

From haltering and leading, to toenail trimming and shearing, TTEAM training methods allow handlers and animals to interact with a minimum of stress for both parties.



Marty McGee Bennett

TTEAM Training

Medicating Made Easier

Most of my students are new alpaca owners. That makes sense, since “newbies” are looking for information about all aspects of their new-found love and they are eager to do things correctly. But I am especially honored when a long-time owner decides to come and see what I am up to.

People who appreciate my presence in the business but really don't know what I am doing, will inaccurately characterize my work as “good stuff for people who don't have very many alpacas and have lots of time.” Nothing could be further from the truth. I teach animal handling skills, and people that really need handling skills are those people who handle the greatest number of animals – like veterinarians and the owners of very large herds. Of course, the bottom line is that any one who owns alpacas can benefit from a higher level of understanding about what makes them tick and can save time and frustration by learning how to handle them.

I just returned from a clinic held in Southern California – the seventh such clinic at this same ranch. I met the owner of this ranch in the late 80's when I was just beginning to teach. She was intrigued with what I was doing and we began what has turned into an on-going collaboration. It is always fun when I do return engagements to see the way that hosts implement the techniques that I teach. In this long running relationship, I have been able to see this particular California ranch develop, just as I have. Each year, I see real progress in the old imported girls and see how much easier each new crop of weanlings is to manage. The owner told me, “Looking back on the journey, I am amazed at just how little effort we



Pens of alpacas await herd management practice at a California clinic.

have expended. It seems like we have avoided some bad habits and organized the ranch a little differently each year.”

A Day in the Life

This year's agenda included herd management as a topic of special emphasis. What was different about this year's visit was that I had the opportunity to experience a day in the real world of a big ranch, by helping to deworm and vaccinate eighty animals.

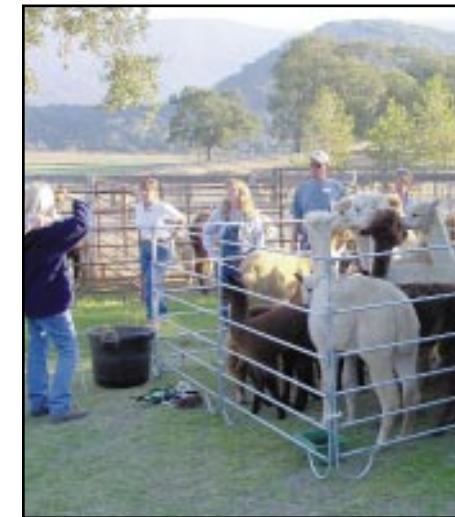
One of the characteristics of this California ranch are that the facilities are well organized. Lane-ways lead to ever-smaller work areas, and nearly all handling can be accomplished without haltering or leading the animals.

Once the records were checked and medications drawn, we descended on the herd at a bit after 10:00 in the morning. The animals on our list lived in two different large pastures and two additional small pastures up the hill. Each of the large pastures fed into the same small working area. The smaller

pastures had their own catch pens. We began with the animals closest to our work area. Using a rope and wands, we worked the first pasture of alpacas into a small waiting area approximately 12' x 30'. From there, we moved groups of animals, ten to fifteen at a time, into another smaller area, about 12' x 12'. When animals are worked in a group, you have several advantages. Alpacas feel safer in a group and are therefore less reactive. Additionally, because it is crowded, the animals slow each other down. Depending on how many animals with which you intend to work, you may opt for a 10' x 10' pen or even smaller. Anything larger than 12' x 12' would not work nearly as well. Less experienced handlers will do much better in a smaller pen.

Once the animals were in the smaller working area, the ranch manager and I took turns with two different jobs. One person would catch the animal, while the other person would collect and administer the medications. I have

developed a number of different ways of catching alpacas and I feel strongly that how you catch your animals has a big impact on how they feel about humans in general and specifically how they will react to the procedure you are about to do. Chasing an animal around a large area and grabbing it around the neck almost always provokes an attempt at fighting the handler. Fighting takes time, gets adrenaline going, and will cause the animal to behave erratically during the procedure – all of which are good reasons to look for an alternate way of catching.



The alpacas are crowded up in a small pen in preparation for “faux” injection practice.

The Midline Catch

We opted to catch each animal using a technique I call the mid-line catch. The mid-line catch does not require the use of a catch rope, and is a good compromise for people working large numbers of animals in a small space. To use this technique, the handler approaches the animal from behind the eye and moves up to the shoulder with the arm closest to the animal outstretched. The other arm is kept by the side with the shoulder open (*see photo above right*). The idea is not to trap the alpaca in the corner – stopping movement – but more to begin to direct the movement in a convenient and predictable direction.

The outstretched hand makes contact with the mid-line of the neck about a hand's width below the ears. Once the hand is on the neck, the handler can use his hand to steer the animal around the edge of the pen. The idea is that the animal moves around the edges

of the pen and the handler stays in the center. Once the handler has control of the direction in which the animal is moving, then the other hand comes up under the jaw to gain full control of the head. With practice, you can catch animals quickly and easily using the mid-line catch without provoking the fight/flight response.

Putting the Alpaca in Balance

Once the head is in control, the handler can put the animal into balance. Putting an animal into balance is fundamentally different than restraint. A handler can



Notice that the handler is approaching from behind the eye and is making contact with the middle part of the neck rather than reaching around the neck.

put an alpaca in balance by using the full length of the arms without wrapping himself around the animal's neck. Restraint only works when the animal believes that he cannot escape from the handler. The animal figures this out by fighting like crazy and then surrendering to the handler's physical superiority. Fighting takes time, energy, and can be a real problem if you can't overpower the animal. The technique of balancing rather than restraining provokes little in the way of resistance, saves heaps of time, and is safer and easier for the animal and the handler.

To put an animal into balance, the handler uses the alpaca's head to help the animal put its weight equally onto all four feet. Practically, this means helping the animal to stand evenly on the two front feet. More of an alpaca's weight is borne on the forequarters, and if the animal is carrying weight

equally on his front feet, then in all likelihood, the hind end is also in balance. Using the head and looking at the animal's front feet, the handler uses intermittent nudges to shift the alpaca's weight equally on both front feet with the head looking forward in line with the neck, the neck in line with the body and the body over the feet.

The *most* important aspect of putting an animal in balance is that once you see that the animal is in balance, you must *release* pressure on the animal. As you begin to work with the animal, it will inevitably shift its weight and begin to fall out of balance. As the animal begins to shift its weight, the handler once again uses the head to help keep the weight evenly distributed over the front feet with the body in alignment. The process of balancing is always occurring, so in actuality, the handler working the head is constantly active, keeping the animal in balance. Alpacas that learn to stand in balance are less frightened and less likely to react to the injection. Practice this technique and you will get better at it. The animals also get better at seeking a balanced stance on their own and become less resistant to handling.

Once I caught an animal and put the animal in balance, the ranch manager approached from behind the animal's eye from the same side of the animal that I was on and would reach across the shoulder to give the injection in the crease of the neck just over the top-line. In all cases, the animal didn't move more than a step or two and offered no resistance. If the animal needed two injections, we would both move to the animal's other side, giving the injection on the animal's other side. * Catching the alpaca and giving one or two injections would take perhaps a minute.

Giving Oral Medications

In addition to vaccinations, some animals needed oral wormer. One handler most easily does this. A right-handed handler begins by standing on the left side of the alpaca with the animal in balance. The handler encircles the neck with the right arm, making sure to keep the arm up high behind the ears. Keeping the arm high gives the handler more leverage. The thumb of the right hand steadies the head, the little, ring, and middle fingers steady the underside of



This is the proper position of the hand and fingers when supporting the head prior to giving oral medication.



The handler can control and support the head as the medication is administered.

the head. The tip of the index finger slips into the corner of the right side of the mouth on the right side (see photo above left), making sure to keep the index finger firmly pressing against the outside of the cheek.

The handler then slips the deworming syringe into the mouth, just alongside

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of the index finger. Tilting the head up slightly and massaging the mouth a bit after the wormer is inside the mouth helps to encourage the alpaca to swallow. I found I was able to help in this process by standing behind the alpaca as the ranch manager gave deworming medication to each alpaca. Animals resist less when they can't back up. A handler working alone could accomplish the same thing by beginning with the animal's behind in the corner of the pen.

We worked this way with all the animals in the lower pastures and then moved to the smaller upper pastures to work with the weanlings. As it turned out, the dreadful imported Delilah was the last animal on our list. She had just had a baby and was in the nursery pasture. Delilah is a very protective mother; a prodigious spitter; AND a "screamer" who doesn't take kindly to human help just after birthing. We were able to ease her into a catch pen, catch her with a wand and a rope (see the Summer 2002 edition of *Alpacas Magazine*: "Camelid Handling Secrets"). I was able to get to Delilah's head so efficiently that she didn't have time to spit and we gave her two shots and an oral dewormer without having to shower afterwards – which was no small accomplishment!

We were ready to go to lunch at just after 12:00, finishing up in what was

record time. I asked the ranch manager for a report on the history of herd management at the ranch and here is how it looked:

Prior to 1998, the vet administered all injections. Beginning in 1998, two ranch managers would work together. Herd management for 20-30 animals would take the two of them pretty much a whole day. But now – since they do much more of these routine tasks themselves – the savings in veterinary bills and labor alone is at least \$6,000 a year for a herd of approximately 100 animals.

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. 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 with the principals of balance and leverage make "Camelidynamics" the world's most popular and enduring training/handling system for camelids. Marty and her husband, Brad, live in Bend, Oregon. She can be contacted at marty@camelidynamics.com or visit her website: camelidynamics.com.

