



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.

■ Alpacas Bring Balance to Lives of Troubled Youths

I met Ann Marie Santesson-Gerber when she attended a Camelidynamics clinic in England in 2002. She was in England to learn about training and handling as part of her family's new business venture – importing alpacas into Sweden. Ann Marie is a Swede, married to Paul Gerber who is originally from Switzerland. They live in the beautiful village of Simmrishamn on the southernmost tip of Sweden. When I met Ann Marie, she seemed pretty typical of a new camelid owner: very enthusiastic and absolutely besotted with alpacas. At the end of the clinic, she was sold on Camelidynamics and decided to make it one of the elements of her business plan. She mentioned at the time that she would love to host a clinic at her place in Sweden. When I asked how many alpaca owners were in Sweden, I believe the answer was maybe two and Ann Marie didn't even have alpacas yet. This is a woman who thinks ahead. I told her I would love to visit but needed a minimum number of participants to make it work.

At the time, I remember thinking that it would be fun to go to Sweden someday... little did I know I was dealing with an alpaca lover on steroids! Within three years, I taught a Camelidynamics clinic in Sweden to almost 30 attendees from all over Scandinavia. Since then, the Santesson-Gerber herd has grown to over 70 alpacas and Österlein Alpaca has hosted numerous events, including a veterinary seminar with Dr Cheryl DeWitt from Findlay, Ohio – an event with modest beginnings that engendered such a huge response that a small one-day event turned into two large ones.

So... you can understand my excitement when I received an e-mail from Ann Marie, who had a plan for me to speak at the biggest agricultural fair

in Sweden (over 20,000 people from all parts of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland). My enthusiasm was dashed, however, several paragraphs later in this same e-mail, when I read that this fair would be held in Sweden in FEBRUARY. February! (I had visions of those famous 24-hour nights).

But Ann Marie was ever the saleswoman. She pitched the event as a nice winter getaway – AND (be still mine heart!) she promised to arrange for a stay at the famous Ice Palace, where you get to sleep on a bed of nails, I mean ice... and drink vodka out of ice glasses, eat on ice plates, and get a certificate at the end of it. I said "NO!" Alpaca owners cruise the Caribbean in the winter, but Sweden in February was simply not my idea of a fun time!

Undaunted, Ann Marie persisted in her attempts to cajole me to come. It was useless to try and resist this woman. Finally, she convinced me to go.

My job was to promote alpacas by lecturing and demonstrating several times each day. Through my demonstrations, fair attendees would see how lovely alpacas are to handle and how much fun they are. Not too hard of a task, I thought. Besides, the arena was completed heated, so this was going to be a pretty easy assignment.

If that had been the end of it, I wouldn't be writing an article about my trip, but Ann Marie had more in store for me. At the beginning of last summer, Tina Inglegren, a social worker specializing in family dynamics, approached Ann Marie with an idea (methinks Ann Marie was about to be on the receiving end of a determined Swedish woman). Tina was responsible for a group of troubled teenagers – young girls who were having "adolescent issues." Those same girls had learned about Ann Marie's alpacas and expressed their curiosity about



Ann Marie Santesson-Gerber

Sebina with Muray. He is a very special individual and normally HATES to be hugged but with Sebina he does everything!

them. Tina was wondering if the teenagers would respond positively toward being around these gentle creatures. Ann Marie thought she would give the idea a try.

“I let each girl select an alpaca and we went for a long walk. All the girls were delighted and Tina was very impressed, as normally these girls are not that easy to please. Walking there with these shining, adorable girls, I got the idea to do something more. I got to thinking about the agricultural fair in February – perhaps we could involve the girls with an obstacle course or something else that the girls, alpacas, and audience would find exciting and interesting. Besides,” continued Ann Marie, “at the moment in Sweden, we do not even have 600 alpacas! Most people do not have a clue what an alpaca is, so the need for information is immense.”

Continued Ann Marie: “Another thing we wanted to do was to check the truth in this popular talk of ‘therapy’ in connection with alpacas. Many breeders are using this as a sales argument and I have always been very skeptical. There are alpacas suited for such activities but definitely not as a rule and they definitely have to be trained and handled correctly. We also want to put the emphasis on ‘animal-assisted activity’ instead of ‘animal-assisted therapy.’ ”

“The government officials in charge were skeptical, but nonetheless willing to proceed with this idea. However, they were not about to pay for anything.” Tina is not one to take no for an answer (this must be the national temperament!) and donated the use of her indoor riding arena for the meetings.

Many months down the road, the program is now a done deal and the plan to link the work the girls are doing with the agricultural fair is now official. The girls are going to work with their animals on a regular basis and in February, the girls will be showcased at the fair working with their alpacas over obstacles. I will serve as the “judge” of the event.

I have been working with Ann Marie about the real objectives of the work that she is doing with the girls. The point is not to lead a bomb-proof alpaca over some obstacles without hesitation, the idea is

to demonstrate real handling ability along with understanding, communication and compassion. It is not the destination but the journey. I have asked Ann Marie to work on simple obstacles that teach the basic concepts... going over, under, through or walking on surfaces, but to present new and different jazzy obstacles to the human/alpaca teams the day of the competition. In this way, the



Ann Marie Santesson-Ceher

Look at the sweet connection between this young girl and her alpaca. The alpaca is paying very close attention and the girl has such a light hand!

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The girls learn to empathize with the alpacas by feeling what it is like to be pulled on.

handling skills and the relationship between the girls and their alpacas are really tested.

Now that I am truly in the thick of it, I have been asking Ann Marie about the girls and the program and it is quite a story. I asked Ann Marie how the girls were selected and to share with me a bit about their background.

“They are quite normal girls but surrounded with problems. Their relation to some adults is disturbed. Some of them have few or no friends and are not very happy at school. Like so many other girls at that age, they need to be seen, encouraged, and have their self-confidence and self esteem

strengthened. We are working preventively so they will not fall back into something bad. If we can help them, we have reached an important goal – apart from getting help training our alpacas!”

“For us, alpacas are much more than just fleece producers. A nice, safe, well-handled alpaca with a lower fleece quality can be just as important as a high quality, nervous, and not trained individual. Everybody is not interested in fleece! But this of course also requires a handler who knows how to act together with alpacas. Without the knowledge of how the alpaca thinks and acts, you do not get your alpaca to feel safe and consequently accept you and what you want the alpaca to do.”

“We have many alpacas and sometimes it is difficult to find enough time to train them as much as we would like. And we simply do not have enough hands! To have these girls coming on a regular basis, training the alpacas according to Camelidynamics with the competition as a goal – how could we better combine two good things?”

The girls would be missing the point if they just focus on getting their animals to do the obstacles. It is about getting the animal to trust their leadership. And it is here the self-confidence and self esteem enter the picture. In the beginning, the girls were so nervous about what the audience would say during the competition and I often tell them that at agricultural fair in February there will be not one person in the audience having more experience than these girls in handling alpacas in this way. The girls are unique and they should know this!”

When it came time to pair up animal and human teams, Ann Marie basically let the process sort itself out. She was fortunate to have a wide selection of animals and in the first few sessions, the girls could try out different animals and choose one they were drawn to, Ann Marie told me.

Said Ann Marie: “Everything is a question of chemistry and I am not the one to say who should like whom. Some alpacas did not at all like the idea of jumping, so no matter how nice they are in other aspects, we discarded them for this project. We certainly do not want to force an alpaca to do something it does not like. The alpacas finally selected were an interesting combination of non-pregnant young females (almost the best ones – they absolutely love this and jump like thorough-breds

at the Grand National!), entire males, and geldings. The first time we had the non-pregnant females together with the boys, all alpacas went bananas and it certainly was a challenge for everybody – and still is, even though the alpacas now are getting used to the whole circus. It is an interesting vitamin injection mixing the sexes...! Each girl is very concentrated on her alpaca and I think this is important so they can connect. One rather isolated and lonely girl has formed a very tight and sweet bond with one of the most difficult alpacas. He doesn't like at all to be touched and hugged but is standing like an angel together with this girl."

I asked Ann Marie about her approach to leading lessons, "For me, having seen some horror examples of how people can treat their alpacas during leading and showing, one of the most important things is to have a light hand and concentrate and pay attention to the alpaca – not the surroundings (sometimes a real challenge...). And not desperately cling to the lead rope as though the alpaca is going to bolt any second. I have taught them how to give the signals if the alpaca does not want to walk, which of course is crucial when introducing a new obstacle. And naturally "less is more" are our key words. If the alpaca refuses to go through an obstacle today, we just continue next time."

I asked if the sessions so far have been all sweetness and light... Ann Marie told me, "not exactly."

"They certainly did get frustrated in the very beginning as they were used to well-educated horses and dogs! I had to tell them that an alpaca is not a bag of potatoes to be dragged over the obstacle when they took the lead over the shoulder and pulled! If you compare them now to the first time, it simply is like the difference between night and day. It is very educating for an eager girl to see how much easier it is to make the animal do what you want, given the right instructions: no force, but know-how! Hopefully, this is something they bring with them in other situations later on in life!"

And what about Tina Ingegren? Is she pleased with the progress of the girls? Ann Marie told me, "Tina is deeply impressed about how the girls have developed emotionally and how important the alpacas now are in their lives. One girl had refused to go to school on a regular basis, but is now suddenly going there happily. This girl has never before had the patience to continue something for a longer



Girls and alpacas arrive at Tina Ingegren's riding arena for a pre-Christmas practice session.



This obstacle requires alpaca and handler to duck – the teams can now take this at a run!



The alpacas are taking jumps like thoroughbreds at the Grand National.

Photos by Ann Marie Santesson-Gerber



Photo courtesy of Ann Marie Santesson-Gerber

Group shot of the girls with their alpacas. Ann Marie is the fourth (human) from the left.

period, and her father is so impressed that she has not quit our alpaca program! The parents are also very pleased, some parents are coming to watch and help, and they love it. One mother is going to knit a scarf for Christmas with the yarn of Bruno, her daughter's deeply-loved alpaca. To have your alpaca's baby fleece around your neck must be the ultimate way to always be with this animal! As for the girls themselves, for them it is the first time they are doing something nobody else has done before. It is "their" thing and nobody can say they are not good."

Of course, none of this would be possible if it were not for Ann Marie. I asked her how she feels about the program, "Most striking is the total happiness the girls are showing when they come here. It is so obvious that they have formed a tight group. They are helping and accepting each other. One girl is accustomed to always getting her own way, not liking to take orders, and is incapable of coming on time. She is now doing exactly as I tell her and is always turning up five minutes before our sessions start. Her teacher cannot believe the change. To me, this is the most rewarding and interesting thing I have ever done together with

our alpacas. The girls are so wonderful and I am walking on clouds after each session. This may sound strange, but it is true!"

Keep your eyes on this magazine for an after-show report about these young Swedish handlers and the results of their big day. As for me, now I need to pack my bags for Scandinavia in February. Hmm... I wonder which "jammies" I should wear when I have my sleep-over in the Ice Palace?

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.