

Make the Decision to Lead with Precision!

By Marty McGee Bennett

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 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 al-

pacas, pulling an animal to teach him 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 (Alpacas Livestock Summer 2009 Issue *Thumbelina Learns to Dance but I Get to Lead*). Teaching an alpaca to lead is not the topic for this issue but the related subject of “speaking” clearly through the lead once your animal knows enough to follow you on the lead.

Pulling on the head to direct the movement of the body might work for getting from point A to point B, the “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



Pull steadily on the lead and the alpaca will throw his weight to the rear and resist.



In this photo the alpaca is leaning on the lead and using the handler for balance and to pull away.



The alpaca is standing in balance.

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 photo on next 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 a 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 just 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 that your halter fits safely and comfortably (reference halter fit articles here please.) Without a properly fitting halter your attempts to truly communicate



This photo illustrates how to attach the lead to the side ring. NOTE that the lead is attached to the **front edge** of the most forward ring in the nose band. Many halters do not have a ring on the nose band and if your halter does not then you cannot use this technique. The ring further back on the halter by the cheek will not work.

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.



I know these are not alpacas! But look at the expression on the face of Fidel the bactrian camel. In the first photo I am using small signals to ask him to take one step forward. He looks interested. In the second photo a new student is trying out signals and is a bit heavy; Fidel looks a bit flumoxed!

- If your halter has a ring on the NOSE BAND you can try leading from this ring. See illustration. Leading from the side ring is like having power steering, makes it easier to understand the signals you give and it much easier to maintain contact (discussed below). 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 (6 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



This handler is using two lines to gain more connection with both sides of the body. He has a nice light contact through the lines and is using obstacles to help alpaca to focus.

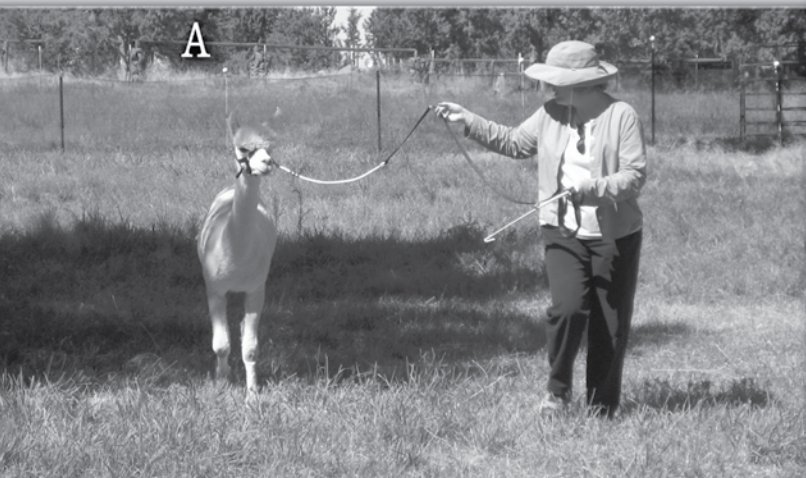
obstacles and some that are more complicated. The main thing is that these obstacles are used as an excuse for you to give very precise signals NOT as a punch list. Dragging your alpaca over all of the obstacles DOES NOT constitute success. I like to stop before each obstacle use that moment to ask my 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 in-

volves speaking and then waiting and listening. People who stop talking and listen to feedback from other people end up being ignored. The same is true with alpacas. Look at the photos A and B 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 alpaca to make up his own agenda and a lead that is too tight encourages the alpaca 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 it’s 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 ex-



In the first photo the handler has a nice light contact through the line. In the second photo she has lost contact. Learning to consistently maintain light contact through the line will help your alpaca learn to both listen and carry himself in balance.

plains why your alpaca might be standing quietly 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. 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 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 by 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 our animals 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. 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.

About Marty McGee Bennett...

Marty McGee Bennett’s first llama jumped off the back of a pickup truck and into her heart in 1981. Since then Marty has devoted her professional life to the well being of llamas and alpacas and the education of camelid enthusiasts. Over the years Marty has been a llama breeder, conference organizer, board member, fiber artist, and most importantly trainer and teacher. Marty brings a variety of experience and qualifications to her work with camelids, including a B.S. degree in Animal Behavior. Marty’s combination of TTEAM, the principles of balance and leverage and a second sense with both camelids and people make “Camelidynamics” the world’s most popular, and enduring training/handling systems for camelids.

Her clinics, books and videos have helped thousands of llama and alpaca owners more fully understand, appreciate and enjoy this magical animal.

Marty’s most recent book “The Camelid Companion” published in 2001 has received rave reviews in publications worldwide. Conducting hundreds of clinics in North America and around the world including numer-

ous trips to Australia, New Zealand and Europe have kept Marty on the road for much of the past two years. After searching the country for just the right spot, Marty and Brad and their family of four-leggeds have moved to Bend, Oregon. Visit us in Bend online at www.camelidynamics.com.



In this photo the handler is standing in balance and so is the alpaca. They have just come to a balanced halt.