

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.

■ Care and Feeding of... The Alpaca Head

The alpaca's head: it is a big part of why we fall in love with them... the beautiful eyes, long eyelashes, the adorable lips.

But as we gaze at this enchanting countenance, it is crucial to remember that they also breathe and eat with it. Unfortunately, for many alpacas, their owners may appreciate the beauty of the head but don't understand exactly how to REALLY look out for it. For over twenty years, I have been writing about halter fit, with most of the emphasis on the importance of the airway. In this article, let's revisit the issue of halter fit, but go further to have a look at the whole head. For inspiration, I am gazing into the naked eye orbits of my personal alpaca skull. Alas, poor Yorick... I knew him well. (To be, or not to be?)

The Problem

I spend my entire professional life and much of my free time working with, watching, and obsessing about camelids. I have a pretty good understanding of their behavior and what humans do to affect it, both positively and negatively. In my experience, improper halter fit and its related effects create more behavioral problems than any other single factor.

Many, if not most, alpacas who misbehave in the show ring do so because their halters don't fit properly.

Most difficult-to-halter alpacas are that way because of their early experiences with the halter – both its fit and the way it is introduced. Behavioral problems such as kicking, spitting, and rebellious cushioning can be and often are related to halter fit. Any time an alpaca is wearing a halter that doesn't fit, he is going to be more difficult to handle. This means shearing, trimming toenails, giving



injections, or doing an ultrasound can all be adversely affected by improper halter fit. An alpaca's small head, coupled with the leverage provided by its long neck, make proper halter fit tricky AND extremely important.

You would think that given its importance and the fact that we don't have a heap of other pieces of equipment to worry about, that we would just naturally get it right. Surely people who have owned alpacas for years would know how to properly fit a halter. Unfortunately, this just is NOT so. Go to any show or look at any magazine or show catalog, and you will see many examples of alpacas wearing halters that are uncomfortable if not downright dangerous. Most people can pick out a halter that REALLY doesn't fit. It slips way down the nose, compresses the cartilage, and looks obviously uncomfortable, but there is way more to it than that! Halters can be frightening or uncomfortable (or both) for a variety of reasons. On top of that, you can have a halter that isn't scary or uncomfortable or unsafe but it doesn't work to communicate and control the alpaca any better than a rope around the top of the neck.

Halters That Are Scary

Clear the airway! That is the first thing we are taught to do in CPR training. In fact, we are taught to do this even before we stop the bleeding. This is the most basic element of lifesaving procedure. It is IMPORTANT! Alpacas are semi-obligate nasal breathers. Dissect this appellation and you understand that alpacas must largely but not entirely breathe through their noses. Go figure, they have

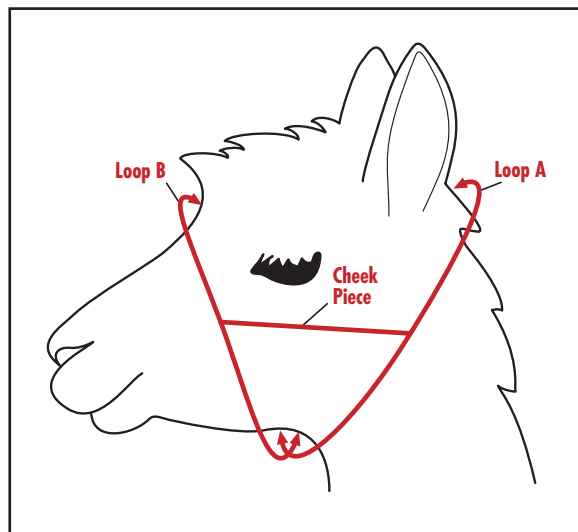


A halter that fits well is essential to the health, well-being, and good behavior of your alpaca.

that perfectly good opening called a mouth, but it is almost entirely for eating (more on that later). An alpaca can die if his nasal passage is blocked. Because of this, ANY suggestion that the halter may slip forward is going to frighten the alpaca. Imagine that someone is pushing your head slightly under water, if you tilt your nose just right you can still barely breathe but you begin to panic and struggle. Your tormentor is thinking “just settle down and cooperate and I will lighten up.” Alpacas or humans that even think that they can’t breathe will panic.

The problem is not limited to nose bands that slip totally off the nose bone, but also includes halters that slip to the edge of the nose bone. On a related matter, I think it is absolutely inappropriate to cover the airway of an alpaca... period. Covering an alpaca’s nose and mouth with a spit mask or sock or covering the head during shearing or an unpleasant medical procedure compromises the airway and increases the animal’s level of discomfort or abject panic. Inhalation pneumonia is also not out of the realm of possibility. Once we have our hands on an alpaca, we can easily aim the nose away from people to control where the spit goes. Spit washes off, bad memories stay with an animal for a long, long time... maybe forever.

Alpacas have a frighteningly short nose bone (*see photo of an alpaca skull*), in fact most of what we call the “nose” is actually cartilage, not bone. The nose bone on most adult alpacas ends about an inch or so in front of the eyes. Not very much bone on



which to hang a halter! In fact, the bone is so short, we ought not use it at all for actual fitting. That’s right, leave the nose out of it!

Most people have trouble fitting a halter because they are trying to fit the nose and there just isn’t enough nose to fit. Instead of fitting the nose bone, I suggest that we focus, instead, on fitting the rear part of the jaw-bone and the back of the head. Almost every halter is composed of two loops: one that goes around the back of the jaw and behind the head (crown piece-throatlatch – “Loop A” in the drawing) and a second loop that goes around the nose (noseband – “Loop B” in the drawing). These two loops are connected by a short piece on each side called the cheek piece. Some halters

Behavioral problems such as kicking, spitting, and rebellious cushioning can be and often are related to halter fit.



This halter does NOT fit. It is restricting the animals ability to chew and is not resting on bone but on cartilage.



You can see what happens when a halter that is fitting in this way is actually used to control the alpaca the cartilage is compressed and the airway is compromised. When taking these photos I could hear the sound of her breathing become much louder and more obvious.

feature adjustments in both of these loops, whereas others are sized according to the size of the noseband (a bad idea).

In order to fit a halter that is not going to slip forward and off the bone, we must begin by fitting Loop A, which MUST be reasonably snug, because the nose bone is so short. The adjustment of Loop A is the one that prevents the noseband from slipping forward off the bone. And this is the kicker... Loop B (the NOSEBAND) must be large enough that it doesn't interfere with the fitting of Loop A.

Why Halters Are Uncomfortable

Alpacas eat or ruminate most of the day. Assuming that jaw movement is required for both of these activities, it is probably safe to guess that the jaw moves side to side once every second or two for half of their waking hours. My math gives me approximately 7,200 side-to-side movements per day – and that is a lot of chewing. Put a halter on until the nose band won't go any further; as in putting a ring on a cone,



Another view of the way that the nose band of the badly-fitting halter compresses the cartilage.



This halter fits! You can see that it must be right up close to the eye in order to be fully on the bone. Notice too that the noseband is not compressing the cartilage or the skin around the mouth. This alpaca still has full mobility when she chews. Notice that when I pull down on the bottom of the halter (right) the nose bone supports the halter and does not compress the cartilage.



and you are by definition tying the mouth shut or at least interfering with the alpaca's ability to chew freely.

A properly-fitting halter means that Loop A (the loop that is composed of the throatlatch and the crown piece) must be tight enough to keep the noseband (Loop B) from slipping off of the nose bone BEFORE the nose-band is fitted. With the crown piece snug, there should still be slack in the nose band! Fitting the nose band means taking up any extra slack – it does NOT mean tightening it. You should still be able to fit a finger or two inside the nose band of a fitted halter. A nose band that compresses the skin covering the bottom mandible or impedes the animal's ability to chew is uncomfortably tight.

I do not know of any formal studies on the effect of tight nosebands on the alpaca's ability to properly chew its food. My intuition tells me that not only is a tight noseband a comfort issue, but it is also a potential health issue. Given a camelid's elaborate digestive process, I cannot believe that properly chewing forage before swallowing it isn't important. Yet, being able to ruminate properly must impact how the food is digested. An alpaca that wears a poorly-fitting halter all day long (and many animals

at shows wear them all night as well) for several days may be subject to stomach upsets. This may lead to diarrhea or impactions from improperly digested food. At a minimum, spending several days locked in a small pen with nothing to do but eat while wearing the equivalent of a muzzle, must be pretty frustrating and can't help but affect show ring performance.

Fitting a Halter – A Step-By-Step Process

You must start with a halter that is properly proportioned. To check this, buckle the crownpiece of the halter you intend to use on a medium setting. If you have eight holes, choose the 4th or 5th hole. Next, open the nose band all the way to its largest setting. Measure both loops with a tape measure. Multiply the circumference of the noseband by 100 and divide by the circumference of the crownpiece/throatlatch. The resulting number should be 85 or larger. This means that the nose band, when fully opened, is at least 85% as big as the average size of the crown piece/throatlatch opening. For example, if the opening of the throatlatch/crown piece is 15 inches, then the nose band should be at least 13 inches. If this ratio is significantly off, your halter will NOT fit in

the way I describe – no matter what you do!

Another clue is to look at the cheek pieces. Cheek pieces longer than 2" indicate that the halter is constructed with a noseband that is too small. When you put one of these halters on an animal, the noseband gets stuck on the nose, and therefore the cheek piece must be longer to connect Loops A and B.

Once you have determined that your halter is properly proportioned, you can put it on and fit it to your alpaca. You will do this each and every time you halter your alpaca. Pre-fitting halters just about guarantees they will NOT be properly fitted.

Putting on a halter is like putting on a lace-up shoe – you must loosen the shoe each and every time you put it on!

- 1) Open the nose band all the way up.
- 2) Put on the halter.
- 3) Tighten the crown piece as much as you can.
- 4) Put your fingers on each side of the noseband and tug forward. If you can pull the noseband to the very edge of (or off) the nose bone, then you must tighten up the crown piece. You can determine where the bone ends and the cartilage begins by pressing gently down. If there is give, it is cartilage, not bone.

After you are totally satisfied with the crown piece adjustment, take the slack out of the noseband. This means that the noseband should just gently touch all the way around the nose without pressing or restricting the alpaca's ability to move his mouth and jaw.

Check the crown piece about 10 minutes after you

put the halter on or just before entering the show ring. Nylon stretches by approximately 33%. As the nylon stretches and the fleece compresses, you could end up with a dangerous amount of slack in the crown piece.

Remember that halter fit counts all the time. Alpacas have small heads and young alpacas have even smaller heads, so be precise! You must pay attention every time you put on a halter! The old truism is: most car accidents happen close to home. Well, the same could be said in the alpaca world: most haltering dramas happen when we are just putting on a halter for "a few minutes" to do something quickly.

Putting a halter on an alpaca is a compromise in comfort... nakedness is always more comfortable. Take the halter OFF whenever you can and, if at all possible, don't make your alpaca wear a halter overnight. Happy Haltering!

Note: This article was reviewed for technical accuracy by Toni Cotton, DVM.

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.