

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!

Why in the world would you want to teach your alpaca NOT to pick up his feet? I know this sounds like exactly what you don't want to do but read on. No doubt about it trimming toenails is hands down the most problematic of alpaca management chores. Trimming toenails is a problem pretty much everywhere I go. There must be something that could and should be done differently to make it easier for alpacas to accept having their nails trimmed. If it is "broke"... fix it!

There are a number of possible explanations for the difficulty of toenail trimming.

1. Alpacas use their legs as their primary means of defense – that is, to run from what could be dangerous.
2. Male alpacas bite the legs of other male alpacas as part of a ritualized dominance process.
3. Male alpacas bite the legs of female alpacas to encourage them to lie down for breeding.
4. There is a problem with the way that human beings go about the process of trimming toenails.

We can't change the basic nature of the alpaca... in the short term anyway. We could make tempera-

This is one set up for working with the legs solo. Notice that there are other alpacas in view and that the size of the pen is just big enough for the handler and alpaca to stand in.



ment more of a priority when making breeding decisions, but that is a different article. So it would appear that numbers 1-3 are really out of our hands, dovetailing nicely with the oft-quoted wisdom, "The only behavior you can change is your own." So I am going to put my money on number four.

It's Not the Trimming

The actual trimming of toenails is really easy. It doesn't require any particular skill or strength to snip off the extra growth of a toenail. It doesn't require much time or any specialized tools, and it doesn't hurt. But getting the leg and foot in hand and keeping it there long enough to trim the toenails is another matter all together. An adult alpaca that is determined to thwart your efforts at trimming his nails can be amazingly slippery. Trimming the toenails of twenty or thirty difficult alpacas may in fact be beyond the physical limitations of the very people to whom we are selling the alpaca as a lifestyle... women, older people, and the less-than-physically-fit. My experience is that many if not MOST alpacas are difficult to one degree or another when it comes to having a pedicure. Even the animals that are easy are easy because they don't fight very hard – not because they actually cooperate. I meet very few alpacas that will stand quietly carrying their weight on the remaining three legs without some degree of propping up. Acting as the couch for thirty or so alpacas, much less a hundred is not my idea of a nice day, even if they are not actually fighting.

Trimming toenails is something that must be done on a regular basis, and it is important from the standpoint of both health and aesthetics. It would make a great deal of sense to invest some time in learning to do it well and teaching our alpacas to accept it. And here is the kicker, pardon the pun... I think the major reason that we find ourselves with difficulty trimming toenails is that we do not teach an alpaca to accept having his legs handled BEFORE we attempt to pick up his feet. Or to say it another way... we must teach the alpaca NOT to pick up his feet.

Cooperation or Intimidation?

The problem is that we misinterpret fear for cooperation. The alpaca is NOT picking his foot up because he understands what it is that we want and

has magically decided to cooperate. He is picking his foot up because he is afraid. We then compound the error by refusing to give the foot back when the alpaca wants it back by being too determined to get the toenails trimmed in that moment. This approach teaches the alpaca to begin using preemptive behavior to keep his feet out of our hands because we have made the process frightening.

This explains why alpacas often get worse about toenail trimming, NOT better. What begins as simply picking the foot up to keep it away from us humans becomes picking it up and hiding it under the opposite leg, followed shortly by sinking down, and finally by cushioning to cover up the legs altogether. Once an alpaca has learned this little trick of escape and evasion, it works so well that it becomes a challenge to get him to give it up.

I would submit that the typical way we go about trimming toenails is only reinforcing a very natural, instinctive avoidance response, instead of teaching the alpaca what he really needs to learn and that is, to overcome his instincts and allow us to handle his legs.

Teaching the Alpaca NOT to Pick Up His Foot

Thankfully, the way back is not that hard but it does require a shift in thinking. We must first teach the alpaca NOT to pick up his foot! We must focus initially on helping the alpaca keep his feet on the ground and ONLY after we can run a hand down the leg without an evasive reaction do we move on to actually picking the foot up. When we do pick the foot up, we must give it back almost before the animal asks for it.

The following process is useful for both teaching a young alpaca to accept having his legs handled and his toenails trimmed. It is also the same process I recommend for rehabbing alpacas that have become difficult. Lessons are very short: 3-5 minutes and there is no need to work daily or even weekly. If you weigh your alpacas on a regular basis, this can be a good time to work on this, too. It takes a longer period of time to change the mind of an alpaca that has already made it up, than to avoid causing the problem in the first place. That is not to say that the process itself is more time-consuming.

There are many different ways to approach the physical set up. You can work in a catch pen with a second person; you can work alone in a space just big enough for you and your alpaca, or a slightly



Above, This is the bracelet. It is a very useful technique for balancing an alpaca while someone else works on the legs.

Right, The bracelet in use as a second handler begins the process of teaching the alpaca to accept handling of the front legs.

larger space with a number of alpacas crowded up inside. If you choose to work with a single alpaca, the ideal pen size is about 4-5 feet by 6-7 feet. This area should be near or next to other alpacas. The most important element of the set up is to create a way of limiting movement without tying or restraint. In a recent column, I wrote about using panels to create areas for toenail trimming (*see the SPR06 issue of Alpacas Magazine*).

Working with a Helper

If you are working with a helper, his or her job is to act as a balance spotter – that is, to help keep the animal in balance, not to restrain him. A light support with one hand under the jaw and the other in the groove that is just behind the bottom lip that I have named “the bracelet” is a great technique (*see photos above*). If you are working alone in a small space with a single alpaca, you can hang a bag of hay or offer grain to create some incentive to stand.

With your alpaca in balance, begin by standing next to and facing the rear of the



alpaca. Put the hand/arm that is closest to the alpaca across the body (*see photos on the next page*). This will allow you to help manipulate the alpaca's balance. You want the weight on the leg with which you are working. In this way, you can help the alpaca keep his foot on the ground. After all, it is very difficult to pick up a foot when there is weight on it! Remember, this is about teaching your alpaca to keep his foot DOWN, not about having him pick it up. Your alpaca will have to shift his weight before he can pick the foot up. With your hand across the back, you will feel the beginning of the weight shift. Correct it and help your alpaca succeed.

Working on the Leg

Use the back of the other hand to make circular motions, beginning at the upper shoulder and moving down the leg. Don't work slowly. Make one circular motion and then slide your hand down the leg a bit and make another. Each circle may take a second or two – no more. If at any-time, you feel the alpaca begin to shift his weight, use your hand across the back to bring the weight back into neutral, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, move your other hand back into safe territory.

Your goal is to help your alpaca stand in balance without leaning toward you or leaning against your arm and to teach him that you understand his body language. “Yep I get it – you are afraid and notice I am listening!” If you insist on moving

into scary territory and ignore your alpaca's early subtle indications of fear, then you will leave him no choice but to "talk" more loudly. This means your alpaca will begin practicing the kinds of behaviors you seek to avoid – namely, picking the foot up, cushing, rearing... It is AMAZING once your alpaca really believes that you will retreat when he is afraid, he will let you do more and more.

Work with the rear legs in much the same way. Place the hand closest to the alpaca across the back and use it to shift the weight onto the leg with which you are working. It is more difficult to work alone with the rear legs unless your alpaca is highly motivated by food. Be prepared that progress on the rear legs will come a bit more slowly. Remember that, unless and until your alpaca is willing to stand quietly with your hand/arm resting across the back, you are not ready to move to the next step. Laying the proper foundation for a house goes slowly and doesn't offer dramatic progress at first – it is a dangerous step to skip.

Work on each leg for a minute or so. I like: left-front; left-rear; right-front; right rear. Move your hand as far as you can down the leg, PROVIDED your alpaca can accept it. There are some animals that, for whatever reason, have trouble with your hand across the body. It may take a few lessons to get past that. Always begin with what your alpaca CAN do and practice only what he can do successfully. A perfect lesson is one in which your alpaca never picks his foot up. I know it is a bit counter-intuitive, but it works!

Until your next *Alpacas Magazine* arrives in your mailbox, try this process on a few alpacas. Teach them to keep their feet on the ground. Tune in next time and we will move on to actually picking up the feet.

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.



The handlers are teaching this alpaca to keep the front feet on the ground as they are handled. Notice that the handler working on the legs has her hand over the back to pick up indications of shifts in balance.



One handler balances the alpaca while another works on teaching handling acceptance of the rear leg. Notice that the alpaca is being balanced and NOT restrained. The handler at the head is using the full length of the arms. This makes the alpaca feel less threatened and at the same time allows the handler to see more of what is going on with the animal's balance.