

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.

■ Thumbelina Learns to Dance... But I Get to Lead!

We have a very small herd of alpacas that we lovingly call the “Camelidynamics Experimental Herd.” They get to do product testing, poke holes in my logic when I try a new technique, and put their seal of approval on things they find satisfactory.

Given that handling animals and teaching others to do it is my full time job and given that I am a human being – chronically over-extended like most of us are – several things are true:

- The Camelidynamics Experimental Herd gets less handling than most alpacas do – sort of like the cobbler’s children and shoes, if you remember that childhood fairy tale.
- When I do handle them, I want to get in, get it done, and be done so that I can have time off from alpacas and do other things like play with my dogs.

Soooo... Dave Belt, our illustrious editor, reminded me a few days ago that I am quite late with my column (did I mention being chronically over-extended) and asks what would I like to write about this time? This is the hard part: the TOPIC... once I have a subject I am off and running! It occurs to me that I have a young female in the experimental herd who has not had a halter on or learned to lead and it is really past time to get it done. Voila! I can write an article about teaching to lead – a perfect opportunity to be efficient and kill two birds with one stone.

That alpaca, named “Thumbelina,” is 10 months old. Her previous handling has been minimal. In her 10 months of life, she has been weighed by being herded across a platform scale with the rest of the group perhaps 12 times (no touching involved), been injected 3 times, and been shorn –

no training and no other handling. Before I get going on the “how” part of teaching an alpaca to lead, let me briefly mention when it’s appropriate to begin lead training. Obviously, if you are taking an alpaca to a show, you must get them trained before you go. It doesn’t take long. If your weanling is going to his first show at 6 months of age, it is perfectly reasonable to begin lead training at five months and work with this alpaca 2-3 times a week. That is 8-12 lessons of about 15 minutes.

PLENTY! If you are late getting started, I would go for fewer lessons, rather than longer ones. If you are one of those rare people who likes to get things done really early, I would discourage you from doing any lead training earlier than 4 months. Babies this age are too small, too insecure away from their mothers, and their attention span is too short. Older animals learn quicker, so I prefer to wait until there is some reason (like a looming magazine article!) to address the issue. Herd management at our farm is done by herding animals from place to place; there is no need for animals to know how to lead; and therefore, no hurry. Teaching an alpaca to lead at a year or older is no problem.

This article chronicles Thumbelina’s experience over two days learning to accept a halter and to lead. For a more complete understanding of starting a young alpaca please refer back to previous articles in this magazine, particularly my earlier article, entitled “It is Not What You DO, It is What You Don’t Do!” (in the HER08 issue of *Alpacas Magazine*).

Most people assume that the process of teaching an alpaca to lead inevitably involves some bucking,

rearing, foot planting, cushioning, or other forms of acting out. That is just not true. It is true that it takes a good set up and some skill, but nothing extraordinary. You can either spend your time holding on to a bucking, rearing, hysterical alpaca, and then more time solving the problems this creates... or you can spend your time creating the physical layout and learning a few basic skills. The latter saves you time, your back, your rotator cuff, and is a lot more fun for you and your alpaca student.

The NON Camelidynamics Alternatives and Why NOT to Use Them...

Before I describe how I teach an alpaca to lead, I want to make a few comments about the way it is often done.

- Tying an animal to a post with a bungee or inner tube. Dangerous to do with a creature with a long neck and a relatively large body compared to the head. I also have trouble understanding how tying an alpaca to a post teaches him to walk politely behind or next to a person. The two just don't seem related to me.
- Pulling steadily forward on the lead, creating discomfort until the alpaca comes forward, then releasing as a reward. Pulling steadily is what leads to bucking, rearing, and cushioning. Steady pulling teaches the alpaca to lean back on the lead, not to come forward. Most alpacas do eventually figure out that they are supposed to follow the person – mostly out of desperation – but often they learn a slew of inappropriate and problematic behaviors along the way. And perhaps more importantly, you don't want to create discomfort AT ALL.
- Teaching the alpaca to lead by following other alpacas that already know how to lead. Alpacas already know how to follow other alpacas. They do this naturally from the time they are born. Use this approach and you are not teaching them anything new. It is not a bad way to get an alpaca that doesn't lead from point A to point B in a pinch. Following other alpacas does NOT, however, teach an alpaca to walk with a person away from other animals and rely on the human being for leadership. If you use this way of moving an alpaca around too much, there is a distinct danger of creating an animal that will become more difficult to lead on his own.



Using the midline catch to catch Thumbelina. I approach from behind the eye and make contact on the midline of the neck. This keeps Thumbelina in balance and doesn't teach her to throw her weight away from me.



I attach the halter helper.



The halter goes on for the first time. I am using the handler helper to steady and guide Thumbelina's head into the halter so that I don't have to get too close and wrap my arms around her neck.

Photos courtesy of Mary Bernmett

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Thumbelina in a halter for the first time



Attaching the hook to the side of the halter makes signals much clearer and helps keep Thumbelina from getting stuck.



I fold my line across my hands so that I can't get my hand caught and I can also give the alpaca line easily if I need to.

All of the aforementioned techniques miss the real object of the exercise and that is to teach an alpaca that a specific signal on the head means to move the feet. We want to end up with an alpaca that understands you come forward from a signal and you keep moving forward until you get another signal to stop. An alpaca that understands these things can be set up in the show ring where you must be able to ask for a single step with a specific foot and will stand still even though the handler moves, another skill useful in the show milieu. An alpaca that understands what is being asked will be more cooperative, will feel safer, and act out less than one who simply knows to follow the human or they make you uncomfortable.

The Set-up

Before we even begin to talk about a specific skill set for teaching your alpaca how to lead, we must talk first about set up.

Tackling an alpaca in the corner, forcing a halter on him, then attaching a lead and taking your first trip around a paddock is a recipe for DISASTER! To teach an alpaca to lead safely and efficiently you must have a catch pen of the appropriate size (9' x 9' or 8' x 8') and an adjacent laneway about 30 feet long and no wider than 10-12 feet narrower is better (*see photos.*) Lightweight camelid panels work great for this, are inexpensive, and can be used for a host of things when you aren't using them for lead training. You can set up the system as pictured in this article, dismantle it after the weanlings have been trained, and put it up again the following year for the new crew. A long, narrow aisleway does a lot of things that help the process.

- You can absolutely control the behavior of the alpaca without having to use force or hold on for dear life.
- The alpaca cannot learn to run past you – when this happens, it is not you leading – it is you following. With a narrow space, if the alpaca attempts an end run, you just step in front of him. You stay in charge of the process without having to get too close or scare the alpaca by pulling on his head.
- The size and shape of the pen suggests what we want the alpaca to do... walk politely with us in a straight line.

Your skill set:

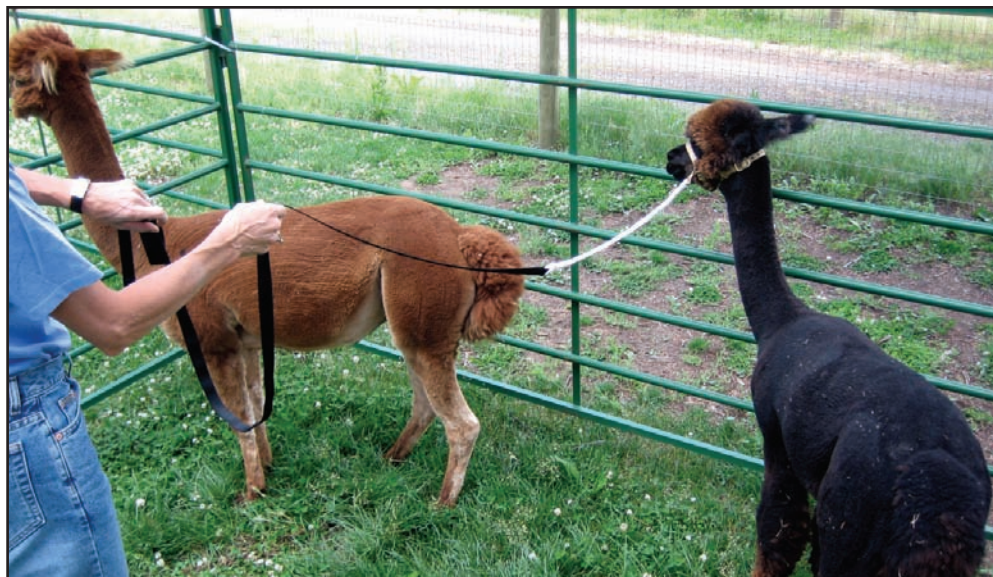
- Catching and haltering using the midline catch and the handler helper.
- Being able to establish light contact through a lead.
- Using the ratchet signal to get an alpaca to take a step.
- Being able to react to stop unwanted movement and then release immediately.

This article is about leading, but I can't really address the issue of teaching an alpaca to lead without talking about catching and haltering at least a little bit. I have written many articles in this magazine about both catching an alpaca in a way that isn't frightening and teaching an alpaca to accept a halter. Catching well and putting on a halter are both skills that a human being acquires, they are not something that an alpaca learns to do. If you learn to catch an animal with finesse and put a halter on in a way that is not frightening, it takes just a minute or two, even the very first time. I usually put the halter on and go on to leading in the same lesson. My rule of thumb is to work with a youngster in a catch pen for no longer than 5-7 minutes. If all goes well, the alpaca is caught, and is haltered and ready to leave for the laneway in that amount of time. If the alpaca is more challenging, then I call "time" at seven minutes, regardless of where I am in the process, and then progress in the next session.

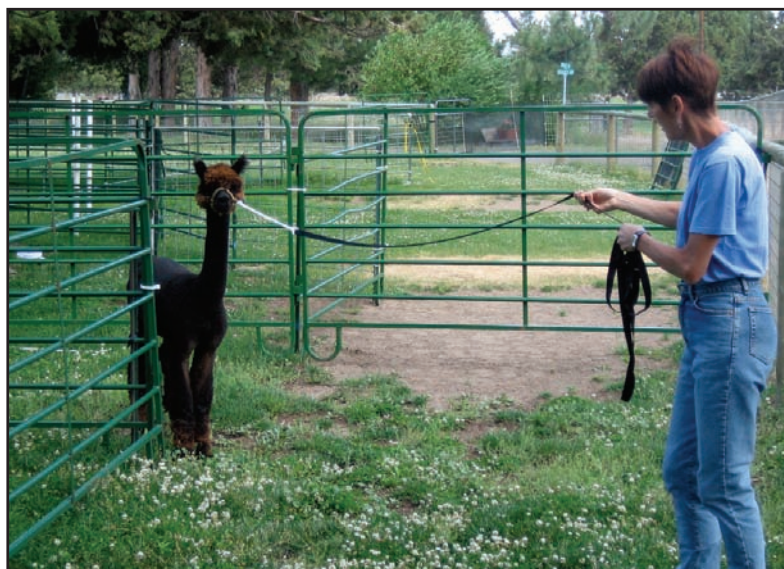
Play by Play: Thumbelina learns to lead

10:30 Alpacas are in the pens. I have arranged things so that Thumbelina is in a pen with a settled two-year-old for company. There are six other alpacas divided into three pens in the line up. With animals arranged this way, it makes it easy for Thumbelina to walk along WITH me, but not leave her buddies completely until I am ready to ask her to do it.

10:31 I enter the pen, approach Thumbelina from behind the eye, and use the midline catch to get my hands on her (see photos on the previous page). I use a short piece of nylon that I call the handling helper to assist with the haltering process. Using this tool, I can put the halter on from the side without having to crowd Thumbelina and provoke any fear-based avoidance reactions.



I work with Thumbelina on learning signals inside the catch pen first before leaving it for more freedom.



This is what light contact on the line looks like. I am not giving signals right now, just letting her think about things. Notice the arc in the line. A flat line means too much pressure.



These are Thumbelina's first few steps walking on a lead!

Photos courtesy of Marty Bemmett

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Thumbelina take her first walk in the lane way with the rest of the group standing by for encouragement.



Thumbelina takes her first walk inside the laneway next to the other alpacas.



Thumbelina takes her first walk away from the rest of the animals but still with the support of the laneway on one side.

10:32 The halter goes on. I do a bit of 'TTouch' on her head, and particularly on her mouth before asking her to accept the halter. I offer it to her once and she startles a bit, having never seen one before, so I bring it up to her nose again; pause a second or two; and slip it on. No big deal. I make sure that when I buckle it, I have the crown piece very snug so there is no chance it can slip forward and off of her nose bone. This would scare her and turn her initial leading experience into a nightmare that would make the next lesson A LOT more difficult. PAY ATTENTION TO HALTER FIT!

10:35 I attach a lead to the side ring of the halter (you must have a halter that has a side ring on the nose band, not all of them do). Attaching the lead here gives much clearer signals (remember that is the point) about coming forward and stopping. It also makes it more difficult for Thumbelina to resist coming forward. The offset position of the hook puts uneven pressure on her head and helps me help her take a step in response to the signals. The quicker I can get her to take a step, the quicker she will get what I am asking and the less likely she is to become frustrated. Frustrated animals act out (i.e., misbehave).

10:36 I use the lead inside the catch pen (remember, her buddy is still in the pen for companionship) to begin to teach her the meaning of a signal. To do this, I get as far away from Thumbelina as I can inside the 9' x 9' pen. It is tempting to just leave the pen at this stage for the laneway, but DON'T DO IT! You need to teach the meaning of the signals first and you also need to let the alpaca sort out that they are connected to you and can't just take their head and body any ol' place anymore.

I establish a light contact through my lead line (see photo on previous page). Your line should have an arc in it. If it is flat, you are putting too much tension in the line. Begin to give a series of ratchet-like signals. Ratchet signals are signals in which there is more of a forward shift than a

1. TTouch refers to a system of circular massages used to calm an animal. Originally discovered by Linda Tellington-Jones and refined for camelid use by Marty Bennett.

release, but there is a small release between signals. If you imagine that the signal has a forward value of 4, then imagine the release has a value of 1. In other words, you are giving back 25% of what you took to start with. This is very different from a steady pull. A steady pull encourages resistance in the other direction. A tug with a complete release doesn't cause the alpaca to shift his balance and come forward. If the animal doesn't come forward, then he will have a terrible time figuring out what the signals mean! The tempo that you use to give the signals is important. Give the signals a little faster than one per second. I keep giving these signals until Thumb takes a step. As soon as she takes a step, I immediately put total slack in the rope. The slack is my way of indicating to her that she did what I wanted. The signals are saying TAKE-A-STEP-TAKE-A STEP, the total slack says YES, THAT'S IT! I repeat this process and each time, it takes a smaller number of signals to get a step. It may take 10 or 12 signals to get a step at first, but don't stop giving the signals. Otherwise, it will be really hard for your alpaca student to make the connection between the signals and the outcome. After the fourth step, Thumbelina comes forward after the second signal, and this time she has a really different look on her face. It is like a light bulb has come on. I know she is thinking, "Oh my gosh, she is talking to me with that rope! The signals on my head are really for my feet! How cool is that!?"

10:38 I attach an extender on my lead, making it a grand total of 17' long. This allows me to stay a comfortable distance away from her and still have room left to give her more line if she bolts. Alpacas think more clearly when the human is at least two arms' lengths away. The worst thing to do if your alpaca bolts is hold fast. This absolutely leads to more panic. Give the alpaca as much line as you have. I make sure to carefully fold my long lead before I leave the pen so I can easily give my alpaca student all the line she needs without getting it wrapped around my hand. I open up the pen and lead Thumbelina into the laneway. I use the signals to move her up to the end of the laneway (about 40 feet and then back) she moves slowly but gains an understanding with each step about signals. We go up and back twice and call it a day.



Thumbelina takes her first spin out of the laneway, but still remains near her friends.



I take the halter off while keeping the crown piece in place so that Thumbelina cannot jerk her head out of the halter.

Photos courtesy of Marty Bemmett

10:45 Halter off, lesson over. No bucking, no planting, no resistance, no drama, and only 15 minutes from start to finish, including a few minutes for photo kibitzing. Yee-haw!

I opt for a lesson the next day, however it could just as easily been next week.

Day Two:

2:30 Thumbelina is haltered and ready for the second lesson.

2:33 We enter the laneway and take a spin to the end. Next, we turn around and head for the open end past the tree for her first experience out of the laneway. I am going to take her from the

laneway, past her buddies, so she is actually leaving the others and going out into our big pasture. However, I am going to stay just along the panels for this first outing, so she isn't tempted to run past me. She can experience the freedom of a big area. If I were to walk her straight away from the others she would naturally want to run past me to get back to them and I would have no way to stop her, short of holding her by the head.

2:40 We head back to the catch pen, halter off, lesson over.

Session time: 10 minutes

Total Time invested... 25 minutes.

My article is due. That's all folks, I am off to walk the dogs!

For over twenty-five years, Marty has traveled the world, devoting her professional life to the well-being of camelids and the education of their owners. Marty's ground-breaking work with Linda Tellington-Jones (creator of the TTEAM animal handling concept), combined with the principals of balance and leverage, make "Camelidynamics" the world's most popular and enduring training/handling system for camelids. Her clinics, books, and videos have helped thousands of camelid owners more fully understand, appreciate, and enjoy this magical animal. Marty, her husband Brad, and their family of dogs, cats, camelids, and chickens live in Bend, Oregon, where they run the Camelidynamics Training Center. She can be reached at marty@camelidynamics.com.