

# The MOST IMPORTANT, USEFUL, CRITICAL Article You Will Ever Read On Camelid Training

By: Marty McGee Bennett

I am NOT kidding. If you haven't paid very close attention to halter fit and you are having trouble with one of your llamas or alpacas this article is going to make a huge difference to both you and your animals. I have worked with hundreds of difficult animals that were difficult only because they were in fear for their lives every second they wore a halter. I have seen problems from kicking to kushing evaporate because I changed or adjusted a badly fitting halter.

Red, blue, black, brown, polypropylene, nylon, leather, X-style fixed nose band, three way adjustable, there are a lot of halters to choose from. It is CRITICAL you understand and appreciate how important halter fitting is to your camelid. Your success as a handler and trainer depend on it. Paying attention to halter fit is easy, and there are few other changes that can make such an immediate and dramatic difference in behavior.

The issue is not only what type of halter you select, but how it fits. Many owners believe that if a halter can be attached to the animal's head – it fits. NOTHING could be further from the truth.

Llamas and alpacas are semi-obligate nasal breathers. This means that they CANNOT survive if forced to breathe solely through their mouths. Anything that compromises the nostrils or the nasal passages is not only uncomfortable, it is life threatening. When compared to other animals the nose bone in camelids is comparatively short and drops off sharply.

Add this to the awesome leverage that a camelid's long neck affords, and it is easy to understand why our woolly buddies are



**This is an alpaca skull. Notice how little bone there is to hang on and how well protected the eye is by bone.**

often reluctant to allow us to halter them. Haltering and halter fitting is further complicated by a camelid's horizontal head set. Because llamas and alpacas carry their heads with the nose oriented horizontally rather than vertically (like a horse) a halter that slips off the bone must literally overcome gravity to return to its original position.

## THE ELEMENTS OF HALTER FIT: THE BIG THREE

### Safety

A properly fitted halter's nose band not only rests on the bone but stays there NO MATTER WHAT. It isn't enough for the halter to start out on the nose bone, it must stay there when the animal pulls back, bucks, rolls, grazes, steps on his lead rope, breaks away from the handler dragging his lead, or scratches his face with his foot. The smaller the animal the smaller the skull the shorter nose bone and the thicker he is to properly fit.

It is particularly important to understand the dynamics of halter fit if you intend to use your halter for any type of restraint. It is incredibly frightening for an animal to be tied or restrained, in a halter that feels as if it could slip off the nose bone. Animals that have been restrained in an ill-fitting halter never forget the experience.

### Comfort

Preventing harm to your camelid is the highest priority of halter fit. From your animal's point of view the second most important aspect of wearing a halter is comfort. Your camelid should be able to do everything with his halter on that he does with the halter off. These activities would include eating and grazing, ruminating and yawning.

Well fitting halter do not rub raw spots or create calluses on your animal's head even if left on for a few days. Once the halter is adjusted properly your animal should quickly forget that the halter is even on the head until you use it to communicate with him.

### Effectiveness

The halter is the most important piece of equipment you own. Horse people have a variety of tools to communicate with their horses. They have a choice of bits and other tack as well as their legs and seat with which to signal their requests. Essentially camelid trainers have a halter and a lead rope. It only makes sense to select a halter that is truly effective as a tool of communication.

### Types of Halters

When the camelid phenomenon first began, it was a challenge to find a halter – any halter – that would remotely fit a camelid. Many people had their own halters made or used modified sheep or foal halters. Now the reverse is true. It is just as frustrating these days to pick and choose from all the types of halters available. There are three types of halters with variations on these basic themes: fixed nose band, x-style and adjustable.

**Fixed Nose band:** This type of halter features a continuous loop for the nose band that cannot be adjusted. The crown piece may be adjusted but any variation in the nose band is achieved only by changing to a different halter in a different size.

**X-Style Halter:** A halter in which the crown piece and the nose band form a continuous loop. It is not possible with an X-style halter to adjust the nose band and the crown piece independently from one another. Loosening the crown piece provides slack in the nose band; tightening the crown piece takes up the slack in the nose band.

**Adjustable Halters:** These halters feature adjustments in both the crown piece and the nose band. These two elements can be adjusted independently of one another.

Another important aspect of a halter is the way in which the possible adjustments can be made and how they fasten. Some

halters have a slide arrangement, others feature buckles and holes, and still others use fastex or spring loaded clips. Halters usually come in nylon, leather or polypropylene, in a variety of widths.

- I want a halter that is safe, comfortable and is effective as a tool of communication. I use the following criteria to choose a halter that fits this bill:

- I want a halter that has a wide variety of small adjustments and can be adjusted easily without taking the halter off the animal.

- I want a halter with a short cheek piece and one in which the throat latch and the nose band travel through the same ring under the chin. These two features taken together encourage the halter to stay further back on the nose bone where it is safe.

- I want a halter that is proportioned so that it will slide back on the widest part of the jaw with a crown piece short enough to keep it there.

- I want a halter that includes rings on the nose band allowing me to lead from the side ring and increasing the clarity of signal as well as leverage.

A two-way adjustable halter – a buckle halter with adjustments in both the crown piece and nose band – meets these criteria better than any other type of halter I have found.

The proper halter is one thing, but how you adjust is on your animal is everything. The same halter on the same animal could be safe, comfortable and effective, or it could be unsafe, uncomfortable and useless. The outcome is totally dependent on how the handler adjusts the halter.

X-style halters are fine for animals that already know how to lead. Provided they are large enough they are usually comfortable and do a good job of staying put on the nose once properly adjusted. They fit a wide variety of animals. On the down side they don't convey signals from the handler to the animal as well as a halter with an independently adjustable nose band.

I do not like or use halters with fixed nose bands. They are more often than not unsafe, uncomfortable and do a poor job of communication as well. These halters are inexpensive to manufacture and are quite prevalent especially for smaller or younger animals. This is unfortunate in that a small head makes it even more important to have an adjustable nose band.

### **Putting Your Halter on and Making Adjustments**

Before putting the halter on the animal adjust the nose band opening so that it is MUCH bigger than you think you need. A good rule of thumb is to open the halter to all the way up. Adjusted this way the nose band will easily slide up the nose close to the eye and will still have slack available. If there is no slack available when you buckle the crown piece, you are not allowing for normal movement of the jaw or mouth. It is quite common for owners to literally tie their animal's mouth shut. A nose band that fits this way is usually unsafe as well because it is prevented from sliding all the way up the nose on bone.

Snug up the crown piece. The crown piece must be tight enough so that the nose band cannot slip off the nose bone – even when significant forward pressure is applied to the nose band. Tighten up the crown piece and then grasp the halter from each side of the nose band and tug forward if the nose band slips forward your crown piece is not snug enough.

Next, take all extra slack out of the nose band. Leave enough room for your animal to ruminate and eat comfortably.

The most common adjustment I make on a halter, which is improperly fitted, is to loosen the nose band significantly and tighten the crown piece to take up the slack. The net effect of these adjustments is to cause the nose band to slide further up toward the nose on firmer bone. From a safety standpoint I would rather err on the side of adjusting the halter too close to the eye and a tad snug in the crown piece than to allow the nose band to slide too far down the nose. This is especially true if your animal has not been led before or you intend to use your halter for staking out, typing or restraint.

### **Dynamics of Adjusting the Halter**

Many camelid owners are unaccustomed to seeing a halter nose band this close to the eye and are reluctant to adjust the halter this way. Concern for the eye is misplaced. Once on the face a halter cannot poke an animal in the eye and the graduated shape of the nose prevents the halter from slipping up over the eye. The skull does a terrific job of protecting the eye. The entire eye is encased in a thick bony socket.

For small or young camelids you simply do not have a choice. In order to be firmly on bone and to be safe the halter must be very close to the eye. This is true for virtually all alpacas and all llamas under the age of six months. Halters high up on the nose bone disappear from the animal's view and are less obtrusive than when they are closer to the front of the nose.

It is my belief that llamas and alpacas are distracted and annoyed by halters that rest in what I call the danger zone – the middle area of the nose bone. When the handler puts forward pressure on the halter as in leading it feels as if the halter could slip off the bone. The animal is literally waiting for the ax to fall. Animals wearing halters with the nose band in the danger zone may: become extremely resistant to wearing a halter, kush when asked to lead or will bolt or panic suddenly as if for no reason.

When discussing halter fit owners always ask me to quantify how to do it. They want to know how to adjust the halter in terms of numbers of fingers or inches, how much room to leave in the nose band and the crown piece, and where exactly on the nose bone the nose band should rest. I cannot make quantitative guidelines that will work for all animals. You must think about fit proportionately. Larger heads afford the opportunity for more slack.

### **The Crown Piece**

The adjustment of the CROWN piece is what determines how far the nose band can slip forward. How much room you should leave in the crown piece is totally dependent on the length of the nose bone. This means that the crown piece can be looser on a big llama than it can be on a small or young alpaca. It also means that a very short nose bone requires a very snug, if not tightly fitting crown piece.

The length of the nose bone is different for adults versus weanlings or babies and for llama and alpacas. The portion of the nose bone in front of the eye might be an 3/4 of an inch long on a weanling alpaca and two inches in length on an adult llama. Young animals whose heads are simply too small to fit both safely and comfortably in any halter, need to grow some more. I think it is only fair to wait to put a halter on until you can satisfy both require-

ments.

The length of the nose bone also varies from individual to individual. I have palpated nose bones and found that they were much shorter than I expected them to be given the size of the head. In many cases these animals exhibited extreme behavior related to haltering.

Also halters tend to stretch when warmed up by the animal's body heat changing the way a halter fits. On a big llama halter, stretch is of little consequence, but on a weanling llama tied to a fence it can be extremely significant. The best policy is to adjust the halter up close to the eye tighten the crown piece and pull on the nose band to make sure it stays there.

### The Nose Band

Adjusting the nose band has far more to do with comfort than it does with safety. The nose band must allow the llama or alpaca enough lateral movement to ruminate, eat and graze unencumbered. Again this varies depending on the size of the animal and his jaw.

Adjusting the halter so that it is close to the eye is not only safer it also means the nose band is much closer to the hinge of the jaw. A properly proportioned halter nose band angles back toward the animal's body and encircles the widest part of the jaw.

When the animal chews there is less lateral movement at the hinge of the jaw than at the front of the mouth. Have a look at your animal while he eats. Because of this fact you can snug up the nose band positioned close to the eye and angled to the rear a bit more and still leave plenty of room for eating and rumination. A snugger nose band is also more effective for communication.

Many people complain that they have a certain llama or alpaca that is much harder to fit – these animals usually have a very steep nose bone and a shorter nose.

When haltered in the traditional way the halter slides right down the nose bone like a car on a steep icy hill. Adjusting the halter as I suggest also solves this problem. The length of the nose is immaterial the circumference of the jaw is what you are fitting how short or long the nose is has nothing to do with that.

### The Halter Design

Many halters on the market are not proportioned to be worn as I describe. No matter how hard you try, you won't be able to adjust them as I have described. This is because the parts of the halter are not the right length.

In some cases the nose band is simply not large enough in diameter to allow it to be worn close enough to the eye to be safe. Buying a larger halter with more room in the nose band may not

solve the problem because the crown piece and cheek pieces may be too long. Some halters have a cheek piece that is too long. A long cheek piece causes the crown piece to slip down the neck.

A crown piece that slides down the neck is not unsafe but a halter is most useful for communication when it stays at the poll – immediately behind the ears. With certain halters if you tighten the crown piece so that it is up behind the ears (where it should be), a cheek piece that is stiff and too long forces the nose band down into the danger zone.

Some halters feature a fleece lining under the nose band ostensibly for greater comfort. A fleece lining inside the nose band is no substitute for a proper fit. Fleece lining on a nose band that is already too small only makes it tighter and more uncomfortable.

### Adjusting a Halter

A properly fitting halter is safe and comfortable. The nose band rests firmly on bone and stays there NO MATTER WHAT. There is enough room in the nose band for the animal to chew without interference.

- Before you put the halter on always open the nose band so that it is larger than you think you need.
- Snug up the crown piece. Tighter for animals with smaller heads.
- Take the slack out of the nose band. Larger animals need more room.
- Always carefully examine the nose bone before you put a halter on an animal you don't know.
- Recheck halter fit after about ten minutes.

If you have doubts about animals you have haltered after reading this article put your current halter on and adjust as usual. Really look at your animal. Does the halter interfere with the freedom of movement in the jaw? Does your animal have to struggle to get a mouthful of grain or hay? Do his nostrils flare more with the halter on than off? Take hold of both sides of the nose band of the halter and tug forward. If you can pull the halter forward off the bone, your animal can too and is in danger.

I did a clinic in Alaska some year's back. We were working on leading techniques and one of the young males was

impossible. He would walk along nice as pie and suddenly for no apparent reason go absolutely bonkers. He was difficult to halter and had a history of this type of behavior on the lead.

I thought the halter fit was marginal, but we were working in a field some distance from the barn. This guy took a while to halter the first time. It was close to the end of the day, and I didn't want to go to the trouble of taking this llama back to the barn and changing his halter. I remember thinking "That llama has the brains of a gnat."

He was a young intact male, and I thought he was a nervous,



**This is a fixed noseband halter. Notice that the noseband is NOT angled to the rear and is restricting the movement of the mouth and well as resting right at the edge of the bone. This halter is very uncomfortable and it is obvious from looking at the alpaca's face.**



Compare these two halters. Notice the one on the left fits up high on the bone close to the eye. The one on the right doesn't look too bad until you consider that it is not on bone and will compress the cartilage when used for control or communication.

Early on an alpaca can mean the difference between safety and danger and success and failure in the show ring.

**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 principals of balance and leverage and a second sense with both camelids and people make "Camelidynamics" the world's most popular, and enduring training/handling system 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 numerous trips to Australia, New Zealand and Europe have kept Marty on the road for much of the past 20 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, or online at [www.camelidynamics.com](http://www.camelidynamics.com).*

high-strung, llama feeling his hormones. I watched as this guy blew up with several different people. I finally decided to take the time to change his halter. When I brought him back after changing his halter the group thought I had switched animals. The behavioral change was unbelievably dramatic. I almost couldn't believe it. He was a puppy dog on the lead and not only with me. Five or six different people lead him over and under challenging obstacles.

This is one of many examples in my memory of positive behavior changes spurred by the seemingly simple act of equipping your llama or alpaca with a properly fitting halter. If I have scared you about halter fit, it is for good reason. Paying attention to halter fit has a direct impact on the safety of your animals and a direct impact on your success as a handler. Use these guidelines and you can rest easy knowing your camelid is comfortable and free from danger.

Even if you don't think you have a problem with halter fitting or you have read about halter fit in my book, or attended a clinic, please review this article. I have just returned from several shows and have been distressed to find that even people that have attended clinics and are using my suggested brand of halter are still not adjusting their halters properly. One or two holes particu-



Compare the way these halters are adjusted. This is the same halter on the same alpaca. Notice that when the nose band is not adjusted well up on the nose bone that downward pressure on the noseband compresses the cartilage.