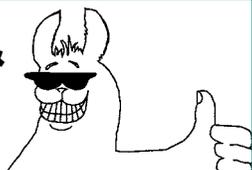
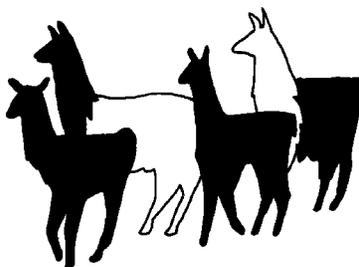


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## Interview with Courtnee and Robin Benson of Sapaveco Ranches

by Sue Wilde

**Hi Courtnee and Robin, welcome to the LamaLink. We are always happy to feature dedicated llama breeders in the Link.**

**Where is your farm, Sapaveco Ranches located? What is the meaning of Sapaveco? Your family was living in Austin, what prompted the move to the country?**

Sapaveco Ranches is located in Florence, TX just north of Austin. We have a second location for family and friend recreation in Rocksprings, TX. Sapaveco comes from a vegetable packing and shipping company that was owned by my great grandfather in San Patricio County, TX. The name of the business was San Patricio Vegetable Company, or for short, SAPAVECO. He brokered and shipped vegetables out of Texas and Colorado. We wanted to use this name because of the nostalgia. My dad was always a country boy, raised in South Texas. After living in the city for almost 20 years we all felt that

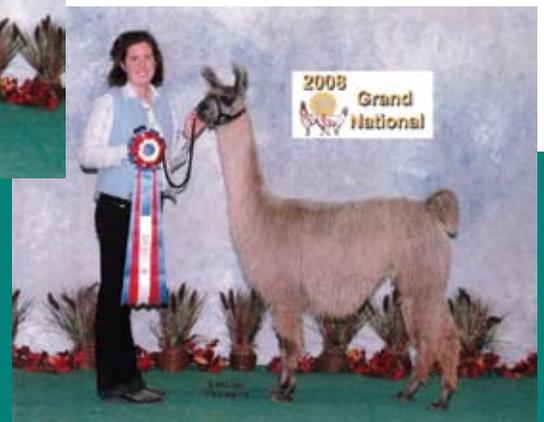
it was time to move to the country. We lived in Austin, but spent every weekend out of town at our lake house at Lake Buchanan, our Rocksprings ranch, or offshore fishing out of Port O'Connor. Robin owned a pet sitting business for 10 years while living in Austin and had to give it up when we moved. After so many years and so many good friends made, it was extremely hard for her to give it up. While living in Austin we always had a minimum of four dogs, a couple of cats, a rabbit, and fish in a pond, plus we were foster parents for the local SPCA – basically, whatever we could get away with living in the city. We even had a couple of baby goats living in our back yard for a while that would drink water out of the swimming pool. So, when we made the move to the country we knew we had to have some kind of animal.

**You have been breeding llamas for only a few years, what made you decide**

**to choose llamas for your farm? What criteria did you use to choose your first llamas? What are you looking for in a llama for your program now? Do you two always agree on what llamas should be in the program?**

Robin knew right off the bat that she wanted llamas. She liked the unique and exotic, yet gentle look they have. However, with our first purchase of llamas, we did not intend on showing, but just keeping them as companion animals. When we bought our first llamas, we did not purchase for great bloodlines, conformation, or fiber. Needless to say, we have learned a great deal. Now when we look to add a llama to our program we look for a complete package in the animal we are considering purchasing. It must have excellent conformation, the fiber type we want, size, disposition, good and reputable bloodlines that will benefit our breeding program. A great show record doesn't hurt. We are focusing on silky and suri fibered animals. Our silky main herdsire, MSF The Patriot, and our suri junior herdsire, SHAG Power Petrone, we feel we can accomplish our goals. Both males have amazing show records

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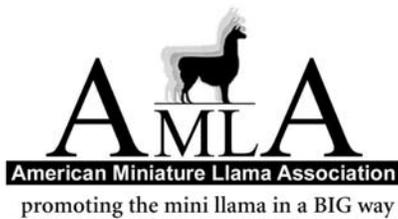


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and place at the top of their class on both the local and national level and they have the best dispositions. We want our females to be just as strong in the show ring as our males as to later produce the best offspring. I do a lot of research prior to deciding what we will purchase and spend countless hours doing this. When I show Robin something that we may be interested in, she knows I have done my homework on the animal and am serious about it. After we go over the different qualities of the animal, the show record, breeding record, etc., then we make our decision and we tend to agree. I feel we have made wise decisions on which animals to purchase to benefit our program.

**Your website is very good and your photographs are great. Any tips on taking a good photograph for promoting your llamas?**

I have spent a lot of time creating the website and playing with what looks the best. I think that a good picture really draws attention to the animal. Robin and I both take the photos for the website or advertisements we may do. First, we make sure there is nothing distracting in the background with minimal trees and no other llamas. I like pictures with green grass and a clear, blue sky so we always try to get our pictures done on nice days. The llama needs to look clean and groomed, but it's not necessary to have them show ring ready for the picture because not every speck of dirt is noticeable in a picture. Either Robin or I will set up the animal while the other snaps pictures. We always make sure the llama is posing at it's best – neck up, tail up, ears up, and correct foot placement. We want the llama to look it's best. When sending pictures to a potential buyer you should always stand next to the llama so they can get an idea of the actual height of the llama, too.



**The show record you have on your site is more than impressive. What are your show ring secrets? Would you consider pursuing a judging certificate? What are the characteristics of a good llama judge?**

We really enjoy showing and strive to show our llamas in a way that displays them at their best. First, we don't go in the ring nervous because it will travel right down the lead rope to the animal and cause them to misbehave. We always enter confident. Relaxing in the ring is not an option. We are always aware of where the judge is and always want to have the llama set up to paint the best picture to the judge. Before showing a llama we always evaluate it and know how to show it at its best – does it need to walk more slowly or quickly, will it allow the judge to go down the topline, etc. We work to teach our llamas to set up and then allow someone to rub down their topline. Grooming also plays an important part of presenting your llama. It needs to be neatly groomed and sheared in a way that shows off it's conformation. I really love grooming and shearing the llamas, so this makes getting ready for the shows fun for me too. I have considered pursuing a judging certificate and I think that will be something I may do in the future. However, I want to finish college first and learn my family's commercial landscaping company before I pursue the judging certificate. Robin and I both believe that a good llama



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judge looks at the entire llama. The judge should not focus only on the top line, leg movement, etc, but the entire package.

**You and your mother Robin are a team in the llamas, what are your strengths that you bring to the venture? How are your dad and brother involved with the llamas?**

We each bring valuable strengths to our llama venture. Robin does a lot of the every day tasks while I am at school. She also worms, vaccinates, grooms, and desensitizes and halter trains the young ones. We both agree on which llamas to breed together to produce the best offspring possible. Researching bloodlines and different llamas really interests me, so when we are thinking about purchasing a llama I make myself very familiar with the bloodlines and characteristics of the llama. We are each involved in the showing aspect. When we get ready for a show we usually try to get a system going. While my mom and our ranch hand brush or pick the fiber, I wash the ones they have

previously completed. This works out best and we can get the job done quicker. As far as running the business goes we each do our fare share. I handle inquiries, advertising, etc., while Robin inventories our supply of hay and grain and manages our ranch hand, plus has hands on every day with the llamas.

My dad, Mike, and brother, Connor, are very supportive of us. They each try to attend as many shows as they can. My dad usually ends up doing most of the driving when we go to shows or need to pick up llamas. They both also have a good eye for which two llamas bred together would produce a pleasing offspring.

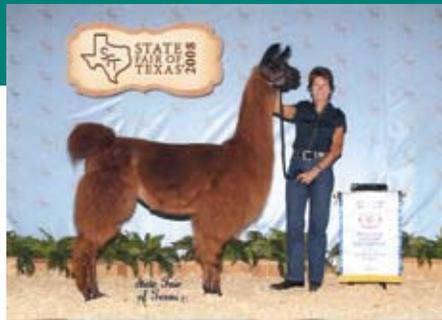
**Your offer hauling and shearing services on your site. Where did you learn to shear llamas? What are some of your more interesting experiences with shearing? What should people do to get their llamas ready for shearing? What are you doing with your fiber?**

I pretty much taught myself how to shear llamas. The first time we had our

llamas sheared we had someone do it for us and I watched him do a couple of them. It looked easy enough so I tried it on a few of them after I had ordered shears. The first shearing I did was a full body shear so lines and exactness didn't matter as much. When I sheared for our first show it was different because I had to make it nice and neat, but it still turned out good.

This past summer I offered shearing services around my area. I had quite a response. Everybody was able to bring the llamas to our ranch so I could put them in the chute (or attempt to) and make it an easier task. We couldn't believe the shape that these llamas came in. None of them had ever been on a halter so my mom and I got the wonderful job of putting a halter on these untouched llamas for the very first time. One lady came with two llamas she had rescued and I sheared them, did their toenails, and wormed them. We told her at the time that her female looked huge and her milk bag was full. She called two

*Continued on page 10...*



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days later to let us know that she had a baby llama. Another gentleman came with his four llamas and he didn't understand how he started out with two llamas, but now had four! We explained to him that a female can get pregnant practically any day of the year. He was so surprised by this and wanted to know what he could do to keep this from happening year after year. He emailed a month or so later to let me know that he had a fifth llama.

If possible don't let the llama's fiber get into bad shape where it is difficult to groom them. If the llama is matted almost to the skin I would recommend cutting off this fiber with a pair of scissors or hand shears. Then, the llama can be blown out so the blades do not dull as quickly. Pieces of dirt and especially sand can dull blades extremely fast. We keep our llamas pretty clean at all times so when show time rolls around it's not such a job to brush or pick out all of the debris. This also allows us to save our fiber when we shear. When we have enough fiber saved up we are going to send it to Ingrid's in Paintrock, TX to be made into rugs.

**You are learning to show in performance classes, what is the difference between training for halter classes and performance classes?**

I have just started training a few llamas for performance classes. It's been a lot of fun learning how to do this and working with the llamas. When we purchased SHAG Power Petrone he was already trained for performance classes (thank you Michele!) and I wanted to continue with him. We have begun training a couple of young females that are doing quite well. The llamas have to respond to commands such as step or jump when going over the jumps in the course. They also have to know to stop walking and stand when the handler stops. Showing in halter helps with this because they already know to stop and set for the judge. However, I think that showing in performance will be very beneficial to showing in halter classes because it creates a stronger bond and a more trusting relationship between the llama and the handler. The llama has to be able to do more than walk around a ring when participating in performance. They have to be willing to go through different obstacles, carry a pack, and submit to handling. I'm looking forward to participating in the performance classes in the shows.

**You have award winning llamas, how are you two promoting your program?**

I have done extensive work on our website to get it up and running for advertising. I think it is a really good tool to show off all of our animals and our llamas for sale. With the website people can see what our breeding program is all about, the quality of animals we have along with their show records, and the bloodlines we have. I found many llama people and their websites from visiting other's websites that I found through links. I have also linked to other farm websites and I think that helps bring people to the website. We have also been doing advertising in Lamalink. We advertised in the herdsire spectacular issue to promote our main stud and our junior herdsires. We also advertise impressive show wins such as at Grand Nationals. We run a monthly business card ad as well. The llama magazine published by the SCLA in our region is the Humming Herald and we run ads in it as well. We have also advertised with American Livestock. We are members of LFA and SLA so our contact information is listed on those websites which may attract people. We have business cards at our vet clinic and several local feed stores from which we get phone calls. Meeting and networking with different people from across the United States is a great way to get your name out there. Participating in shows in our area and outside our area also garners recognition. We have our ranch logo and info on magnetic signs on the side of our truck and have been approached numerous times in parking lots – even out of state. We think at the heart of it all though (and this should be in any type of business) is trustworthiness and honesty.

**You are studying biology at college to be a part of your family business of commercial landscaping, does this help with understanding llamas?**

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