

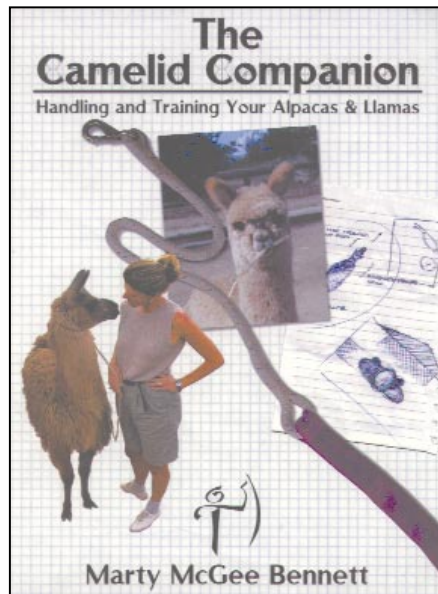
CRITIC'S CORNER

*A Review of Alpaca-Related Books,
Videos, and What-Not
by Dave Belt*

The Camelid Companion: Handling and Training Your Alpacas & Llamas

By Marty McGee Bennett, Drawings by Bill Brack. Published by Raccoon Press, May 2001.

US \$46.95 plus \$7.00 S/H



Sometimes a book is written that is so comprehensive, so imaginative, and so clever as to be dubbed a “classic.” In literature, there are the works of William Shakespeare, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Agatha Christie, to name but a few. Among classic reference publications, one could cite such luminaries as the Encyclopedia Britannica, Webster’s Dictionary, and the Physicians’ Desk Reference. With so many “flash-in-the-pan” books that will be “here today, gone tomorrow,” it is truly my honor to announce that a genuine CLASSIC book has been written by one of AOBA’s own members.

I do not choose the word “classic” lightly, either: I truly believe that “The Camelid Companion” is the most comprehensive, articulate, and sensible reference tool to have ever been written about camelid behavior. Head and shoulders above other texts of similar ilk, this is a book that every alpaca owner – new **and** seasoned – should possess. It is incredibly well-written and will retain its utility forever. This, to me, defines a classic in the truest sense.

For those who might not be familiar with the life-work of Marty McGee Bennett, here’s a thumbnail sketch. After earning a degree in Animal Behavioral Science from the Uni-

versity of Georgia, she served in the U.S. Army for a few years. After leaving the service, she pursued her lifelong dream of working with animals. In 1987, she met British animal behaviorist Linda Tellington-Jones, “inventor” of a unique style of animal-human interaction training called **Tellington Touch Every Animal Method** (TTEAM – pronounced “Tee-Team”). Inspired by Linda’s success working with humans and their horses, Marty set about the task of creating a model for use with llamas and alpacas. Twenty years later, she is truly a “celebrity” among the alpaca community for her amazing techniques and teaching style. She and her husband, Brad, currently travel the world in a Recreational Vehicle, presenting training sessions. Marty also shares her unique insights through regular columns in *Alpacas Magazine*.

Let me walk you through some of the many highlights of her latest book, *The Camelid Companion: Handling and Training Your Alpacas & Llamas*.

First of all, the book is divided into five parts:

- **Part I:** Learning the motivations and fears of alpacas – that is, what is it that makes them tick? How do you take the “emotional temperature” of your animal?

- **Part II:** Useful ideas when setting up your barn and paddocks to maximize training and handling opportunities. Learn how to be a “safe presence” to your animals. Also, learn the crucial importance of balance and leverage and how to use these concepts when handling an alpaca.
- **Part III:** Teaching your alpaca to accept and lead on a halter, and also how to employ what’s called the “TTouch” (“Tee - touch”) – a secret massage that your alpaca will find pleasurable.
- **Part IV:** Herd management tools, to include medical and husbandry issues like shots, toenails, shearing, etc. Also includes helpful hints about breeding and birthing.
- **Part V:** Identify the five types of “difficult” alpacas, and how to see them in a new light. Learn about behavioral buttons and the importance of deductive reasoning.

One of the features that a reader will find very useful is the employment of icons. Not only do the icons make the text layout more interesting, but they serve a very important role in alerting the reader to pay careful attention. Here’s a sampling of the icons:



Marty’s Law of Camelidynamics: a cleverly inventive word that describes the way the world works if you were a camelid. In other words, when you see this icon, the text tells you how a particular situation is viewed from the eyes of an alpaca.

(Not for) Beginners Only: helpful hints for all alpaca owners, both brand new and experienced. Great ideas presented throughout the book!

Caution: pay close attention! These are safety issues that concern either you, your animal, or both.

Get This!: there are some things so important that they bear repeating. As Marty puts it: “When you see this symbol, get out your mental highlighter!”

Toolbox Essential: gear, equipment, skills, and techniques that you simply cannot do without.



Not-So-Common Sense: you might think you know everything there is to know about a particular topic. This

symbol alerts you to make sure you haven’t missed an obvious, but easily overlooked, tidbit.

More than anything else, *The Camelid Companion* is a book about cultivating trust, kindness, companionship, fun, respect, obedience, safety, friendship, and confidence between alpacas and their owners. By combining basic instruction, useful photographs and illustrations, excellent anecdotal references, and a common-sense approach to interacting with animals, Marty has created a masterpiece that is part literature and part reference guide. And whether you buy this book as a day-to-day reference guide, or whether it serves as just an occasional reference tool, each reader is guaranteed to learn something from the wealth of information contained in its chapters.

When reviewing a publication of this magnitude – 386 pages – it would be impossible to zero in on any one highlight. A couple of brief highlights for me, personally, were the following:

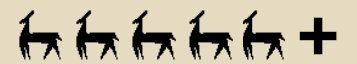
First of all, do you know the difference between the words (concepts) “training” and “handling”? Simply put: training is about the ANIMAL learning new skills; whereas handling is about the HUMAN learning new skills. Training means that you teach an animal to understand and respond in a consistent manner to a visual, verbal, or physical signal. Examples of training would be: teaching your alpaca to lie down on command, fetch, respond to verbal commands, etc. Handling, on the other hand, involves working with an animal in a way that allows **you** to accomplish tasks. In other words, teaching your alpaca to “do nothing – just stand there.” Examples would be: putting on a halter, giving a shot, picking up feet and trimming toenails, and shearing.

Speaking of handling, Marty makes two salient observations – one is that having the proper size and configuration of a catch pen is tremendously important. The animal must be convinced that he cannot leave the pen, so he doesn’t expend his energy and attention on trying to escape. Now that may sound obvious, but what is not so obvious is the flip side of the coin: the irony to successfully handling a frightened alpaca is to disengage the “flight response.” How is that done? By giving the animal the freedom to flee. Confused just a little by those seeming contradictions? Read the book and you’ll better understand Marty’s point.

On a very serious note, the author touches on important topics that would be especially useful for new owners, but on which even old-timers could probably use refresher training. For example, she discusses the life-and-death implications of an ill-fitting halter. She also gives important emergency procedures, like what to do if you discover an animal that is entangled (DON’T run up to the animal, as it will elicit the flight or fight reaction... instead, walk up calmly from BEHIND the animal’s visual field). Also: what do you do if two of your males are engaged in a serious, prolonged fight? (The answer might surprise you.)

While the book should definitely be considered an authoritative reference guide for handling alpacas first and

Rating:



Rating System:

5 alpacas: a must-have for every alpaca owner
4 alpacas: good reading
3 alpacas: will appeal to some, not others
2 alpacas: wait for next edition
1 alpaca: what were they thinking of?

foremost (and so is therefore primarily pretty serious in tone), the great thing about Marty’s writing style – which matches her live workshops – is that she incorporates humor when you least expect it. For example, she describes three accupressure techniques that all alpaca owners will take delight in practicing: the “Clouded Leopard,” the “Lying Leopard,” and the “Raccoon TTouch.” Marty encourages the reader to try these techniques on a human first – what a great idea!

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention one other “fun” part of Marty’s book – the part where she teaches the reader how to administer injections.

Forget the old “stick-the-needle-in-the-orange” routine. No, Marty has come up with a far more clever (and funny-bone hilarious) way to practice this important skill. You see, it has something to do with a chicken and some soy sauce, and well... I’ve said too much already. Let me just say that my 14-year-old daughter gave this demonstration as part of her 4-H presentation this year, and the judges were in stitches. She got a Grand Champion ribbon for her project, to boot!

Well, have I gushed enough? I simply cannot say enough positive things about this book. In parting, there is

one very important recommendation I have: SERIOUSLY consider buying a good supply of these books and GIVE a copy to anyone purchasing an alpaca from you. Your clients will thank you, and definitely the alpacas will thank you.

To order this book, log onto Marty’s website, martymcgeebennett.com, call (800) 570-5262, or order through the AOBA website (which leads you to Amazon.com to place an order that benefits the AOBA organization). For more information about ordering this book through Amazon.com, please see page ____ of this issue of *Alpacas Magazine*.