

- I have written this entire article using feminine pronouns to reinforce the idea of teaching your female alpacas to lead. However ALL alpaca regardless of gender and state of pregnancy benefit from learning to lead.

Photos:

1. Well fitted halter –with hook on the side 1 photo with two references
2. Long narrow aisle way for leading 1 photo
3. Labyrinth photos- 2-3 photos
4. Series of cavern photos 3-4 photos

## Part Two of Go Take a Hike

In part one of this article in the \_\_\_\_\_ issue *Alpacas Magazine* I presented the many reasons to teach your alpacas- all of them- to lead. Not only does teaching an alpaca to lead make it easier to get her\* from place to place but it also makes it possible to take her for a walk, to get out of the barn, get exercise, see different scenery get some special grass and most importantly to learn to trust YOU! I am beginning this article with the assumption that you have read part one of this article and have haltered your alpaca. The most important aspect of your leading success is a well fitting halter (see photo). A well fitting halter is one whose noseband is large enough in diameter to slide well up on the nose bone and whose crown piece has enough take up to keep it there— NO MATTER WHAT! Alpacas can only breathe through their noses. The soft cartilage on an alpaca's

nose is easily compressed by an ill-fitting halter. This will compromise the airway and cause the alpaca to panic.

Animals that don't know how to lead are invariably shocked to find themselves attached to a human with no way to escape. A frightened alpaca on a lead rope for the first time will run until he cannot run anymore and will hit the end of the rope. If the halter slips off the nose bone he will surely panic and throw himself around. Ironically bucking and lunging is physically taxing and the animal requires more air, if the halter is restricting the airway... you get the picture. This is an extremely frightening experience. This nightmare scenario is easily prevented, first, by using a properly fitting halter and second by remaining in a long and narrow confined space for initial leading lessons (more on this aspect of lead training later in this article).

A very important aspect of successful lead training is teaching your alpaca that a signal on the head means that he should take a step. Many alpacas have no idea that a signal on their head means anything! They only know "follow the human where ever the human goes or he will make you uncomfortable." This very basic approach to leading an alpaca breaks down very quickly in the show ring when it is necessary for the alpaca to remain standing even as the human moves. Teaching your alpaca to respond to a signal is best done before ever leaving the catch pen. Once your alpaca is haltered attach a lead rope to the halter.

One option that will speed-up the process of teaching your alpaca to respond to signals on the lead is to hook the lead rope to the side ring of a halter that included rings on the nose band (see photo). Hooking the lead

rope to the ring directly under the chin in the traditional way bisects the body exactly and makes it likely that an untrained alpaca will be able to use the lead rope to remain in balance and resist coming forward. With the lead rope hooked to the side ring, resisting causes the alpaca to put more weight on one leg than the other and therefore lose her balance. A loss of balance in this context equates to taking a step...just exactly what the handler wants. To begin the process of teaching the alpaca the meaning of a signal, stand as far from the alpaca as you can within the confines of the catch pen. Begin to give signals on the lead and do not stop giving them until the alpaca takes a step. It is very important to persist in giving the signals. In this way you teach the alpaca that the two things are related—that one means to do the other. If you don't consistently pair the two things up, the alpaca will have a very hard time making the mental connection.

The best signaling technique is in my experience, one that mimics a ratchet. That is— it takes up some slack but provides a slight release before taking up more slack. Many new handlers use steady pressure on the line or a tug and release. Steady pressure encourages the alpaca to resist steadily creating a standoff, tug and release does nothing to cause the alpaca to change her balance. A ratcheting signal applies forward pressure but not enough to create resistance. To give a ratcheting signal, begin with a very light connection on the lead with your alpaca, then begin to give signals much like squeezing a sponge making sure not to fully release and avoiding steady pressure. Timing is important you should give 4-5 signals about every three seconds. Continue to give the signals UNTIL the alpaca takes a step then immediately stop for a second or two and begin the

process again. If your alpaca lowers his head and pulls to the rear your signals are too heavy and too long. Using this technique your alpaca will make the connection between the signal and the footstep. You will know when your alpaca begins to make the connection between the signals on the head and a footstep when he responds with a step after only two to three signals. It is almost as if you can see a big light bulb go off over the alpaca's head. At this point you will be ready to leave the catch pen for the leading area.

Ideally your catch pen should open out to a long narrow space (no wider than 20 feet). (See photo) In a long narrow aisle way it is easy to "explain" to your alpaca that the object of this exercise is to follow the human in a straight line. Leaving the catch pen to any space wider than 10-15 feet will allow the alpaca to run past you. If this happens the alpaca will hit the end of the lead rope and panic. In a narrow space you need only step in front of the alpaca to prevent an end run. I prefer to use a long lead for initial leading lessons so that I can get further away from the alpaca (see photo). Alpacas are nervous when they are closer to us than an arms length. Using a short lead means that the human must be quite close to the alpaca. The alpaca spooks away from the human, reacting instead of thinking the human holds tight on the lead, this scares the alpaca, he pulls even more, the human holds tighter and so on. This can be easily prevented by using a longer lead giving the alpaca more space and allowing her to actually think about what we are asking of her.

After two or three sessions in a confined space you will be ready to head out to a slightly larger area and to introduce simple learning

opportunities. I primarily use two different “obstacles,” one is the labyrinth (a learning system taught to me by Linda Tellington-Jones) and the other the “camelid cavern of confidence.” I much prefer confidence course to obstacle course, as this is really the purpose.

The labyrinth is a series of 6- 10 foot long 1.5 “ PVC poles. These poles are arranged to form a series of two turns (see diagram). By working slowly and deliberately through this simple puzzle on the ground you can teach your alpaca to really focus and pay attention. It is a great way to teach an alpaca to respond very specifically to signals- very useful for the show ring. The labyrinth is a great way to settle a scattered frightened alpaca. Practice with the labyrinth at home but don’t stop there... take your poles to a show, find an out of the way spot and use them to settle your animals down prior to entering the show ring. You can also rearrange the poles in a series or walk directly over the poles and use them to help an alpaca slow down and listen to the handler. The most important thing about using the labyrinth is that you work your way through one step at a time. It is not particularly useful to walk through the labyrinth or over the poles at normal speed. The real learning takes place when you focus on each step and ask for real refinement. I use a wand as an additional way of offering cues. You can also use your extended arm to mimic the wand. Remember as you lead to give signals and to maintain a light contact with your alpaca in between the signals.

The “camelid cavern of confidence”<sup>\*</sup> is a wonderful tool for teaching an animal to trust the handler. The cavern begins as nothing more frightening than a series of poles on the ground, as each layer of difficulty is added the

animal realizes that he can leave his comfort zone with the leadership of the handler. Graduation is a trip through a pretty frightening tunnel. This is also a great way to prepare your alpaca to load in a trailer.

Teaching an alpaca to lead nets you much more than your alpaca putting one foot in front of the other. If approached in the right spirit it can transform the relationship you have with your animals. Soooooo go on take a hike!

\* All of the techniques discussed in this article are address in much more detail in Marty's book "The Camelid Companion"