



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.

■ Make the Decision to Lead with Precision

Teaching an alpaca to step out proudly on his own in the show ring is a little bit like teaching a Great Dane to retrieve ducks. It can be done, but the animal is not exactly suited to it. Alpacas are herd animals. Safety is all about sticking with the group and in having the freedom to run. Leaving the rest of the herd, while tied to a human, is a huge leap of faith. Trusting in the leadership of the handler has a lot to do with the kind of leader the handler is! Lead with precision and the alpaca is more likely to understand what is being asked. The more the alpaca understands, the more likely he is to cooperate.

Most people teach an alpaca to lead by pulling on the head. Using the head to pull the rest of the body where you want it to go seems logical. This “technique” works with a dog... often the only other animal with which many alpaca owners have experience. Dog owners will pull a puppy around using a collar around the neck. After a few sessions of dragging, the pup figures out he is supposed to go with the human. Ironically, the problem then becomes how to stop the dog from dragging the owner around. This problem is, unfortunately, often addressed with prong and choke collars. When it comes to alpacas, pulling an animal to teach him to lead comes with a price. The law of unintended consequences often produces an alpaca that cushes as soon as he feels any pressure on the head. There are better ways to teach both dogs and alpacas how to walk on a lead/leash (for example, see the AUT08 issue of *Alpacas Magazine*: “Thumbelina Learns to Dance, But I Get to Lead”).

Pulling on the head to direct the movement of the body might work for getting from point A to point B, but that “technique” breaks down rapidly when you begin to ask for more specific behaviors. The problem with using the alpaca’s head to boss the body around is that darn three-foot neck. With

the exception of the llama, there are few, if any, animals that are routinely led and shown that have such a long neck. You can lead the head quite nicely and the body can be doing something entirely different! If you are in the habit of using the head to make your animal go where you go and do what you do, your technique may leave you stranded when you arrive in the show ring.

In the show ring, our goal is to exhibit an animal’s balance, carriage, and grace. This requires that the animal carry himself in balance and listen and respond to signals from handler. To show well, an alpaca’s head must be lined up and balanced over the neck, the neck must be in line with the body, and the body must be over his feet (*see the photo of the brown alpaca on the facing page*).

Using gross motor movement and big forceful signals will topple this house of cards in a New York minute! Judges must judge what they see and if your alpaca is all over the place in the show ring like he is just coming out of anesthesia... well that is what you are showing the judge. If you missed the part about teaching your alpaca to lead without pulling on his head so that you don’t create leading problems and are now having some trouble with style, gait, balance, poise, and grace on the lead, this article will help bridge the gap.

I can’t say another thing without a few reminders:

- The way you do anything with your alpaca – from oral worming to toenail trimming – affects the way he will behave in the show ring. I could write a book about this, but suffice it to say USE a catch pen! Specifically, move your animal in line with a panel to catch him, instead of grabbing and holding him around the neck. Holding on to the neck as the body flails around creates the habitual response to throw the weight around to escape. This behavior WILL come back to haunt you as you prepare for the show ring.

- Make sure your alpaca's halter fits safely and comfortably (see the SUM96 and HER07 issues of *Alpacas Magazine*). Without a properly fitting halter, your attempts to truly communicate with your alpaca will be impossible. The halter will not work to communicate your signals. Additionally, the ill-fitting halter will distract the alpaca.
- Use a longer lead rope for your training sessions (6-7 feet). Alpacas are frightened when they leave their pals and head out with you. Handlers mistakenly think that bringing the alpaca up close helps! I have news for you... you are part of what they are frightened of! A longer lead gives your alpaca room to think and get far enough away from you to ease the pressure your presence creates. Getting away from your alpaca also gives him a chance to learn to carry himself without your interference.
- If your halter has a ring on the NOSE BAND you can try leading from this ring (see *photo on page 45*). Leading from the side ring is like having power steering. This technique makes it easier for the alpaca to understand the signals you give and much easier to maintain contact. You must use this technique as described with the kind of halter that supports the technique. Leading from the cheek ring will not work! Once your alpaca is performing well, you can switch back to the standard leading ring under the chin.

Now that you are out and about, connected to your alpaca with a properly fitting halter and a longer lead, head out to the "playground for higher learning." I have borrowed this wonderful phrase from my teacher and mentor, Linda Tellington-Jones. Yep. Set up a few very simple obstacles in your leading area. I like poles. I use a combination of wooden fence posts, drain-pipe (six inches in diameter) and PVC pipe of various lengths. The obstacles I use are illustrated in the accompanying photos and captions. You should have some easy obstacles and some that are more complicated. The main thing is that these obstacles are used as an excuse for you to give very precise signals, NOT as a punch list. Dragging your alpaca over all of the obstacles DOES NOT constitute success.



Photos courtesy of Marty McGee Bennett

Top, I am pulling on the lead. You can see the result is that the alpaca pulls back, throwing its weight to the rear, dropping the back and raising the head. It would be very difficult for a judge to see much of anything about an animal led this way.



This alpaca is standing in balance. Her head is lined up with her neck; her neck is lined up with body; and her body is over her feet.



In this photo, the handler has steady pressure on the lead. As a result, the alpaca is using the lead for balance and is leaning to the side.

In this photo the handler has just asked for a balanced halt. Note the nice light connection through the line and the use of the wand as a secondary signal.



I like to stop before each obstacle, use that moment to ask my alpaca to stand in balance, then proceed slowly and deliberately, one step at a time. This teaches the alpaca to wait and listen, instead of anticipating you.

The essence of leading with precision is to be connected to your alpaca through the lead rope and using it to have a conversation. Speaking to your alpaca with the lead rope is very much like talking on the telephone. Once the connection is established through the lead line, the process involves speaking and then waiting and listening.

People who don't stop talking and don't listen to feedback from other people end up being ignored. The same is true with alpacas. Look at the photos of the camel. These photos illustrate a connection and lack of connection through the lead. A lead that is too tight or too loose will compromise the connection. A loose lead does not transmit signals, leaving the animal to make up his own agenda and a lead that is too tight encourages the animal to use the lead for balance. The trick is to be able to move around and maintain this light connection at the same time. You will notice in most of the photos, the handler is carrying a white wand. This tool is very helpful for helping to maintain contact by helping you keep the alpaca slightly away from you, as well as helping to slow an animal down and teach a balanced halt.

Stopping together in balance with your alpaca is key to beautiful leading and successful showing. A balanced halt means that the handler and animal slow down and stop in unison. Too often, the handler thinks halt and stops immediately before the animal "hears" the command and processes its meaning. This sets the stage for circling. Circling is distracting for the animal and the judge. A balanced halt is achieved by giving an up-and-back signal to halt and slowing down, BUT continuing to walk until the animal slows and stops with you.

Refined leading with precision is about imparting information through the lead, but it is also about using your body and body position to communicate, as well. Your alpaca is highly aware of your body language. Your alpaca knows when you hold your breath, and interprets this as danger. This explains why your alpaca might be standing quietly



Okay, okay... I know these are not alpacas, but camels are so expressive and the photos speak volumes. In the photo above, I am using light contact with this camel to teach him to take one step at a time – an exercise that we call "The Dance." Look at his face. He is interested and engaged. In the next photo, a student is trying the same exercise with the same camel. Consistent with being a beginner, this handler is a bit heavy-handed and is using steady pressure. The Bactrian responds with a look of consternation!



and rears up just as the judge lifts his head from the animal next to you, but before he takes even one step toward you. Your alpaca knows when you lose focus and are not paying attention. This explains why he picks this exact moment to sniff his

neighbor or becomes distracted in the line up.

Your alpaca also mirrors your posture and attitude. I was doing some demonstrations and helping exhibitors at a show recently when a tall, beautiful woman brought her alpaca to me for help in the ring. She told me, “This alpaca does brilliantly in the show ring for the person I bought him from, but he is clumsy and slow and he won’t hold his head up for me.” I asked this woman to lead the alpaca for me in the aisle way of the arena. What I noticed as she led him, was that she (the woman) was kind of clumsy and slow and didn’t hold her head up! I asked her to pick her feet up, stand up straight, and become more animated. Lo and behold so did the alpaca! She brought him back later, proudly holding her first place ribbon and I hardly recognized either one of them as the downtrodden pair that asked for help earlier in the day!

Leading with precision shows off your animal to the judge AND shows off our industry to the public. Leading with precision in the show ring looks more interesting and professional to those observing YOU interact with your animals, possibly leading to farm visits and sales. Certainly, leading with precision increases your chances of success in the show ring. Your animal looks better, more balanced, and feels safer and is therefore more likely to stand well for inspection. And even if you don’t win, you will have had more fun.

For over 25 years, Marty has traveled the world, devoting her professional life to the well-being of camelids and the education of their owners. Her clinics, books, and videos have helped thousands of camelid owners more fully understand, appreciate, and enjoy their animals. Marty and her husband, Brad, operate the Camelidynamics Training Center in Bend, Oregon. She can be reached at marty@camelidynamics.com.



Left, the proper placement of the lead for side leading. The lead is on the ring that divides the upper and lower parts of the NOSE BAND. Many halters do not offer this feature, and without it, this style of leading is not an option. The snap is placed on the leading edge of the ring with the opening facing out.

Below, radiating poles make a nice obstacle that helps an alpaca who doesn’t seem to have much awareness around his feet and stumbles or drags his feet.

Bottom, this handler is enjoying a session on our obstacle course, using a leading technique that involves two leads – one on each side. In the background, you can see many of the obstacles we use.

