

# Camelid Handling Tricks of the Trade *or Don't cut off a piece of perfectly good ham!*

You would think that human beings would just naturally do things the easy way. As it turns out, we don't. Instead we often do things the way we were shown how to do them the first time. This is not necessarily the easiest or best way. I am reminded of a story... A woman is getting ready for Easter dinner and is busy cutting off the ends of the ham before putting it in the huge roasting pan. Her daughter is watching and asks, "Why are you cutting off the ends? There isn't anything wrong with the ham you are cutting off." The woman says to her daughter, "You know, now that you are asking...I don't know why. This is the way Grandma showed me how to prepare the ham for roasting and I have always done it that way." They both decided to find out why when Grandma arrived that afternoon. When asked about the mystery technique, she said, "My roasting pan was never big enough to hold the ham."

In my experience I see an awful lot of people using training and handling techniques that are just as nonsensical and for the same reason. The person who sold them their first alpaca or llama did it that way - so they do too.

You need not begin reading this article at the beginning or keep reading until the end. You don't have to understand or agree with any particular training or handling philosophy. The following list is a compilation of tricks of the trade that will help you work magic with your animals immediately. Newcomers to the camelid business will want to laminate this article and put it in the barn. If you have been at the camelid game for a while, you may already have figured out some of this, but read carefully.

You may find one or two new nuggets of wisdom to add to your "toolbox".

## Herding

- Using a special word, noise or whistle to call your animals into the barn at mealtime is a great way of getting them in the barn - but be aware of the dangers of creating a "calling" pattern. Periodically call the camelids in at two in the afternoon or ten at night and give them food when you do. You won't be faced with a group of cute, clever camelids looking at their watches and shaking their little heads when you holler the magic word at the wrong time of day.

- When threatened, an animal's first choice is to get away - the flight response. All mental circuits are focused on finding an escape route. Herding a group of animals is actually the same as creating an escape route for the animals that suits you. Camelids will instinctively orient themselves so that they have a forward escape route relative to any perceived threat. Before you begin herding, look at the process from this perspective and block all exits except the one leading to the desired location.

- When moving animals into or through small spaces and particularly when moving around frightened or shy animals, be aware that you are larger than you think. Remember... to a camelid you are as big as the physical space that you occupy and your reach (reach=your body and the length of your arms). You will make major points with your animals, especially nervous ones, if you keep yourself at a safe distance as you work around them.

- When sorting animals, it is very helpful to have two or more levels of

confinement. Small catch pens that join a slightly larger area are much more useful than a single, tiny catch pen in the corner of a huge pasture. It will be much easier to herd the animals into the secondary container. There will always be those animals that sneak by when you are working them into the smaller catch pen; with an intermediate container you will not have to start over in the big field.

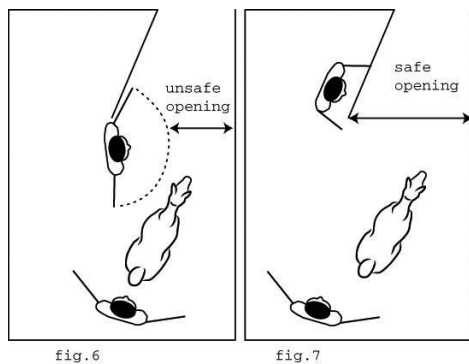
- If your pasture is too big to manage alone, you can build a temporary fence in the middle of the pasture to create an area you can work with. Fiberglass fence posts and nylon tape make a visible barrier and can be taken down easily for pasture maintenance. You may be able to manage smaller pastures with a length of rope or flat nylon tape (40 feet works well). Simply tie the rope or tape to the corner of the pen, walk out with it, and round up the animals.



You can make an instant fence using herding tape. Most alpacas and llamas will respect tape and herd very politely into the barn or a pen.

- When herding with more than one human, both herders must remember the effect of their reach. Gate tenders should stay as far out of the

way as possible. You would be amazed at the difference one giant step backwards will make. At clinics I have helped someone move an animal that was absolutely stuck simply by asking a bystander to move back a bit and open a gate slightly. Your camelids are acutely aware of human anatomy and will pass easily if the human is more than arm's length away from the path the animals must take. It also is better if your gate tender is standing behind the gate instead of on the animals' side of the gate. It feels safer for the animals to pass through a gate if the gate is located between the human and the critters.



Have your helper stand behind - NOT in front of - a gate when herding animals through an opening.

## Catching

- Use a catch pen! Build or buy panels to create a sturdy, safe, confined area approximately 10' x 10' in a convenient spot accessible from your pastures. Herd your animals to this pen each time you halter or work with them. If you have any trouble with any particular technique or task while working in the pen, try making it smaller by stacking bales of hay inside the pen.

- Try catching difficult animals (wild or spitty animals in particular) in the catch pen by tying a rope to the end of a stick (a four-foot dowel will work). Use the stick to guide the rope over the head. Once the rope is around the neck you can control the head but still allow your animal to

move within the catch pen. Use the rope to steady your animal as you walk up to him with the halter.



Using a wand and rope to catch a llama can work wonders to level the playing field with an animal that has learned that he is bigger and stronger than a human.

## Haltering

- If your animal is having difficulty with initial halter training, try this: Buckle the crown piece of your halter in its largest hole and offer this large opening as if it were the noseband of the halter. Sometimes a few practice attempts with this much larger opening can pave the way for actually putting the noseband over the nose.



Introducing the halter by buckling the crown piece.

- Check your halter fit! Halters that don't fit are dangerous, create behavioral problems and don't work well for their intended purpose. Your halter is probably lacking if the noseband cannot be adjusted. A properly fitting halter rides up high on the nose bone close to the eye and stays there regardless of what the animal does or doesn't do. A properly fitting halter is

safe and comfortable. The noseband rests firmly on bone and stays there **NO MATTER WHAT**. There is enough room in the noseband for the animal to chew without interference.

- Before you put any halter on always open the noseband so that it is larger than you think you need. Snug up the crown piece. - tighter for animals with smaller heads. Take the slack out of the noseband. Larger animals need more room. Always physically examine the nose bone before you put a halter on an animal you don't know. Some animals have shorter than average nose bones. Recheck halter fit after about ten minutes - especially when haltering alpacas in full fleece.



A properly fitting halter fits well back on the nose bone and will stay there **NO MATTER WHAT!**

## Leading/Loading

- If you pull steadily on your llama or alpaca he will pull steadily back. You and your animal will be counterbalanced. No productive movement will result from this counterbalance. Camelids learn very quickly to widen their stance, drop their head and grow roots. Llamas and alpacas commonly learn to cush as a reaction to the steady pull. Use intermittent signals with a mini release in between each signal and continue giving them until the animal loses his balance and moves.

- Use a longer lead for initial lead training. I like a lead that is about 17

feet long. Getting further away makes your camelid feel safer and more likely to try walking with you. If he does bolt you have more time to react with a longer lead.

- If you have a long narrow aisle way, use it for your first few leading lessons. You can keep control of your animal more easily, and leading in a long narrow pen encourages your camelid to walk in a straight line behind you rather than all over the place.



Using a long narrow aisle way for initial lead training makes the job much safer and easier.

- When showing a llama or alpaca, help him stand still by watching for weight shifts in the front half of the body. Pay very close attention to the front feet and use your lead to keep the weight evenly distributed on both front legs. If the animal's weight is more over the right leg, move the head and neck to the left and release - weight over the left leg, move the head and neck over the right leg and release. You must correct and release or your animal will begin to lean on the lead rope and you will end up fighting with him. Your camelid will be much more likely to stand still using this technique than if you try to hold him still using force.

- Do you have an alpaca or llama that has trouble paying attention on the lead? Try walking him over 5-6 parallel poles on the ground spaced about 3 feet apart. This will often help a scattered animal learn to slow down and focus.

- Loading a difficult camelid:

Most llamas or alpacas would rather not get into a confined space with a human and will load in a trailer or other conveyance much better if they can get into the trailer themselves without being led in. Spot the trailer by the entrance to a barn and use panels to block any exit other than the trailer door. Herd the animals into the trailer. It will be much easier to herd a group of animals into the trailer releasing the ones you don't need rather than trying to load a single frightened animal intent on getting back to the group.



Herding animals into a trailer is much easier than dragging them in!

## Management

- Try giving subcutaneous injections using the group method. Put as many camelids as you can into your catch pen. The animals will feel safer in a group, making the job easier from a purely psychological point of view. But the advantages don't stop there. With enough animals in the pen you don't have to restrain the animals as you give the injection. The shot recipient can't move very much because of the crowd of other camelids. Stand behind the animal's eye on the side of the animal closest to the center of the pen and use an injection site in the front half of the body - the crease of the neck works well. This is not only easier for the animals but also a real time saver for the manager.



Crowding animals together makes giving injections much easier.

- Add a butt board to your chute! Tie a frightened camelid in a chute by the head and he will more than likely throw himself around, flip over, end up forward of the shoulder restraints or lie down. A camelid's long neck makes it difficult and dangerous to restrain him by the head. Add a rear barrier to your chute, tie your animal loosely and your chute becomes a very tiny catch pen instead of a restraint device. Camelids will remain calmer when contained than when restrained. **Always double check halter fit when using a chute!**

- Don't have a chute? If you have a trailer, use it for the chores that you would normally do in a chute.

- Are you nervous about giving an injection for the first time? Forget the orange; practice on a chicken! Get a whole chicken at the grocery store with the SKIN ON. Practice both sub-Q and IM injections with a variety of substances. Soy sauce is just about like Tetanus C/D; honey is very similar to ivermectin. Try a variety of needle sizes. You will get a much more accurate idea of what to expect on a real animal. You can even bake and eat your chicken after you practice.

- Difficulties picking up feet to trim toenails? Don't bother picking up the feet at all! Stand your camelid on a rubber mat or concrete pad and

trim the long parts of the toenail while the animal stands on his feet. It may not be the perfect answer, but it is possible to do a fair job of trimming toenails this way and this technique can keep you out of a fight with your camelid. A helper can steady the animal as you squat down and work. If your animal kicks, you may want to use a panel as a boundary reaching under the bottom rail to trim. Another alternative for quieter alpacas... steady the animal by putting your hand on the shoulders or hips while reaching down with the other hand to trim. When using this technique it is best to nibble away at the nails rather than taking off big hunks. Pruning style toenail trimmers work best for this technique. I have even used long handled limb pruners on very long toenails. With these long handled pruners, I don't even have to bend over!



Trimming on the ground is a great solution for keeping nails in shape.

## Husbandry

- If you ever have to milk a female camelid, this trick comes in very handy. Cut off the needle end of a 20cc syringe and insert the plunger in the wrong end - the end you just cut off. You now have a breast pump. You can put the smooth end with the rim up against the teat, draw back with the plunger and you are milking away.



Teat Pump

- Work with your babies early (three to four days old) and often (once a week) in the first three months. Five minutes per session is enough. Work in a catch pen with mother present; handle the mouth, tail and legs while the baby stands in balance unrestrained. Allow the baby to move freely in the catch pen and move with him as you work.

- Correct young camelids that don't respect proper boundaries. Male or female camelids that pull on your clothes, make physical contact with you or stand in your way without yielding the right of way are heading down a dangerous path. Don't encourage this behavior and learn more about how to respond appropriately.

And finally...Whatever you are doing, remember to breathe!

*More information and details on these and other training and handling techniques are available in past columns in this magazine and Marty's book "The Camelid Companion". For more information about Camelidynamics, Marty and TTEAM visit [www.camelidynamics.com](http://www.camelidynamics.com)*