

Part One of

Oh Go Take a Hike! The Virtues of Obstacles.

Most people get involved in the world of alpacas because they are looking for a new lifestyle, some thing more interesting, less stressful and more fun than their current occupation. Almost every new alpaca owner I talk to cites the desire to connect with the animals as one of the main reason they find alpacas appealing. Too often as the alpacas enter the barn door, along with the pressure of being a good caretaker, the fun goes out the window. The only time we humans interact with the alpacas is to put something unpleasant in their mouths, trim their toenails, given them an injection, stretch them out for shearing or ask them to stand still in a show ring. And then we wonder why they run to the far side of the pasture when they see us coming. I have good news for you. As your resident training and handling columnist I have what I feel will be some welcome advice. Perhaps the single best thing you can do with your alpacas to: make them more cooperative, easier to manage, and maybe even healthier is to—are you ready... HAVE FUN WITH THEM! Yes, no longer is having fun the last thing you allow yourself to do when all the nails have been trimmed. Do it now, do it every day and all your other jobs will get easier.

I know this advice sounds too good to be true— but it is in fact true. Most of the difficulties we have with our alpacas have to do with a lack of trust. However we seldom do anything with them that would create trust. Hand feeding them doesn't count. Hand feeding your alpacas will encourage them to come over to you to get food but it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with their stomachs. In fact when I see people reaching out their food filled hands to a frightened alpaca who must screw up her courage to snatch a bite before darting away, I see a big cartoon bubble above her head that says, "Please just put the !@#\$\$% stuff on the ground and leave me alone!" Trust happens when two beings take risks together and learn to count on each other. Hand feeding does not fall into this category. We use food coercively for all

kinds of ulterior motives. I am not saying using food this way is inappropriate my point is, food isn't that useful for creating a relationship.

Most alpacas, most of the time are managed and handled by virtue of our ability to restrain and force them to bend to our will. Consequently many alpacas are ready to use any and all resources at their disposal to avoid us. They run when they see us coming, become panicky when we try to do even simple things like look at their fleece and fight like crazy when try to handle their escape equipment i.e. trim their toenails. And it is NO WONDER! In order to truly create a relationship with an animal we must find some mutual activity that both human and animal can enjoy. Taking a nice walk complete with some grazing is about the best thing we can offer an alpaca. Toenail trimming, shearing, shots and worming hardly fall into that category. Therefore, I think that to truly change an alpaca's mind about people, learning to lead is critical.

Halter your alpacas and take them for a walk, it will be good exercise for both of you. Your alpacas will learn to enjoy these outings and will learn to trust you and your leadership... provided you prove yourself worthy. Ideally take your alpaca out in the world away from the familiarity of the barn; over the river and through the woods is even better and with just you for company. Taking your alpaca for a walk with another alpaca is good and can be a good start but true bonding occurs when you go out alone together and your alpaca must place his trust in you.

If your situation doesn't allow for a hike away from the safety of your pastures you can accomplish the same thing with a creative obstacle course right in your own back yard (more on this in Part two of this article).

Rigorous outdoor adventure programs and ropes courses that include confidence exercises high in the air are deliberately designed to teach people to trust each other by tacking difficult and frightening situations together. Vulnerable mistrustful members of the human community such as victims of domestic violence, abused children are particularly helped by these kinds of programs. This from an article about national program called Project Adventure, "On the ropes course you don't have to be smart,

athletic or even coordinated. You have to learn to trust and take risks. It's really all about trusting your peers....the program builds a sense of family." For many frightened alpacas learning to lead and going on a hike can be a mini "Outward Bound" experience... provided you approach it with that spirit. Dragging an already frightened alpaca over a series of obstacles is going to do very little to enhance trust in the handler. To be useful the obstacles must increase incrementally in their complexity and level of difficulty and the handler must be willing to decrease the level of difficulty should that be necessary. For many alpacas just learning to lead and leaving the comfort of the herd to venture out with a human is plenty difficult. For these animals short walks close to home lead to longer walks further a field.

Older imported pregnant females really benefit from learning to lead and going on walks. Many alpaca owners feel that leaving older imported breeding females alone except for necessary management is a kindness. The intention is good but the effect is not. These animals live in fear of any human contact. They never know if today is THE day and consequently they are anxious every single day every single time they see a human. Only in the very latest stages of pregnancy would walks be contraindicated. We think nothing of doing a rectal ultrasound to confirm pregnancy and then worry about taking the poor girl out for a nice walk. I wouldn't necessarily begin the process in the later stages of pregnancy but I wouldn't let pregnancy interfere with an ongoing exercise and bonding program.

I recently experienced first hand the magic that happens when you teach an older animal to lead. When I met her a few months ago Applause was a 14 year-old very pregnant imported alpaca. Applause would typically scream, spit, and loose control of her bladder when handled and kept 10-foot safety zone around her at ALL times. Her owner and my clinic host Shari Pritchard told me that if I could just work with her a bit and try to get her past the wild and frightened look on her face that she Shari would be really happy. I told Shari I thought it was really important to teach Applause to lead so that Shari could take her for walks. Shari looked at me like I was speaking backwards

in tongues. She told me, "I will be happy with just getting close to her without a drama. Leading is way beyond what I am hoping for." Shari's husband Bill had even lower expectations. He thought Applause was a pretty much a lost cause. Just before lunch on day one of the clinic I demonstrated a new way of catching and haltering Applause. An approach that didn't involve cornering her or holding her against her will. I was very pleased with Applause's new attitude, as was Shari. She stood quietly and didn't scream. After a ten-minute lesson I turned her back out to the pasture and left her to think about things over night. Humans don't appreciate that animals need time to process things just like we do. I was asking her to do nothing short of change her entire approach to humans. Leaving an animal to think about things over night can make a huge difference in the next training session. I planned to work on leading the next day.

I was pretty sure that Applause didn't have any idea that a signal on her head had anything to do with her feet. Most alpacas -even those that lead well-usually only know that they are supposed to follow the human being when the human being moves. This is much different from an understanding of stop and go signals applied to the head. Understanding signals goes a long way toward making an alpaca feel safer with the handler. Knowledge is power and every little bit of knowledge we can give an alpaca makes them feel more comfortable in what is essentially to them an alien environment.

Applause settled down much more quickly than the day before. Haltering went very easily. I worked with Applause inside the confines of the catch pen teaching her that a signal applied to her head was really for her FEET. I was not surprised to find that she was a quick study and it wasn't but a very few minutes before I felt comfortable bringing her out into an open area in the barn. (See photo) With clinic participants in a semi-circle at the edges of the barn I walked Applause around the barn. She followed politely. As we got near the humans she did a surprising thing. She walked over to inspect each person and participate in some nose greetings. At this point Shari began to cry. She was convinced that Applause would never be able

lead much less show any interest in humans. Bill said, "This is an animal that would never get within ten feet of a human EVER!" I turned the lead rope over to Shari with a bit of instruction about how to give light signals and they were off and walking!

The truly remarkable sequel to what was an already amazing transformation happened when Applause had her baby. Shari sent me this email...

Hi Marty,

Well I had to let you know. Applause FINALLY had her cria today. A beautiful dark brown little boy.

But her attitude with this birth has been absolutely amazing. And I really think I have to thank you. Normally when she births her crias, she is a screaming lunatic. Really! If you even come within 10 feet of her cria, she would scream, spit, whatever she thought she needed to do to keep you away.

THIS TIME WAS SO DIFFERENT.

She allowed me to come up and dip the cria's navel - no screaming and biting of my hair. She just smelled my hair, no pulling it this year and no screaming at me. It really is amazing.

She still didn't want me to pick him up (for weighing) and so I didn't. He is healthy, active and I thought - why break that trust just because I want to know what he weighs. So I will wait a few days and weigh him when she is a little less protective. He is a great size and I'm sure he is about 18-19 pounds.

She even let me get under her next to the cria to strip the wax from her teats and be sure he was suckling fine - which he was. But you cannot imagine how dumbfounded I was. It was the best birthing this spring.

THANK YOU SO MUCH! Truly, I mean it.

Warm Regards,

Shari

This fourteen year-old leopard totally changed her spots and learning to lead was the key to the shift. I think it is a mistake to treat teaching your alpacas to lead and work over obstacles as an elective it should be a central part of your management program. I believe it is very important to the well being of your breeding females and non-show animals. Ironically working over obstacles is perhaps the fastest and best way to solve other behavioral and management challenges like difficulty trimming toenails, kicking

and spitting. These behaviors are all expressions of a lack of trust. Continuing to fight about these chores will never change your alpacas mind about you.

This is the first part of a two-part article. Next time specific obstacles that will increase your alpaca's confidence level, help her to focus, settle down at a show and enjoy her association with humans. For now I suggest you work on getting those girls haltered. Of course you are going to use a safe comfortable halter and use haltering techniques that will help to develop trust and confidence*. And remember to HAVE FUN!

* Specific suggestions for a new way to handle your alpacas is available in many of the back issues of this magazine as well as in "The Camelid Companion"