



## Let Your Barn and Pastures do Your Training and Handling for You!

*Handling animals can be stressful enough without the environment working against us, so it makes sense to look for any way to give ourselves an advantage. **Marty McGee** suggests how we can do just that.*

The way your barn and pastures are organized can make your training and handling job a breeze or it can make it a frustrating nightmare. Something as simple as moving a scale from one area of the barn to another can save hours of time each and every time you work with your herd. The way you move your animals through the barn for handling can make them feel safe and settled or trapped and panicky. Calm animals are easier to train, easier to sell, and I believe live longer healthier lives. Barn design also makes a huge difference in the way your animals feel about being around you.

When thinking about barn design it is useful to look at the tasks associated with having animals. In addition to training our animals we are also responsible for their health and welfare. I think it is useful to look at the difference between training and handling; two words that are very different but are often mistakenly used to describe the same process.

**Training:** Teaching an animal to respond to a cue or signal in a predictable manner. Examples of training would be kushing on command, lifting a foot in response to a physical or verbal cue, responding to cues given on a leadline, walk, trot, whoa.

**Handling:** The process of accomplishing a maintenance task such as shearing, giving an injection, trimming toenails and this may surprise you... putting a halter on.

In fact most of what we do with our alpacas is handling not training. That is not to say that the animals are not learning while we are handling them... but we do not require their participation for handling, merely their acceptance. Particularly when it comes to handling barn design really makes a difference.

**Getting to the barn:** First things first! Getting your alpacas to the barn so they can be handled and trained is an important and often overlooked issue. Lane-ways leading from the pastures to small catch or handling areas are critical to your dominion over the barn. Chase your alpacas around the pasture five times before you get them in the barn and you have not only wasted your time and dialed up the adrenaline for all involved, you have taught your animals to disregard your leadership. It is best not to try to be better at things at which your alpacas clearly excel. Each time you try to unsuccessfully out-run an alpaca, school track star or no, you have demonstrated that you are a pathetic excuse for a sprinter. Use your superior brain to prevail. When you decide it is time for the alpacas to be in the barn there should be no argument. Lane-ways and/or herding tape a short run of fence into a large pasture (see illustration #1) all help funnel your animals into the barn and guarantee that your alpacas will cooperate. Organise your pastures so that there is no question that you can make your animals go to the barn any time you want to and you may find that they become more cooperative about everything.

Once in the barn a handling system will complete the picture. The alpacas should flow through a handling facility that incorporates all of those elements important to your particular management style. Think about what you need to do with your alpacas and plan how it will happen then create a handling system that helps you do it. An efficient effective handling system will save hours of time. The following is an example list of tasks that alpaca owners and breeders must accomplish regularly.

- weighing all alpacas including babies
- routine injections
- oral worming
- toenail trimming
- showing animals to prospective buyers including fleece checks
- shearing
- haltering and leading those animals that will be sold and or shown

A well-designed handling facility can make all of these tasks much easier. Perhaps the most important principal for easy animal handling is safety in numbers. Working alpacas in groups will go a long way toward keeping them calm. Remember when moving amongst animals that are somewhat crowded together don't use your hands to warn an animal of your approach or to ask him to move. Reaching out with your hands to touch an animal is a sure-fire way of getting kicked. When moving through a group of animals keep your hands to yourself and use your body to nudge animals out of the way.

As you read about the handling system I describe refer to illustration #2. The Holding Area: Herd your group of alpacas into the primary loafing area (A). Ideally this is an area that is large enough for all the alpacas to mill around comfortably. This area could also be the main feeding area for your barn making it a pleasant and familiar place to wait. This is your staging area. All animals to be worked wait in here for their turn to move into the handling area.

The Aisle Way: Smaller groups of alpacas are herding into the aisle way (B) a few at a time. Let the animals naturally sort themselves into the aisle way. Usually animals that are comfortable with one another will opt to stick together. Your alpacas will be happier and act out less if you allow them to sort *themselves* into the aisle way. One at a time the animals pass into the next level of the handling area (C). You can use a pair of lightweight poles, I call these tools wands, to move the next animal from the holding area (B) to the scale (C). With a four-foot pole or wand you can reach over the panel to move animals without having to be in the aisle way with them. Using an extension of your arm to herd and sort animals is much better than using your arms. The alpacas know that you cannot grab them with poles and will stay much calmer and take direction rather than dashing about.

The Scale: Scales are an important part of good management knowing the weight and more importantly any change in weight will help you keep track of the health of your herd. In my travels I have seen scales that were so inaccessible that the animals had to be haltered and led to a different building entirely. For a scale to be really useful it should be easy to use— that means handy to the animals.

Regardless of where your scale lives it will be much more user friendly if it has a box around it. Scales that sit out in the open look scary. It doesn't matter to your alpaca that the scale is only 2 inches off the ground it is still scary. It is difficult to herd an alpaca up on to a scale that is not in an enclosure. It is even more difficult to get the alpaca to remain on the scale and to stand in balance to get an accurate weight. Even if your scale is located in a handy place but without enclosure around it you will probably have to halter and lead the alpaca up on the scale. Haltering each animal to get a weight takes time and training and needlessly complicates your herd management.

You will also want weights on young animals that have not been introduced to a halter and have not been trained to lead. I have seen handlers unintentionally terrorize a baby simply to get its weight. After a very few bad experiences a confident friendly baby can become a spooky nightmare to handle. Good barn design can make weighing adults and youngsters as easy as moving them through the barn. The area enclosing the scale should be the exact size of the scale and enclosed with panels. Create a space in which there are no edges from which to slip off. The best scale is one for which there is really no choice for the alpaca to stand properly. Weighing babies can be a piece of cake. Bring mom and baby into the scale enclosure together and make a note of the weight. Open the front gate and allow the baby to leave, make a note of the mothers weight. Let the mother rejoin her baby. Do the math and you have a weight on the baby without having to separate him from his mom for more than a second or two and more importantly you won't have to pick the baby up. I think there are very few experiences that are more

frightening to a baby alpaca than being picked up totally off the ground by a human. If your scale platform is not large enough to accommodate both mom and baby, the baby can be worked through the scale enclosure just after mom with a minimum of fuss and effort.

The Handling Area: Once you have an accurate weight you can prepare any weight dependant injections. Open the next gate and the animal moves into a small handling area. (D). Small handling areas are ideal for giving injections with no restraint. An area this size is also ideal for giving oral medication and trimming toenails. A moveable panel can make this area even more useful. Many tasks require increased containment. A panel that slides toward the barn wall reduces the amount of space available. Decreasing the amount of space or increases in containment will help with less cooperative animals and works much better than physical restraint. This arrangement works especially well for trimming toenails without lifting the feet off of the ground. \* The barn office (H) is right next to the handling area. Medicines, records and tack are all handy to the training pen and the handling area.

Once the appropriate management tasks are accomplished the next gate is opened and the alpaca can move to the final holding area (F). I think it is best to keep the herd together in the final holding area until all the animals have been worked, otherwise the last few animals will be very nervous about where the rest of the herd is going. On the other hand there are always a few animals that make the herd miserable when confined. If you have a few rabble-rousers that change the rest of the group to a lovely green colour, handle them first and allow these little darlings back the pasture keeping the rest of the herd together. When the last animal is finished the entire group goes back to the pasture.

Create a baby creep (an area with an opening only big enough for babies to get through) right in the centre of the barn (G) and your youngsters will learn to relax around you as you pass through this area in the course of working in the barn. As you pass through the barn and the baby creep as you do chores it is very tempting to reach out to pet your alpacas. We humans feel that if we reach out and pet our alpacas enough they will accept it and learn to like us. My experience is the exact opposite happens. We are viewed as annoying and scary. My suggestion is to keep your hands mostly to yourself as you move amongst your animals. Save encounters that involve touching for the catch pen. In this way your animals can relax fully around you. With the confinement of the catch pen and a catch rope you can make sure that when you reach out to touch your alpaca it will result in acceptance rather than a mad dash away from you.

In my drawing the final holding area (F) is long and narrow and accessible from the training pen. This makes it a perfect area to conduct initial leading lessons. After teaching youngsters to wear a halter the next step is leading. Moving from a small training pen to a large pasture can be a rodeo. Almost all weanlings will make a few mad dashes before they figure out they are attached to a human and cannot go wherever they please. It is so much easier to deal with these sometimes-frightening reactions if they occur in a long narrow aisle way rather than a big open area. I also use a 17-foot extension lead in this space so that I can offer additional line and avoid pulling on the youngster's head. A few lessons in the long narrow area makes leading in the great big world a breeze.

When it comes to shearing time this facility is easily adapted to the process. The alpacas can be moved through the small handling area where preparations for shearing can be accomplished- this may include blowing the fleece, a tiny bit of surface grooming, giving a sedative or a bit of Rescue Remedy™ (a homeopathic-like remedy that helps to keep your animals calm). Try putting a bit of Rescue in a spray bottle with some water and giving a spritz or two around the animal's head. Following these preparations the alpaca is easily moved to the shearing area. After shearing the alpaca is herded to the holding area.

This same facility can solve the problem of loading animals too. There are several spots that an opening to the outside of the barn would provide for an easy way to herd animals into a trailer. Most alpacas will gladly load into a trailer provided that there is no human inside. By spotting the trailer near the barn and herding the animals from a lane-way or small pen you can load an animal without haltering him. This system makes evacuation in case of fire easily managed.

A good handling facility will transform your alpacas and save you time. Happy Handling!

More about this technique and other training and handling techniques mentioned in this article are described in detail in "The Camelid Companion"