

# Showing Off: Part I

By Marty McGee Bennett

What exactly are we showing when our llamas or alpacas parade around a ring? Obviously, we are showing the animals to the judge for the purpose of learning about their conformation and fleece so we can improve our breeding programs. Actually, we are showing a lot more than that! We also are showing the uninitiated how much fun it is to work with a camelid, how interesting the process of breeding these animals is and how in the midst of a competition we are good sports. In short, we are exposing future or potential owners to our animals and our industry. Depending on how it is done, we could be showing off our captivating camelids or participating in a righteous rodeo!

Much time and effort are expended getting the general public to our shows. You have to wonder what John Q. Public must be thinking when the animals are tackled for nothing more complicated than a look at their fleeces or their top-lines. It is clearly in the long-term interest of the camelid industry for the animals to be shown to the judge and to the public to their best advantage. We want the public to see beautiful animals that behave beautifully. In my opinion there is more to successful showing than good preparation at home. Showing a camelid well requires the cooperation of not only the animal but also the entire show team including judges, ring stewards, show organizers and exhibitors. Animals that are normally very tractable can be made to behave badly by well-intentioned but uninformed ring stewards and a lack of coordination between handler, steward and judge. Animals - like people - only have so much tolerance. Using it all up before the show starts

is a recipe for bad animal and human behavior.

When it comes to the issue of shows, I am in a unique position. I don't show llamas or alpacas, but I do spend my professional life helping people, many of whom are new to the camelid industry, learn to handle their animals. I don't want to win...s want everyone, two and four-legged alike, to win. When it comes to the show ring, I am behind the scenes. I hear the enthusiasm and excitement; I also hear the frustration, disappointment and disillusionment.

Showing is a choice. Enter the ring, and you have made an agreement to abide by both the ring procedures and the decisions of that particular judge. When you choose to take your animal to a show, it will necessarily involve some boredom, annoyance and some new sights and sounds - nothing unreasonable. There is no point in making it more difficult that it needs to be. I have seen many camelids that are miserable at shows and insure that their owners are too! It is my observation that with very little effort we could make the process of getting ready to show and the act of showing much easier for all concerned. I offer this article as food for thought for judges, ring stewards, organizers and exhibitors.

This article will be presented in into two parts. Part 1: Suggestions for handlers, ring stewards, judges and organizers. Part 2: Getting your llama ready to show, problem solving, retraining animals that have become impossible to show. Part one follows:

There are certain general principals of animal handling that determine the likely behavior of a camelid in any given circumstance. I call

these principals the "Laws of Camelidynamics." I have organized this article using these laws and describing how knowledge of them can be helpful with the specific issues faced in showing.



**Law of Camelidynamics:** *When a llama or alpaca is afraid, it wants to run away. When prevented from running, it will fight.*

Camelids can think, but they are largely creatures of instinct, particularly when they find themselves in new and strange situations such as a show. Instinctive responses to danger are flight, fight, freeze and fooling around. The first three are pretty self-explanatory. I would like to expand a bit on the fooling around response. Fooling around is just what it sounds like - engaging in all kinds of behaviors that the handler finds annoying; these can include head tossing, continuous movement, rearing and kushing to name just a few. It is helpful to see these behaviors as fear-based responses instead of a diabolical desire to make the handler look bad in the show ring.

A camelid's first response to danger is the flight response and is the most heavily relied upon. When confronted with something frightening, a llama or an alpaca wants to run away from it. Prevent the animal from running away, and he will have no choice but to fight, freeze or fool around. Techniques that help to make your camelid feel safe with you and safe in his environment will reduce, if not eliminate, unpredictable instinctive behaviors.



**Law of Camelidynamics:** *Containment works better than restraint for controlling the flight response.*

**Containment** = Limiting the space in which the animal can move.

**Restraint** = Physically holding or tying an animal with the aim of preventing movement.

Instinctive responses are muted when animals are worked in a container. The smaller the container, the more muted the response. Nine by nine or ten by ten foot spaces work fabulously for most show chores and are always handy, since they are the same kind of panels used to house the animals at the show. Allowing movement inside a small container offers the animal the opportunity to realize that the situation is not dangerous and will give him a chance to begin to relax.

When we know that many animals are going to be at least a bit frightened and unsure of themselves for the vet check, we can plan in advance to provide a container. The animals will be more cooperative about this pre-show chore inside a pen, and the time spent opening a gate and



Using a catch pen makes it much easier to teach your llama or alpaca to stand quietly.

walking an animal into the catch pen will be more than made up for with

more cooperative animals. It is always a smart idea to minimize opportunities for negative behavior. If your animal can practice standing quietly in a catch pen for the vet check, he has just had an opportunity to learn how to stand when handled. This practice will definitely help in the show ring when you don't have the luxury of a catch pen. Many shows allow vet checks in the trailer, or the vet comes to the exhibitors' pens. This would seem to me to be a better way of handling the animals and managing the interaction of animals that may be ill with animals that are not.

In the show ring judges have different ways of approaching animals for the hands on portion of the judging. Observing the ring procedures of the judge you plan to show under will give you a chance to practice that approach before you arrive at the show or while you are there. The vet check at the show can serve as a bit of a dress rehearsal for the hands on judging in the show ring. Vet checking is informal and doesn't happen with an audience; perhaps exhibitors with difficult animals could be encouraged to bring a bit of grain or alfalfa hay with them to help their animals remain calm. In any case, setting up the vet check so that it is easy for the animal lays a good foundation for better performance in the show ring.



**Law of Camelidynamics:** *Animals feel safer and are less likely to fight when they are allowed to have some distance from humans and when they are standing in balance.*

Fleece checking is extensive in the alpaca show ring. Judges must examine the fleece all the way to skin and must check the fleece in several places along the body. For the most part, llama judges are after a look at

the top line and a cursory look at the fleece. Now that more emphasis is being placed on llama fiber and in some instances can affect placements in the show ring, it is more important that llamas also are accustomed to more hands-on contact with judges. In any case, examining the fleece and or the skin is a useful skill to master, and it may prepare you for the rigors of future shows.

My personal preference for hands-on fleece checking is to stand on the left side of the animal and reach over the back to check the fleece on the animal's right side. This is a two-person job. The handler would remain on the same side as the fleece checker when inside a catch pen and would stand on the side opposite the fleece checker when working without a catch pen. Reaching across the body of the animal and checking fleece on the side opposite means that when the animal moves it will be to move away from the contact with the checker's hands and moving into the checker's body. This keeps the animal in balance between your hands and your body. If the animal kicks, it will likely be on the side that you are checking - the side away from your body, and that is always a good thing! Checking fleece on the same side of the animal you stand on does not give you the opportunity to control movement between your hands and your body. The animal moves away from the contact with your hands and also moves away from you. This requires using some sort of restraint, which is why I suggest checking fleece on the side opposite from where you stand. Initial practice is best done in a catch pen.

No single person - no matter how strong - can hold a llama or even an alpaca still in the show ring. Your best bet for keeping your animal still in the show ring is to put him into balance and keep him there. Try this.



Fleece checking across the body

Stand up and distribute your weight equally over both feet. Now...without changing your balance AT ALL take a step forward. I know you didn't move and that is because taking a step forward involves shifting the weight from both feet to one foot in order to un-weight the foot you intend to move. Llamas and alpacas carry much more of the weight on the front legs, and most movement begins in the front - so balancing them is most easily accomplished by paying attention to the front legs. Keeping a camelid's weight evenly distributed over both front legs and preventing shifts in balance will keep him still! Balancing an animal involves using intermittent signals on the lead to shift the weight in the desired direction, followed by a RELEASE when the animal comes into balance. When I use the word release, I do not mean letting go of the lead rope or losing your connection with the animal. "Release" means relaxing pressure on the head. Steady pressure on the lead rope will push the panic button and cause the animal to begin to fight.

Generally the judge approaches the animal from the left side. When approached by a second human, a llama or alpaca that is nervous is going to move away. The trick to hands-on checking in the show ring without a catch pen is to build a catch pen with people. A successful handler will close off this escape route by moving the right side using the lead rope to inhibit forward movement and using the body and an extended arm to create a container.

The handler focuses on the neck and feet and works to keep the ani-



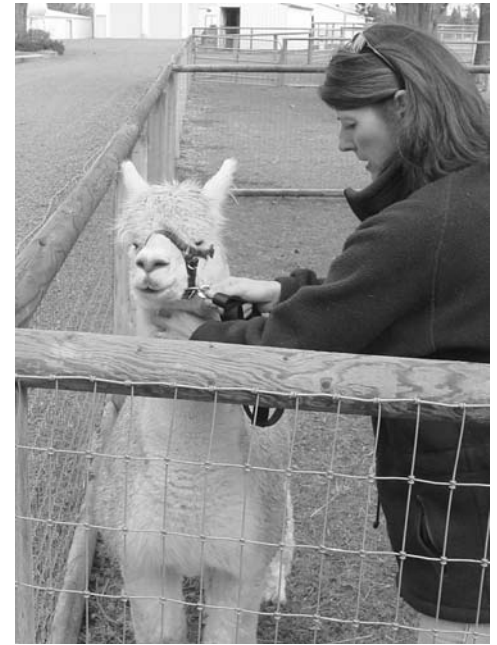
Handler balances animal while judge does hands-on examination

mal's weight evenly distributed over both front feet. The handler should not put steady, backward pressure on the head. This will encourage the animal to rear or push forward into the pressure on the lead. The handler should give intermittent signals to the rear only when the animal begins to push forward. Pay attention and give the signals AS SOON AS you feel the animal shift his balance forward as indicated by pressure on the lead in your hand. Remembering to release when the animal is in balance is the key to success. The biggest contributor to misbehavior in the show ring is steady pressure on the head. Balancing can always be plan "A". If it is obvious the animal needs more support, the handler and ring steward are both in a position to move to plan "B" and add more restraint. BUT REMEMBER....



**Law of Camelidynamics:** *Llamas and alpacas get better at what they practice. Fight with your camelid and he will get better at escape and evasion!*

Llamas and alpacas generally fight restraint to one degree or another. Try to hold an animal still, and his first response is to fight that restraint.



The use of boundaries to help teach an animal to stand can help him understand what you want.

There are generally two kinds of camelids: the kind that give in easily to restraint, and the kind that don't. The kind of animal that gives in easily really doesn't need to be restrained and will quite happily stand in balance when he learns that he can. The kind of animal that won't give in just gets worse and becomes more and more determined to fight his way out of what he sees as a dangerous situation. I have seen big, strong, athletic people end up on their keisters in the ring when they tried to fight one of these animals - even a smaller alpaca. Not only does this look unprofessional, but it also can result in injury

to animal, handler or both and renders the animal unable to be shown by all but the strongest of handlers. The good news is that a majority of the animals that fight the hardest when restrained respond the most positively when given an opportunity to stand without restraint. The trick is that most people do not know how to fully release pressure on a lead, and put an animal in balance. Most handlers feel more secure with pressure on the lead and that pressure is what pushes the panic button and actually causes the problem.

Much of the misbehavior in the show ring involves the checking of testicles. As an interested observer, I urge show officials to consider making this procedure part of the vet check. Grabbing a camelid under its tail in the midst of the show ring is not only a recipe for creating misbehavior but also looks unprofessional.

Checking reproductive equipment prior to entering the show ring would make shows less stressful for the animals and the handlers and save time,

making the show run more smoothly. Until this shift in procedure occurs, I have no magic formula to offer those of you handling male animals to make them like being grabbed under their tails. Learning the TTouch and working the tail in a pleasant, non-threatening way BEFORE the first encounter with a judge goes a long way toward making the process less dramatic. Most people don't believe me until they see it for themselves, but camelids enjoy having their tail worked using the TTouch. What they object to is being man-handled and groped!

Once in the show ring, your best bet is to remember to breathe, resist the urge to tighten your hold on the animal and to concentrate on moving the animal's weight to the front foot on the side opposite the judge at the same moment the judge reaches under the tail. Camelids pivot around their front shoulders. A judge standing on the animal's left side and reaching under the tail will cause the animal to shift his weight to the rear leg on the side opposite the judge. Shifting the

weight to the front leg on the side opposite the judge will counteract this shift and may help delay movement long enough for the judge to check the testicles.

The principals of balance and containment can help problem solve for ring stewards and handlers, making the process of showing easier for all concerned and showing our llamas and alpacas to be the cooperative and fun animals that they truly are - a win-win proposition. What more could you want at a show?

\*Note: Learning to balance an animal is a handling skill that requires practice. Watch for Part II of this article in the next issue of Cool Camelids for more on these principles. Also, my book, "The Camelid Companion," has entire sections devoted to the topic. Reading this material and practicing the exercises will help you learn the technique.

For more information about Camelidynamics, Marty and TTEAM, visit [www.camelidynamics.com](http://www.camelidynamics.com)