

What to do with Berserk Alpacas. Part II.

In part one of this article (AWM Winter 2015/16) I discussed how to identify whether you have a berserk alpaca or llama, and the preliminary steps of clicker training the behaviour you want, such as turning their heads away from you. If they are looking away from you, aggressive animals are much less likely to spit at you, rear up or barge through you. They have also learnt about the benefits of reward based training which include the release of one of the 'feel-good' neurotransmitters, dopamine.

In this article I would like to look at how to take more control and become your alpaca's leader. We will also discuss how to build on your newly opened channels of communication with your previously confused alpaca and how to teach it new skills, such as being haltered, led and worked over obstacles. Although it sounds unlikely, we can turn their desire to be with humans to our advantage and it is perfectly possible to have a well-trained, people focussed alpaca - although I would never recommend creating a berserk alpaca in order to get one! There are much easier ways for example, see my article on Raising Babies on my website.

At the end of the last part we had reached a stage when we had trained our alpaca through positive reinforcement to turn its head away from us, significantly reducing the chance of unwanted behaviours. I had also stressed how important it was to set up a small pen, for example 1.5m x 1.5m (5 ft x 5 ft) so that the handler is able to interact with the alpaca, but within 'protective contact'.

To get the animal into the pen I prefer to use bribery and corruption - i.e. tempt them in by putting feed into a feeder. You can leave your training sessions to feeding time. Feed in the pen and whilst they are eating you can shut them in the pen. It may take a few times of feeding them in the pen with one side of the pen open, for them to feel comfortable with you moving near them shutting them in. You may take your dustbin lid in whilst you do this.

So what is next? Although you could leave the situation now with improved safety and better behaviour, I think you are wasting a great opportunity to progress further. Because of their early experiences these animals want to be with humans but haven't yet learned the rules of being around them. I suggest that you take them through a training programme to teach them these rules.

Haltering your alpaca

In my experience, putting a halter onto a berserk animal is usually straightforward as they are not frightened of human contact (in fact, rather the opposite) and many have been haltered as youngsters. Once again, though, keeping yourself safe is the priority, as they may view your proximity, or your hands on them, as threatening and may rear. If you have set up a small pen, you can probably halter them with you on the outside of the pen and them inside. Catching them with the wand and the catch rope is the ideal way to do this. I retrained my little rescued mule in this way. When he became frightened his first instinct was to kick you, he felt much safer with me outside the pen, and so did I!



Fig. 1 Haltering from outside the pen

It is important to halter your alpaca in a way that doesn't involve you putting your hand over their midline and grabbing their necks, also make sure you are working alongside them and not in front of them (see the article on my website: Haltering Alpacas for the first time). In

this way you won't risk pressing the 'rear' or 'chestbutt' buttons. Feel free to reward the keeping of the head turned away from you at regular intervals! Work lightly, without undue force and keep them in balance as you do so, if you are clear and confident in what you do, this will transmit itself to the alpaca. The techniques I use, and teach, involve a catch rope or a handling helper fastened around the neck, thus obviating the need to hold onto the alpaca with your hands.

You may remember from the first part of this article and from previous ones (e.g. 'A Tale of Two Alpacas') that I am fond of using a Frisbee - or Fabulous Flying Feeding Dish (FFFD). I use it for feeding but I will also use it if an alpaca is threatening to spit, rear or attack me. Just this small piece of plastic is remarkably intimidating to an alpaca if you genuinely have the intention to stop them. I hold it out between me and the alpaca, stand my ground and say 'no' very firmly. This sounds ridiculous but it has worked in so many cases that I have a great deal of faith in my FFFD. Coordinating haltering with holding a Frisbee can be tricky, and I remember Marty McGee Bennett showing me with great glee her new technique of clipping her FFFD onto her belt with her ski pass holder on an extendable line so that she could produce it whenever needed. My more prosaic method is to punch a hole in the FFD and have it on a long bit of bailer twine around my neck. Just being able to see it seems to remind the alpaca about the behaviour expected of it.

Once they are haltered, you can clip the lead rope onto the side ring, because you will need far smaller and lighter signals and using the side ring (the one closest to the nose) will mean that your signals will be much clearer to the alpaca. If you confuse your alpaca with heavy or imprecise signals you are missing the opportunity to improve your communication with it. When you start to lead your alpaca your aim is to get them to listen to you closely.... and in this way you will build a new relationship - one in which you are the leader.



Taking your frisbee with you 'on the road' also protects you while you are outside the pen. You can use it to ask your student to turn his head away from you and you can use it to reward him for doing so. Alpacas are not stupid and understand your intention, as long as you are clear about what you are asking.

Fig. 2 Marvel and I go 'on the road'.

When I initially lead an alpaca I use a long lead and a wand (a long schooling whip) because a) I can use these to show the alpaca very clearly in which direction to go, b) they enable us keep a healthy distance

apart, and c) they can be used to give corrective signals. I also have my clicker training pouch with me to reward the behaviour I want. This helps to relax your student as they are having the correct behaviour 'marked' and they feel good about this! If you only correct but don't reward there is nothing really motivating the animal to behave well and behaviour will usually deteriorate as the animal feels stressed.

When I took Marvel out of his pen I immediately took him out of his field with my long lead and wand. Working with him in his field would have meant using an area he was familiar with, and this familiarity with something he was very good at guarding could have meant trouble so we took him outside. He was so excited to leave his field and explore that rearing and biting immediately slipped down the list of priorities. It had been such a long time since he had been out, that he just tried to get ahead of me so that he could explore. My job, though, was to slowly and gently get him under control so that we could go in directions that I wanted to go. This took some patient



negotiation but I took Marvel to places he had never been before and to visit animals he had never seen before.

Fig. 3 Being led on an interesting walk

In the picture above you can see me persuading him to come with me and away from the tractor. Typical male! Occasionally he remembered that he was 'beserk' and would try to rear at me, but a combination of bringing him down using the lead rope, showing him the frisbee to keep his head turned away from me and rewarding him for keeping all four feet on the floor led to the behaviour becoming less and less frequent.

Finally, at the end of the session I handed him over to his handler to lead and she took him back to his pen where we took his halter off with no drama. We opened the door of this pen and he wandered back to his field. I recommended that initially interactions with him should start with him in his pen, then he should go out of his pen and field on a halter and lead, and any further work e.g. injecting, toenail trimming should take place once more, in an unfamiliar place. Under these circumstances, everything is 'new' and you can renegotiate your understanding of each other.



Fig. 4 Using the 'Peacock'



Fig. 5 Using the wand and lead to keep Kira at a distance from me

In 'A Tale of Two Alpacas', I describe how I worked with Kira who not only reared but also spat. I used the wand and two additional techniques to keep her at a distance from me, and to make sure her head was turned away from me as we walked. These are useful for working with all berserk animals and you can learn them on an advanced course with me or through the work of Linda Tellington-Jones.

Working with your alpaca whilst away from what is familiar to them is a very good way of communicating with them that you are working in a team, and that good and interesting things can happen with a human being. As we all know, camelids are very nosy and being taken for a walk is very enjoyable so doing an activity which reinforces their good behaviour pays dividends in the long run.

I took another 'beserk' male I worked with recently, around his owner's house, across the patio, and all the interesting places we could find around it. Finally, we finished up in the horses' sand



school where we were able to set up some cavalletti as small jumps and make other obstacles from old tyres and bales of hay.

Fig 6. Rosetta cautiously approaches new surfaces.

It turned out that this alpaca was the obstacle king and within minutes he and his owner were happily jumping over everything. He

didn't have the time or the inclination to be difficult or dangerous as he was having much too much fun. It also changed the way his owner felt about him. Working over obstacles or doing an agility course is a great way to build a new relationship, as well as mentally engaging your alpaca and taking them out of the habit of guarding and aggression. Leading your alpaca over different surfaces, tarmac, sand, paving slabs, chippings, chipped bark, wood and plastic has a very calming effect on the nervous system. In this picture Rosetta, one of my alpacas, is learning to walk over plastic.

Conclusion

Are beserk alpacas trained in this way always going to be 100% safe? I don't know that we can ever be 100% sure about anything, doubly so when animals are involved. I do know however, that none of the animals I have trained and are discussed in this article have been euthanized and that their owners feel confident, if cautious, about dealing with them. A sensible owner would be careful about letting just anyone walk into a field with such an animal or unaccompanied children. In the case of two animals I have trained, one treks with all age groups, and another is owned by people running a holiday complex where he is stroked and fed carrots by visitors (with a fence in between them). There has been no return of the problematic behaviour.

You can find out more about courses with me, training dvds, halters and equipment from my website, www.carthveanalpacas.com or email me for more information: taylor.browne@clara.net, You can follow me on Facebook: Camelid Sense.

Ref: Linda Tellington-Jones. *The Ultimate Horse Behaviour and Training Book* Kenilworth Press 2006