

From haltering and leading, to toenail trimming and shearing, CAMELIDynamics guides alpaca owners to more efficient ways of handling their livestock, resulting in a minimum amount of stress for human and animal alike.

■ Teaching Your Alpaca NOT to Pick Up His Feet! Part 2 of 2

In part one of this article [see *A.M. SUM06*, p. 80], I suggested that instead of teaching our alpacas to pick up their feet, we really need to teach them NOT to pick up their feet.

In most instances when a human puts a hand on an alpaca's leg, the alpaca picks up his foot. Most of the time, our aim is to trim toenails, so this would seem to be a perfect outcome. Unfortunately, the alpaca is picking up his foot NOT because he is being cooperative, but because he is afraid. By reinforcing this behavior, we unwittingly encourage the alpaca to up the level of escape and evasion. Over time, "picking up the foot" becomes "sinking down a bit and folding the leg," followed by rearing to keep the leg away completely or perhaps laying down to cover it up.

In part one, I offered a process and suggestions for teaching your alpaca to accept having his legs handled without engaging in escape and evasion – in other words, teaching your alpaca NOT to pick up his feet. If you have been successful, you now have an alpaca that will allow you to slide your hands down the leg without an avoidance reaction. Provided this is the case, you are now ready to pick up the feet, and that is where we now begin.

There are two different elements to picking up a foot. Now that you have an alpaca that is not reflexively picking up his foot from a place of fear, you must physically get him to bend his leg and pick up his foot. Secondly you must help him shift his weight and keep his balance.

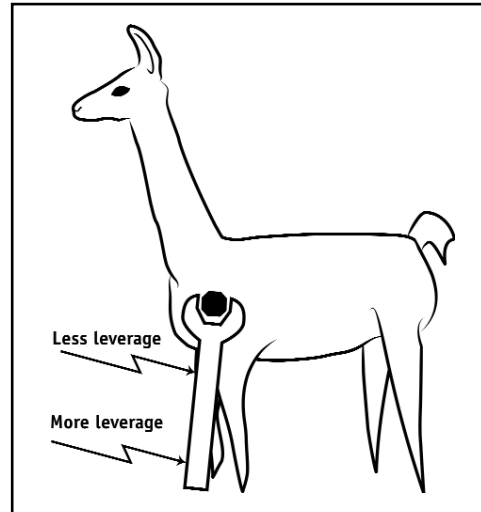
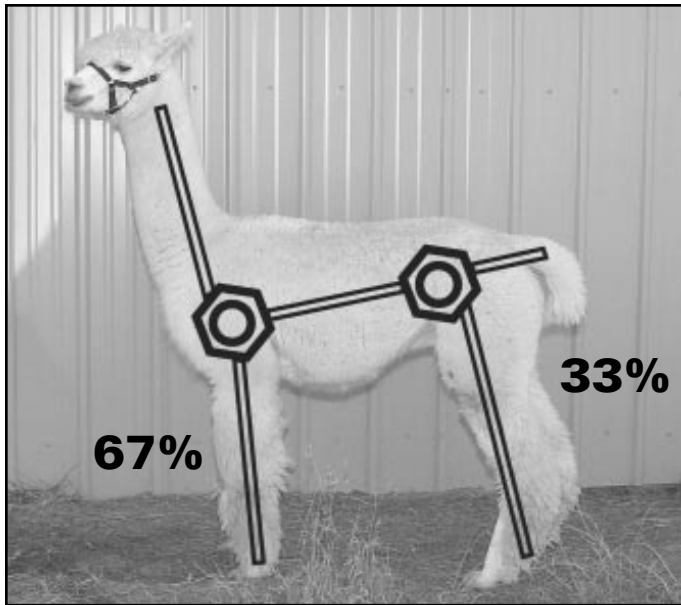
Initial lessons in picking up feet and trimming toenails are best done with two people. It is possible to work alone, but your progress will be a bit slower and you must expect less in each lesson. Whether or not you are working alone or with a partner, the easiest way to work on toenails is to

work in a catch pen crowded with alpacas. Alternatively, you can work in an area that is just about as big as you and your alpaca. Food-motivated alpacas will be better candidates for solo trimming in a small area. If you choose to work in a small space with only one alpaca, it is best to have a number of other alpacas near by or you may find that the alpaca you are working with is so preoccupied with being alone that he will not be able to focus.

In part one of this article, I described in detail how to set up your facility. We also talked about the way your helper stands and how he supports the alpaca. These details remain the same as we continue on and pick up the feet (*see photos A & B on the following page*).

Most management chores – injections, oral medications, shearing – we actually do TO the alpaca. We do not need or WANT them to participate. In an ideal world, the alpaca would stand quietly as we went about our management job. For the most part, we do the best we can to get the job done, and repetition usually is not part of the process. If the alpaca jumps around when we are giving an injection, we surely don't do it three more times so that he can practice accepting a shot! If the alpaca is difficult to shear, we have next year to try to make it go better.

In terms of management, toenails are a bit different. Ideally, the alpaca participates by lifting the leg in response to a signal AND he actually must learn a particular behavioral "skill" – that is, standing on three legs! You try standing on one leg under circumstances you find frightening, perhaps near the edge of a cliff, and you are coming close to what your alpaca is feeling. In this case, practice (provided the animal is practicing the correct behavior) is useful for several different reasons.



Left: An alpaca carries 67% of its weight in the front and 33% in the back.

Right: Distance from the center of mass equals more or less power to change the balance. A small shift when holding the foot means a big shift in balance. Picking up the foot from a point closer to the center of mass is less likely to cause a loss of balance.

1. We can gradually build up the amount of time we ask the animal to remain on three legs.
2. He can practice shifting his weight when asked.
3. We build his confidence in our willingness to give the foot back when he needs it.

In my experience, handlers do just the opposite when trimming toenails. They hold the foot up way too long, push the animal totally out of balance, or become a couch or tripod and hold the alpaca up. And THE biggest mistake of all... resist giving the foot back when the alpaca wants his foot back.

Most handlers do not understand the dynamics of balance and, in the process of picking up the foot, move the animal too far in the opposite direction. The alpaca feels as if he is going to fall down. At this point, he needs his foot back to catch his balance. If the handler won't give the foot back, he will inevitably scare the alpaca and increase his fear the next time his toenails are trimmed. New behaviors appear... spinning, rearing, cushioning, or spitting. If you want toenail trimming to get easier and you want to change this dynamic, read on.

Most handlers use the foot to pick the foot up. This would seem to make sense, however the foot is the point on the body furthest from the center mass. This means that the foot offers you more power to change the balance of the rest of the body. Assuming your alpaca is standing in balance to begin with, you would be better served to choose a place on the leg closer to the center of mass. In this way, any movement by you or by the alpaca will not be as likely to cause the alpaca to lose his balance. You can quite handily get the foot up off the ground by using the upper leg. Using the upper leg is easier for your alpaca to accept and also makes it easier for him to find and keep his balance.

Now that your alpaca is NOT automatically picking up his foot from fear, you must learn how to bend the knee manually. Learning to use a "ratcheting" signal is the key to bending the leg. I have written about the ratcheting signal in other articles in a different context. The ratchet is a technique for creating movement. I use a ratcheting signal for teaching an animal to lead and for getting him unstuck if he balks. It doesn't matter what you want to move – a leg, or a head, or the whole body – the technique is the same. You can also give ratcheting signals with other parts of your body (for example, your hip). I often ratchet an alpaca with my hip to move him around inside the catch pen.

Look at the graphic representation of the three basic ways of giving a signal:

- Steady pull (or steady push)
- Tug and Release (or push and release)
- Ratchet (*see drawing on the next page*)

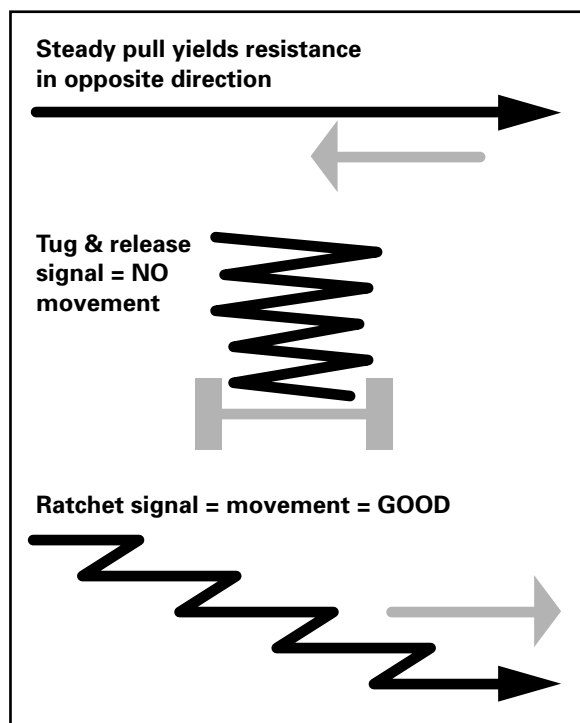
Pulling or pushing steadily usually results in an equal and opposite reaction. When you pull steadily on a lead rope, your alpaca often just pulls steadily back. In the case of pushing the back of the leg forward, you may only encourage the alpaca to push back and lock the knee. A tug-and-release or push-and-release on the upper leg will cause the alpaca to bend and straighten his leg over and over but not necessarily pick it up. Using the ratcheting technique means that over the course of three or four signals, the leg moves incrementally forward. As this happens, the foot comes off of the ground.

For those of you who like numbers, think of it this way – the desired movement that you want (foot off of the ground) has a value of 100%. Each signal is 25%. The ratchet means that you give a signal of 25% and in order NOT to pull steadily,



Photo A: Using an area that is just bigger than the space that a person and an alpaca can stand in is a perfect place to trim toenails.

Photo B: Your assistant balances the alpaca using a technique called the bracelet to help keep the alpaca in balance over his feet. The assistant stands on the same side as the trimmer and supports the alpaca with one hand just behind and below the ears and the other hand (using the webbing of the hand) just behind the lower lip.



These figures visually represent ways of attempting to pick up feet. The ratchet signal is the best way to get movement.

you give back 5%. The next signal is 25% with a 5% give. That means that in five signals, the leg is off the ground and in position. If you give back too much with each signal, it will take way too long to get the forward movement, and if you give it all back you won't get movement at all.

The timing that you use to deliver the signals is also important. At the risk of giving away my age am going to bring up Lawrence Welk. One an-a two an-a three... each signal lasts less a bit less than a second. If your signals are too slow your alpaca will learn to resist them.

The following is a step-by-step process for picking up feet. You may or may not get to the last step for each leg in the first lesson. I recommend that no more than five minutes be spent on toenails in any one lesson. Look at a watch as you work and STOP! You can make progress with toenails if you work with the legs once a month. Working once or even twice a week is fine, but every day is too much. Once your alpaca accepts having his legs handled and toenails trimmed, five minutes is plenty of time to accomplish the task.



Photos C-H: This series of photos illustrates the way to pick up the front leg. Notice that the hand closest to the alpaca is used on the top of the back to help control the weight. The handler shifts the weight on to the leg to place the hand (C) and shifts it to the opposite leg when asking for the leg to lift (D-E). When the alpaca is in balance you can remove the hand on the back to either support the leg or clip the nails (F, G, H).

Picking Up the Left Front Leg

Picking up the left front leg. Step-by-step (Reverse directions for the right front leg)

1. With your alpaca in balance, begin by standing on your alpaca's left next to and facing the rear of the alpaca. Put your left hand/arm on the top-line (first choice) or across the body on the opposite upper shoulder. You will use the right hand to pick up the leg. You can also put your hand directly on the top line (*see photos*). The left hand will allow you to help support the alpaca's balance and move his weight on to the left leg. You want the weight on the leg you are working with until you get your hand in place behind the front leg just above the knee.
2. Once your hand is in place, move your animal's weight to the right front leg, using your hip or your hand as you begin to give ratcheting signals with your right hand in the direction you want the leg to bend (which is... forward). Remember, the foot comes up off the ground as the knee bends. Your signal is going to be toward the front of the animal – NOT up. If you choose to, this is the time to

offer a verbal reinforcement. Make sure to give the command at the INSTANT that the foot comes up off of the ground and not before.

3. Once the foot is off of the ground, IMMEDIATELY put it back on the ground.
4. Repeat this process several times... 10 is not too many. You are teaching your alpaca that you can be relied on to give the foot back.
5. If your alpaca accepts this process, you can begin to hold the foot up off the ground for a few seconds. The previous step should help your alpaca learn to shift his balance and learn to support himself on three legs. However, if your alpaca begins to lean on you, ratchet him gently away from you with your hip.
6. Once your alpaca is standing in balance with his foot off the ground, you can move your left hand from across the back or the topline to support the cannon bone, thereby freeing up your right hand (*see photo*).
7. Once you have the leg supported, you now have a free hand with which to trim.

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Above: An ankle holster keeps nippers handy when you are ready to trim.

Photos I-L: This series of photos illustrates the way to pick up the rear leg. Notice that the hand closest to the alpaca is used on the top of the back to help control the weight. The handler shifts the weight on to the leg to place the hand (I) and shifts it to the opposite leg when asking for the leg to lift (J). When the alpaca is in balance, you can remove the hand on the back to either support the leg or clip the nails (K-L).



Picking Up the Left Rear Leg

Picking up the left rear leg follows essentially the same process.

Put your left hand on the top line or across the body on the opposite hip. If you find that the alpaca is leaning toward you, it may help to slide your left hand further down the leg on the opposite side (*see photo*). The hand placement for the right hand picking up the foot is above and behind the hock. It will be much more difficult to work alone on the back legs unless your alpaca is motivated by food – in which case, a flake of juicy hay or a bowl of grain can serve as incentive to stand in place.

You have now really managed the hard part. Your alpaca has learned to feel safe and comfortable with his foot in your hand and off the ground. Depending on whether you are right- or left-handed, and which side you are working with, you will have to include an extra step to get your toenail nippers into the desired hand. Remember to switch the directions above when you trim the right front and right hind leg. I find that trimming left front, left rear, right front and right rear in that order works well.

A few points that will make the actual toenail trimming easier:

- Use a holster that fits on the lower leg (*as pictured*). This allows you to retrieve your nippers without moving very much. A bunch of mucking around trying to get your nippers out of a pocket will likely take your alpaca out of balance. Heaven forbid they are on the ground just out of reach when you finally do get your alpaca in balance and ready to trim!
- Trim very conservatively at first – we all quick an animal now and again but you don't want it to be the first time your alpaca is trimmed.

- Allow your alpaca to put his foot down a few times during the trimming process if he needs to. The more practice he gets picking up his foot and getting it back, the better off you both are.
- Trim toenails after a rain. The toenails are much easier when they are moist. If you live in a dry climate, wet down a small area and keep the animals in this area for a few minutes before trimming.
- Don't be reluctant to use a sedative for really difficult animals, if you need to. Wrestling to trim toenails makes the process more traumatic and only teaches your alpaca to resist more mightily.

After a few sessions, your alpaca will realize that the ratchet signal means to pick his foot up, and will respond when you give the first signal, he will learn to shift his weight and gain confidence standing on three legs. Toenail trimming will become the routine chore that it should be.

Happy Handling!

For over 20 years, Marty McGee Bennett (B.S. Animal Behavior, University of Georgia) has traveled the world teaching camelid enthusiasts how to better understand and more successfully relate to these wonderful animals. The author of three books, including the best-selling *Camelid Companion*, and the star of seven instructional videos, Marty's work has transformed the way owners, breeders, and veterinarians handle and train alpacas. Marty can be reached at www.camelidynamics.com or marty@camelidynamics.com.