

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.

## ■ Stress–LESS... Shearing

**T**he alpacas are grazing contentedly... and the babies are cavorting in the sunshine. Raising alpacas reminds me of a scene right out of a James Herriott book. Oh, but then... it is time to shear! It is like we have moved from the chapter called “The Joy of Raising Alpacas” to “How to Remove Alpaca Bodily Fluids from your Clothes.” A classic case of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde!”

Shearing day strikes terror into the heart of many new alpaca owners and even seasoned ranchers can dread the day. Certainly it is noisy, dirty, and lots of work for the humans – and, if given a choice, the alpacas would take a pass, too. But the fleece must come off one way or another for the animal’s health and well-being. After all, it IS the *raison d’être* for our willingness to tend to their needs for the rest of the year.

I began my camelid career as a llama enthusiast and fiber artist over 25 years ago, before there even was a North American alpaca business. I harvested the llama fiber from my small herd by brushing or hand shearing. As the alpaca business was gearing up, I had already shifted my emphasis from fiber to training and handling. While on the road, I had the benefit of watching and participating in many shearing events. I have offered suggestions for how to minimize shearing day drama, but until my husband and I settled in Bend and bought a farm and animals, I hadn’t had the opportunity to organize a shearing day myself.

This year with our own animals to shear, we hosted a shearing clinic to put into practice what I have learned on the road. The objective was not to teach new owners to shear, but rather, to support the shearer *and* the animals and accomplish the task with a minimum of angst. Our shearing team of 14 new owners was short on experience but long on enthusiasm.

I know animal handling and fiber but I also know what I don’t know. I asked fellow alpaca breeder, Linda Buttolph, who is a veteran of many shearing days and one of the MOST organized people I know, to supervise the handling/flow of the fleece. I invited a shearer to participate that would be willing to both shear and teach and who would be open to some new ideas. Marcus Whitman of Parkdale, Oregon who apprenticed under longtime shearer Ann Kaiser, was up for the event.

What follows are my observations, suggestions, and things to consider when organizing your shearing day.

### **Do absolutely everything that can be done *before* shearing day**

1. Prepare bags for the fleece. Large clear plastic bags for the bulk of the fleece, a small baggie for the histogram sample and a gallon zip-lock bag for a large reference sample of the fleece that you keep. Prepare labels, index cards, or post it notes to label each separate part of the fleece. Using cards of different colors allows you to see at a glance whether or not the bag contains a blanket or seconds. Colored post-it notes are nice for this purpose, because they stick to the inside of the bag and don’t float around.
2. Organize a workstation for record keeping and histogram samples. Stock it with a clipboard and a list of animals to be shorn, with a place to record the weights of each bag, as well as pens and pencils.
3. Put your scale near the workstation. Get two or three laundry tubs to carry fleece and two or three bins to store various parts of the fleece prior to bagging.



Linda Mahiac

### **Caption**

4. Set up skirting tables, so you can work with show fleeces or skirt and sort for shipping.
5. Organize the flow: Follow the fleece... how it goes from the animal to its final destination. Make sure that there is a place for the fleece every step of the way from animal to storage. Analyze the movement of your helpers and eliminate paths of movement that might create congestion or cause people to step over the animal’s head or otherwise startle the animal. Make sure that moving fleece around doesn’t interfere with the work of the shearer.
6. Prepare the area for shearing: prepare the mat and insert hooks for the ropes.
7. Prepare or order lunch for the helpers and shearer.
8. Decide where each fleece will go... to a storage area, boxed to send off to be processed. Buy boxes and make shipping labels. Fill out histogram forms and prepare envelopes for shipping samples off for evaluation.

### **How will you shear?**

I have assisted with shearing animals standing, on a table, and roped on the ground. Tables can be easier on a shearer’s back, however, if an animal gets away, it can go *really* badly on a table. Shearing with the animal standing is another option but one that requires more experienced handling and usually more force. Shearing in the standing position also



**Holding area caption**



**Laneway caption**

has the added disadvantage of teaching more difficult alpacas that it is okay to fight with humans. Often, a shearing team is constituted on shearing day and I find the stretching out method is easier to organize with new handlers. When done well, shearing on the ground seems to me to be the safest and most efficient way to shear, particularly if you are using inexperienced handlers. Lapses in concentration are more easily corrected on the ground than on a table or with the animal standing.

*Regardless of the method you choose, too often the very worst part of the shearing experience is the same part that can be easily changed – namely, the time before the actual shearing begins to include the waiting and the movement to the mat. In the name of saving time, the animals are confined for way too long, chased, grabbed, and dragged to the shearing station and wrestled to the ground. Time may go by faster when we are wrestling with animals, but there are many reasons not to do this.*

1. It is less efficient, more time consuming, and more dangerous to wrestle and fight with the alpacas.
2. It adds needless stress to the process for both the animals and the humans.
3. Alpacas get better at what they practice and I do not want them to practice using their superior physical powers to fight me. From this point of view, owners pay for the wrongs of shearing day for the rest of the year.

**Decide how animals will be organized and set up a system for getting them to and from the field to the shearer.** This will be slightly different for everyone but the ideas that follow will help YOU help the animals.

1. Create a holding area that is as comfortable as you can make it. We used a small grassy paddock adjacent to the shearing area. Hay and water should be available. Move animals in groups so that they do not have to wait in close confinement for long periods of time or wait alone.
2. Create a laneway to a catch pen (no larger than 9 x 9 feet square) from your holding area. Create

Photos courtesy of Marty Bennett



**The handler is demonstrating the midline catch. The thumb makes contact first – fingers on the midline. The approach is from behind the eye. The alpaca is NOT trapped.**



**The handler is now in the bracelet and has complete control of the alpaca's balance.**



Photos courtesy of Marty Bennett

**The handler hooks the nylon around the very top of the neck. The snap and hook arrangement ensure that the nylon cannot tighten around the neck.**



**This short "leash" allows the handler to give the alpaca a break without having to catch him again.**

a system so that animals can be moved easily from the holding area to the catch pen and moved to the shearer without a halter. The laneway should empty out as close to the shearer as possible. We caught the alpacas with an efficient and less stressful catching technique called the "midline catch" and moved them down the laneway to the shearer. We then used the "bracelet technique" with a short nylon strap around the top of the neck in case an animal broke free of the bracelet.

**Note:** Using the midline catch and the bracelet means that the direction of the alpaca's nose is always controlled. If "spit happens," it can be directed away from the shearer, helpers, and fleece. There is *never* a good reason for covering the airway of a spitting alpaca – it is dangerous, unfair, unpleasant, and unnecessary.

3. Don't use your shearer for animal handling. Owners are often critical of how a shearer handles their animals. It is not reasonable to change the way a shearer does his job. It is much easier to do



Photo courtesy of Marty Bennett

Caption needed

the animal handling yourself. The best use of your shearer's time is to SHEAR! When the shearer stands up, lubricates his shears, and turns around again, he should have an animal standing on the mat ready to shear. Since you are in charge of animal handling, you make the rules and can reasonably prohibit any behavior you consider to be unsafe or unfair, such as grabbing, dragging, hitting, or yelling.

4. After your team is on site, but before you begin shearing, take the time to go through a dry run with a person playing the role of the alpaca. I know this sounds a bit odd, but we found it to be the biggest time saver. The "alpaca stand in" made it much easier to visualize any problems than simply talking about it. A twenty minute dry run saved us easily several times that and virtually eliminated confusion over who does what to who.

I selected Marcus Whitman as my shearer because I like the way he shears but just as importantly because he is a kind man who exudes confidence.

There are several ways to get the alpaca down on the ground. I like to attach the ropes while the alpaca is standing and to use the ropes to bring the animal to the mat. As Marcus was cleaning the area and preparing his shears for the next animal, a handler would move the animal from the laneway to the mat and balance the animal using the bracelet. A second handler would then move up to the alpaca from a place behind his eye and stand close to the alpaca on the opposite side. The second handler did nothing more than act as a block and did not touch the animal. Marcus put the ropes on the rear legs first and then the front legs. The animal was supported in the bracelet and not restrained as the ropes were put on. As Marcus put the ropes on the front legs he introduced himself with, "Hello, my name is Marcus and I will be your shearer today." At first we all took this to be a bit of a charming joke but as I watched it over and over I became convinced that it was more than a nice touch. This momentary connection settled the animal and set the tone for our handling.

A word on using sedatives... As with many aspects of alpaca management there are many different opinions about this. In my opinion it is safer to sedate a very difficult animal especially a pregnant female than to have her hysterical the whole time she is being shorn and worried for hours waiting her turn. Do these animals near the front (not first when you are still getting organized.) There are good combinations of drugs now and plenty of information about how to use them – the animals are not out cold but are much less concerned and cooperative. AND if you are learning to shear and I am one of the first ten alpacas you shear... PLEASE PLEASE sedate me!

I gave some consideration to sedating my yearlings for their first shearing. These confident youngsters had never been grabbed or chased and I was pretty protective of them but after discussing it with Marcus, we decided to do without. Perhaps the best gauge of our success was their behavior post-shearing. If anything, they are now more approachable than they were before shearing.

I have come to the conclusion that the best anti-stress medicine for shearing day is good organization and good handling. However, in the case of really difficult animals who are not able to

benefit from expert handling and a shearer willing to take a bit of time, I am still in favor of a sedative. I think whether or not to use a sedative is a decision that must be made on an individual basis, keeping all the various factors in mind.

### Prepare for the final disposition of your fleeces

I have traveled around to many ranches and seen mountains of fleece languishing in barn. Once shearing day is over, it is easy to move on to other things and leave the fleece to collect dust and insects. I recommend that when you plan your shearing day, you also plan for the wool's ultimate destination. "Carpe fleecum" – do something with the wool immediately. Do your research before shearing day and decide where you plan to have your fleece processed.

Shearing day is exhausting, but with extra labor on hand, it may also be the best time to do much of the work of getting the wool ready for its next stop. You can get the boxes and address them and depending on the moisture content of the fleece, box it up and ship it out the next day. I am a spinner and had a personal plan for some of the fleece but our seconds and less desirable fleeces were going to make rugs, so we sorted, boxed, and sent the wool off immediately.

Now all that remains is to watch my now-naked alpacas give birth and watch a new generation of alpacas begin growing even more wonderful fiber!

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Let's get a new bio for Marty...the old one needs to be retired.

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For over 20 years, Marty McGee Bennett (B.S. Animal Behavior, University of Georgia) has traveled the world teaching camelid enthusiasts how to better understand and more successfully relate to these wonderful animals. The author of three books, including the best-selling *Camelid Companion*, and the star of seven instructional videos, Marty's work has transformed the way owners, breeders, and veterinarians handle and train alpacas. Marty can be reached at [www.camelidynamics.com](http://www.camelidynamics.com) or [marty@camelidynamics.com](mailto:marty@camelidynamics.com).



Photos courtesy of Marty Bennett

**Marcus prefers to pass the alpaca from one handler to the other rather than having a handler straddle the animal and try to manage it alone. I have assisted using both techniques and I much prefer passing the animal from one handler to the other as illustrated in this series of photos.**