a day.
2. Breeding maiden females can be frustrating and often requires multiple trips.



Jude Anderson with Snowman

3. Mothers with cria, bred at 14 to 21 days, have a high catch rate on the first breeding.
4. Overall success is about 66% on the first mating. The success ratio could be increased substantially by eliminating mobile mating with maiden females.
5. Stud males take to mobile mating very quickly. "You don't have to ask twice for them to jump in the van," says Jude.
6. Transporting up to three males in the van for multiple matings is not a problem.
7. Research the female – was her last birth normal? Make sure she's clear of infection. If she's a maiden, will she go down for a male? Or is she still in her "coy" stage? Well researched females often take the first time.
8. Every male is not the ideal traveling stud. The ideal macho should be well behaved, even tempered, polite, and travel well. Avoid high strung, ornery types.

Customers of the mobile mating service are often concerned about health risks. Marilyn researched the topic with Dr. Murray Fowler. Apparently, males won't pass an infection from one female to another, unless they breed the second female within five minutes of the first. Transporting a female can cause stress to her and her newborn cria. Mating in her own pasture, without the stress of mixing in a strange herd, is often the least risky approach to outside breeding. Mobile mating is quick and clean. Neither the stud nor the female is exposed to a strange herd, new feed, or different management practices for a prolonged period.

Jude Anderson did point out a risk that is worth noting. "Be careful how you advertise," says Jude. "Don't paint 'Mobile Mating Service' on your van along with your phone number." Jude found this out the hard way.

"Last year I was doing a mobile mating at a friend's ranch. The mating was going along nicely, when my mobile phone rang.

"Hello." (Male voice) "Can I speak to Allison?"

"I'm sorry there's no Allison here. You must have a wrong number."

"What number are you? I dialed 525-3911."

"This is 525-3911. Where did you get the number?"

"An advertisement in *The Truth* newspaper."

(*The Truth* is a paper that, amongst other things, advertises the services of "Ladies of the Night.") It once ran a feature on alpacas in which we placed a small ad, but I still didn't get it."

"Well, what did you want?"

"Er um, I'd rather not say."

(Now I get it!)

"Is this what you were after?" I held the phone close to the happily orgling male.

Beep, Beep, Beep. "Oops, wrong type of service!"

Both Jude and Marilyn agree on the major benefits of mobile mating. Making friends and getting to know the small breeders and their farms are the biggest pluses of the business. For the female's owner it's not having to miss out on her cria growing up, which is often the best part of owning alpacas.

As they say in Australia, "No worries mate, she'll right!"

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