

TOP SECRET The Secret to Calm, Confident, Companionable Camelids!

By Marty McGee Bennett

I am a long-time camelid enthusiast. I got my first llama in 1981, but I'm a new contributor to this magazine.

The camelid business is booming and each new publication brings more new readers to the ranks of llama and alpaca lovers. In this column I offer some history about my training approach, "Camelidynamics," and discuss the most basic of training tasks-catching your llama or alpaca. For those of you that have had camelids for a long time, this is a new perspective. You may be surprised by this take on a common training challenge. You feed them, take care of them and love them like crazy, so why do llamas and alpacas insist on putting you in the category of things that frighten them? The answer is simple: Most camelids have been cornered and grabbed around the neck. This method of catching is expedient, popularly accepted by many in the breeding business and is very tempting. After all, that neck is just sticking up there like a handle, for goodness sakes. That camelid neck virtually screams to the handler, "USE ME TO CATCH THE REST OF THE BODY PLEASE!"

I did my share of cornering and grabbing in the early days of my camelid career, which now spans, gad-zooks, over 23 years! The day my llamas were delivered my camelid coach puffed himself up and gave me the facts of life with llamas, "Well little missy, llamas don't like to be touched. These animals will never get close to you. When you want to catch 'em, wave your arms around and haze them into a corner, cut 'em off and don't let 'em run by you. Show 'em whos's boss and grab them around the neck. And don't let go, no matter what! That is the way you catch a llama and that is that."

I did this more or less successfully (a few wild trips around the pasture hanging



on for dear life and a few unceremonious landings in the dung pile) for about five years until I happened to meet a remarkable horse trainer, Linda Tellington-Jones, (inventor of TTEAM and the TTouch).

I attended one of Linda's clinics to learn how to train my huge and crazy thoroughbred stallion that I did not - thank you very much - grab around the neck! The llamas were just an excuse to get Linda to my farm. Back then, llamas were very unusual and worthy of a private visit from a world renown horse trainer. A mere horse would never have helped me pull that off. Ironically, I didn't really expect much from Linda's work with my llamas. She was a horse trainer and I already knew all there was to know about llamas - or so I thought.

Linda did some very simple things with my llamas...massaged their heads and mouths and what a shock...they liked it! My wildest llama closed his eyes and almost went to sleep as Linda gently worked with his lips and gums. I thought, "No; this can't be true. These animals hate to be touched on the head and you certainly can't touch their mouths!"

Linda and I didn't talk that day about how I normally caught my llamas, but

what I began to understand was that I was the one limiting the relationship with my llamas. Of course my llamas didn't come up to me! I was forever cornering them and grabbing them. Any sane llama would steer clear of my arms.

I began to see that my llamas' behavior was a reflection of the way I behaved, instead of a fact of nature. I began my studies with Linda Tellington-Jones that day and my life was forever changed. I attached myself to Linda like velcro and a few years later coauthored my first book about training llamas with Linda.

When I ask people what they want but aren't getting from their llamas and alpacas, the answer is, hands down, companionship. Many people cannot touch their camelids without chasing them down or at least moving them into a corner. A camelid can be one of life's cruel ironies - a curious, beautiful creature that has liquid, come hither eyes, but won't let you touch it. Many people characterize this as "just the way llamas and alpacas are." I have written several articles comparing camelids to cats and agree that llamas and alpacas are by nature shy and careful. Camelids and cats are similar in both physiology and temperament; however, a normal cat owner would not be content to feed their cat and clean their litter box if the only time they could touch it was by chasing it into their bathroom, closing the door and pinning it behind the commode. To be sure there are some cats that begin their lives with people as untouchable. The way to befriend these "scaredy cats" is to be patient and to make sure that, when they do finally jump up onto your lap to visit, you don't hold them against their will.

The all too common practice of working a llama or alpaca into a corner to catch him causes the animal to organize his relationship with humans as defensive

and oppositional. I understand that the corner-grab-hold approach to getting one's hands on a camelid is expedient and at times can be quicker; however, the following list of resulting behaviors demonstrates how the expedient approach more than negatively offsets its limited advantages.

- To feel safe, a camelid must have an escape route. If you are the object that takes that away from a frightened camelid, you will never be trusted by him.

- Llamas and alpacas that are routinely grabbed don't ever fully relax around humans. This additional stress affects the way your animal feels about you and may affect his or her health.

- Grabbing a young llama or alpaca teaches him to pit his physical strength against yours. Do you really want to do that with an animal that will grow up to be 350 pounds - or even 150 pounds - of fear and determination to escape your lurking arms?

- Many llamas and alpacas will only submit to the corner-grab-hold approach if you are strong enough to pull it off. Using this approach limits successful camelid handling to those people who are physically AND mentally strong.

- It would seem to make sense that dealing with llamas and alpacas physically could break down the animals' natural reluctance to get physical with humans and could therefore contribute to aggression toward humans.

- It looks very odd to people who have never met a llama or alpaca before and turns off many who might otherwise be interested in owning a camelid.

- It is the behavior that humans engage in that keeps a camelid at arms' length.

So, if you agree there must be a better way, then what is it?

Organizing your barn and pasture is the key to getting away from the need for the corner-grab-hold approach. The most important aspect of respectful catching is a special place to do it. A catch/training pen is absolutely critical! It need not be fancy, but it must be safe, comfortable, accessible, sturdy AND the correct size. The panels used at most llama shows are perfectly suitable. These 9 x 9 foot pens are exactly the correct size. They are light enough to move around and high enough to discourage the idea of jump-

ing. Erect your catch pen in an area that is easy for you to herd your camelids into, out of the rain and weather (inside the barn is fine). The good news about these pens is that they are easy to move around ... the bad news is that a llama or a big alpaca can quite easily move them around too! To be useful for any difficult animal this type of catch pen must be firmly attached to a fence or the barn wall at both the top and the bottom. You can also pound a steel T-post into the ground and use this as an anchor. Each corner should be shored up with heavy-duty zip ties. An easy way of closing the gate securely once you enter is also important.

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Being fully in charge of any interaction with your camelid is important; however it does not require being physically superior. That is a game we humans cannot win. Ask yourself what your llama or alpaca is thinking when you try to out run or out wrestle him. Pathetic is the word that comes to my mind. Don't try to win contests with your animal. Think WIN-WIN. You must think ahead of your camelids and set up your barn and your pastures in such a way that, when you want your woolly friends in the catch pen, they have no choice but to cooperate. Set up a camelid's life so that he or she practices being cooperative instead of trying to work around the system. This may take a bit of time and energy in the beginning, but you will be rewarded every single day for your efforts. You will save time, avoid the risks of injury to you or your camelids and they will be easier to handle.

Ideally, large pastures lead to lane ways that lead to the catch pen. I think it is important that one person be able to herd the animals into the barn. Some layouts may require fences that go nowhere and serve no other purpose than to funnel animals. There is a plethora of new and innovative fencing materials that can be used to easily erect a fence and take it down in a matter of minutes. With this type of fencing, you can use it to herd animals and then take it down for mowing or when it isn't needed. Certainly calling the llamas or alpacas into the barn or catch area is a great PLAN A. However, there are times and reasons that a llama or alpaca may resist going into the catch pen and for this you need to be organized. The good news is that once you set up your system it is finished. Make it work one time and your llamas and alpacas will know it. They will begin to be more cooperative immediately.

Consistently use a catch pen and you will see huge differences in the way your animals interact with you. I recommend that you never catch your llamas or alpacas in any other place. That way when you are visiting with them in the pasture or barn area they will never be concerned that you might grab them. This means your camelids will discover that your arms and hands are safe and are quite useful for a good back scratch.

Once your animal is in the catch pen, the key to making it a safe place is always to give him an escape route within the pen. This means keeping yourself behind the animal's eye. The orientation of your body is also important. Aiming the widest part of your body at your animal student will put pressure on him. Orient your shoulders so that they are



canted slightly away from your animal. He will feel much safer inside the pen and be much less likely to dash madly about. The idea is to organize the movement in the pen such that the animal sees an escape route in front of him at all times. The interesting thing about this approach is that your animal student feels much less need to move when he sees an escape route. Take his perceived escape route away and he will have no choice but to frantically look for one. Remember, as soon as your llama or alpaca is in a sturdy catch pen he is caught. You can allow him movement within the pen without losing ground. Let your pen hold the animal so that you don't have to!



Llamas and alpacas, like humans, will take the path of least resistance. Give your camelid an escape route within the pen and he won't look for a way out of the pen. If you are having trouble with your llama or alpaca sticking his head out of the pen through the rails or attempting to jump out, check in with your body position. You are most likely inadvertently trapping your camelid in a corner.

I teach advanced trainings in Bend, Oregon and as part of the training each participant is videotaped as they catch and halter an animal. In every case in which the animal is distressed or tries to escape from the pen the handler is standing ahead of the animal's eye with the front of their body aimed directly at the animal. After the participants view their videotapes and modify their approach, the difference is absolutely amazing. These same students are able to successfully handle young and volatile never-been-handled llama weanlings with no drama.

A video camera is a very potent tool for learning to be a good handler. I suggest that you watch a few interactions with your animals on videotape. Set up a video camera on a tripod or a ladder so that the camera watches you from above as you halter your animal the way that you normally do. Watch the video and observe when or if your llama or alpaca looks comfortable with you and when he doesn't. Notice your animal's body language. Are his ears back, is he in balance, does he look comfortable or does he look as if he can't wait to get away from you?

A catch pen and a less threatening approach are fine, but we still haven't actually caught the animal. There are several different ways to catch a llama or alpaca in a non-threatening way. In this article I will discuss my favorite. In the last few years I have been using a very simple approach. I attach a rope to a 4-foot lightweight pole (wand). I stand behind the eye of the animal with my shoulders canted away from him. Then I use the wand to maneuver the rope over the top of the head from the back to the front and bring it back to myself, making sure to stay behind the eye and at least an arms length away from the animal.

This method has several advantages.

- Anyone, regardless of size or ability, can catch a camelid successfully this way.
- Your camelid begins to see you as all-powerful within the catch pen. There is nothing to resist or run from and no possibility of beating the system. The camelid accepts you as the leader without the need to physically prove yourself.
- With this method you can catch a camelid without entering his flight zone, allowing the animal to practice standing still instead of running from you.

• Consistent catching using this method creates an animal that does not run from the arms of a person. You can reach out and touch your camelids without provoking a fear response. Eventually (normally within a week or two) your camelids will feel comfortable with your approach and you can dispense with the wand and simply walk up to your llama or alpaca inside the catch pen from behind the eye and hand yourself the rope.



How you catch your llamas or alpacas seems like such a simple thing. It is. It also is the first impression you make on a llama or alpaca on any given day that you interact. In my opinion it couldn't be any more important as a way of setting the tone and the parameters for the rest of your interactions.

Watching yourself on video is the best way that I know of to learn about how llamas and alpacas think and how we can make them feel more confident around us. Give it a try and learn how rewarding it can be to create a WIN-WIN relationship between you and your camelids!

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