

Showing Off: Part II

By Marty McGee Bennett

This is the second part of a two-part article on showing llamas and alpacas. In the first article I offered some training and handling suggestions specifically for the show ring to include ideas for ring stewards and show organizers. In this article I will discuss show preparation and training. If you haven't read the first article in the last issue of *Cool Camelids*, it would be a good idea to read or review it before proceeding with this one.

It is only fair to recognize that alpacas and llamas come with a variety of temperaments. Not all camelids cope equally well with the tedium of the halter show ring. Having said that, I think there are many ways we can prepare our animals for the experience, accommodate their limitations and still show them.

Before participating in his first show, your animal should be comfortable with handling of a basic nature, be comfortable in his equipment, and know how to lead. I have written numerous articles about basic handling. The bottom line is that the more comfortable your animal feels with you the more he will trust your judgment. An alpaca or llama that trusts you as his handler will assume that when you lead him into the show ring everything will be fine. An alpaca or llama that is frightened of people will assume the worst and will behave instinctively - primarily the flight or fight response, both of which interfere with showing.

When preparing for a show, many focus only on leading and showing skills. In fact, the way you catch and halter your animal and even how you trim toenails and give shots are just as important. Your animal decides whether to trust you based on how responsibly you behave-period. Invest-

ing the time to organize your facilities and learn some handling skills makes everything easier - including showing.

It is critical that you recognize that your nervousness is perhaps the biggest problem for any animal new to the show ring. Nervous handlers send their jitters right down the lead line like current through an electric cord. Whatever you can do for yourself to ease the jitters - do it! Get enough sleep, eat breakfast, be as organized as you can, get up early enough so you aren't in a hurry and remember to **BREATHE!** Breathing is like yawning - it is contagious. Breathe loudly and often and your camelid will follow your lead and take a deep breath. Breathing deeply and regularly will help both of you relax. Practice at home or get together with a group of friends at someone's ranch and stage a mock show. Trips to the local nursing home will not only brighten someone's day, but also will give your llama or alpaca valuable experience coping with new situations.

That said, showing an alpaca or llama is definitely the best practice for showing an alpaca or llama! On the other hand, there is no need to make your debut at the national show. If possible, pick out a smaller local show for your first experience. Ideally your first showing experience would be with an alpaca or llama who is a veteran of the show ring and is bomb-proof. Nervous handlers **ALWAYS** hold too tightly on the lead line and don't offer their animal enough space. The judge can see your animal and the way he or she moves much more easily if you are a bit out of the way. You can control your camelid away from his head with the strategic use of your hand

down the lead. Leading your alpaca or llama from just under the chin is annoying for the animal and is more likely to negatively affect the gait.



Properly fitted halter

I have written extensively about halter fit over the years, and this issue is critical in the show ring. Trying to control the body of an animal with the head is difficult in the first place; add the complicating factor of a long neck, and it becomes even harder. Trying to control an animal with a halter that doesn't fit makes it almost impossible. In the show ring you need to help your animal stay calm and focused. A halter that is too big and spins around the head, is too small and ties the mouth shut, or one that slips off the nose bone onto the cartilage thereby compromising the airway makes your job twenty times harder.

A proper lead rope is not nearly as important as your halter, but also can make a difference. My preference is a lead rope with a lightweight hook with a rope that is not too skinny. Heavy hooks can be annoying to your animal and make it more difficult to maintain a light connection with the head. Lead ropes that are too skinny or too stretchy also contribute to this

problem. Lead ropes with hooks that include a swivel create a disconnect. When you turn the hook it should give a signal to the head instead of spinning around the swivel.

Imagine that you have balloons under your armpits and eggs in your hands. Pretend you are showing a butterfly. Alpacas and llamas resist steady, heavy pressure and jump, spook, refuse to come forward and lean back on the lead rope in response to attempts at too much control. **GET LIGHT!** That is a butterfly on the end of your lead. Periodically look at your animal's feet.



This handler and llama are standing in balance.

Primarily concentrate on the front half of the animal; the back half always follows! Remember that following each balance correction you must **RELEASE**. Your animal is walking a metaphorical tightrope. Pull too hard to one side, and he will fall off. Apply steady pressure, and the animal simply relies on the rope for balance and leans to the outside.

The process of balancing an animal is a constant series of small corrections, followed by releases.

Just because you are only interested in showing at halter doesn't mean you can't benefit from using obstacles as part of your training.



This llama is leaning on the lead and using it for balance while the handler is holding steadily.

Obstacles are interesting for your animal and built trust. They are particularly useful for retraining animals that have become bored and soured on the show ring. Work together over challenging obstacles, and you and your camelid will turn into a team. Something as simple as poles on the ground can help a frightened, scattered animal learn to focus; but more inventive obstacles are also useful.



The most important thing about obstacles is that they can be taken apart and made easier.

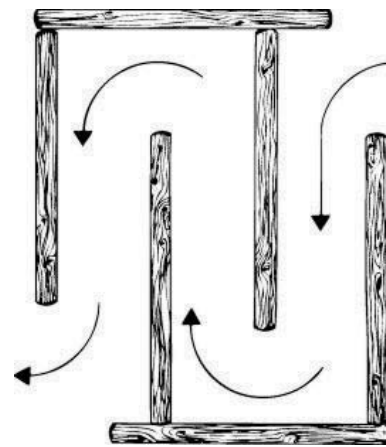
I like to use clear plastic on the ground as a challenge. If the camelid is too frightened to walk on the plastic at first, I use two pieces of plastic to create an aisle way.



Using a split tarp to gain confidence over obstacles

I gradually move the two pieces of plastic closer together until the camelid feels confident and is willing to step on the plastic. Dragging a frightened alpaca or llama over scary obstacles is not a good way to build trust.

Teaching a llama or an alpaca to stand still can be very challenging. Six PVC poles about eight feet long arranged in a maze make a great training aid. Walk your animal into the middle of it and practice standing still. Even these subtle boundaries will help your animal learn to stand still and in balance.



You may find it useful to use a wand or other extension of your arm to give cues from a distance. If your llama or alpaca is still having trouble, practice the same exercise inside a catch pen. If your camelid student is really nervous and cannot stand still at all, walk him around the edges of a

catch pen, walking directly into each corner. With the animal standing parallel to the edge of the pen in the corner, use your lead rope to help him stand still for just a second or two and then proceed directly to the next corner. This will really help to settle a very nervous animal.



Once your animal begins to settle down, try asking him to stand still in the center of this small pen. Once you are having some success with standing quietly inside a small container, move to a slightly larger area. Your next step will be to ask for the behavior in the maze inside a paddock about the size of a show ring. Most handlers ask for too much too soon - especially with the pressure of a looming show. The only way your animal will improve at particular behavior is if you can get him to do it - even if it is just for a moment. Trying in vain to get your llama or alpaca to stand still for five minutes at a time unsuccessfully is not going to be nearly as effective as asking the same animal to stand for twenty seconds inside the maze and have him actually do it!

You must build on success rather than practice misbehavior. I watched an exhibitor at a recent show practicing with her alpaca to show his bite. She worked for about fifteen minutes pretty much doing the same thing over and over. It wasn't working. Both she and the animal were having a bad time. In the course of this practice session her alpaca learned about

four new escape and evasion strategies. He got much better at rearing and plunging than he did at having his bite inspected! Practice the same thing over and over with no success, and you will only succeed in hardening your animal's resistance. Several times during this ten minute session this handler appeared to be making a bit of headway (no pun intended), and each time she persisted for too long - causing her alpaca to begin acting out. She would have been money ahead in my opinion to work for two or three minutes asking for less and spending the rest of her time taking a walk outside on the grass.

Fleece checking, testicle inspection and bite examination are not exactly fun activities for an alpaca. Practicing these things over and over will only cause your animal to become more resistant. I suggest that you take your show candidates for walks, work over obstacles, and work at asking your student to stand in balance inside the maze for short periods of time (1-2 minutes tops). We all only have so much tolerance for irritation and tedium. Use up all of your animal's tolerance before you enter the ring, and he will do worse - not better.

Handling animals is a skill, and you will improve more quickly if you handle more animals. It is far better to practice with six animals for ten minutes each than it is to practice with one animal for an hour. If you can, it is also better to practice on animals that are commensurate with your handling skills. To borrow a ski metaphor - you will not learn to be a good skier if you proceed immediately to the steepest ski run. You will learn survival skills rather than finesse. Certainly you must work with the tough ones, but realize there is a lot to be learned by working on your handling skills with easier to handle animals.

A video camera is your best

friend. Aim the camera at your practice arena and view the tape when you have finished. You will be able to see what you are doing that works and what you are doing that is making your animals misbehave. Look for indications that you are:

- Encouraging your animal to rely on the lead rope for balance. Is the animal carrying all his weight on one side of his body? If so, you are holding steadily.

- Taking your animal out of balance by leading with a heavy hand. Does your animal lose his focus when you go around a corner or try to get him to stand still? If so, you are probably over correcting. **LIGHTEN UP**; practice using signals that are so light that someone watching you would not see the signals as you give them.

- Noticing when your animal is moving freely and looking at what you are doing at the time. What does the lead rope look like? How much tension is in the lead line? Look at the hook that attaches to the halter. What is it doing? If your hook is dangling and pointed at the ground, you have released pressure on your animal. If the hook is parallel to the ground, you have not released and may be interfering with your animal's freedom of movement.

Alpacas and llamas that are relaxed, focused and interested can't help but show better. Showing your animal to his best advantage and having fun at the same time will mean that you "win" every time, even if you don't leave the ring with a ribbon.

*Note: Learning to balance an animal is a handling skill that requires practice. 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