

Restraint free handling

By Julie Taylor-Browne, CamelidSense.

What do I mean by restraint free handling? Put very simply it means not using one or more people to wrestle an alpaca into standing as still as possible. Restraint can mean, for example, casting it, pushing it against a wall or using a gate or panel to immobilise it. More positively, I think that a lack of restraint would involve:

- humans employing the use of the minimum amount of force necessary;
- humans using skills, tools and techniques instead of force;
- offering a camelid the opportunity to express innate behaviour;
- using the concept of containment instead of restraint.

Why use it? As someone who has worked with a number of species over many years I believe that every time we interact with our animals we are training (or conditioning) them. We can unintentionally train them to be afraid of us; to run away when we try to handle them and/or to struggle when we try to pick up their feet to trim their toenails. Alternatively we can consciously train/condition them to stand quietly while we catch them; carry out husbandry tasks and/or actively enjoy contact with us. I hope the attractions of the latter approach are apparent and include the following:

- The age demographic of first time camelid owners is usually around middle age and above;
- Camelids can live up to 20 years;
- Camelids are faster than us, often heavier than us, and their centre of mass lower than ours. In a rugby match their team would beat ours every time; (if they didn't have to carry the ball, that is...);
- Some camelids don't throw in the towel after they have been restrained, some become more difficult to handle and employ more extreme tactics such as rearing, screaming and spitting.
- It is unpleasant and stressful for the humans to deal with alpacas who need a lot of restraint. Usually we do it less and the animal's welfare may suffer as it is not receiving the regular vaccinations and interventions they require.
- Humans may be injured by struggling camelids and view them as dangerous or difficult. The animals may be neglected or euthanised and the owners certainly won't be buying any more of them, or recommending their friends to buy alpacas either.
- The breeders may be young, fit, strong and/or employ stock people who are. When the animals are sold to inexperienced, older or less fit owners they are unable to restrain them in the same way and the animal knows it can escape from them when they try to handle it — and does.

In the last fifteen years of working with camelids and their people I have seen all of these scenarios and many others that have convinced me that the less force we use with our camelids the more able we are to reach a rapprochement with them and work with them in a way which is mutually respectful, much more enjoyable for them and us (as far as having an injection can be enjoyable...), efficient in terms of time and energy and....*calm*.

What's so good about calm? Studies on learning and stress show us that when animals (both human and non-human) are stressed they are unable to learn. They rely on instinctive behaviour or on implicit memories. An example of an implicit memory is car driving. If someone asks an experienced driver what exactly they are doing with their feet and hands as they turn a corner and change down through the gears they risk having an accident as the driver is unaware of the components of what they do — they just call it driving. Running away from human handlers may be an implicit memory in alpacas, possibly beginning from a few days old. If animals (human and non-human) aren't stressed, they both have the possibility of observing each other and learning new behaviour.

Case study - Paco Alpaca

In June 2014 I received a heartfelt request from local alpaca owners. Paco, their ten year old suri alpaca had a very nasty wound on his leg and needed regularly veterinary care (as in a number of times a week) and regular changes of his dressings. They wanted to know if I could help because Paco was very difficult to handle and leapt and reared and struggled when they tried to hold him for the vet so they had had to sedate him and they didn't have either the time or the inclination to go through that several times a week. I had known Paco since he was six months old and had, in fact, halter trained him for his first owner. He hadn't been handled very much by them, and had also decided not to have him gelded at eighteen months against my recommendation. He had become muscly and more difficult to handle as he got older, and was finally gelded at about five. For those readers who don't know suris, they look like a puff of wind would blow them away but they seem to be twice as strong and fast as huacayas.

Paco duly arrived with another alpaca as a companion and had a day or so to settle in before the first vet visit. He did have to have an antibiotic injection but I am pretty nifty at giving restraint free injections, so that went ok. I took this opportunity to handle Paco and to do some Tellington Touch on him. When the vet arrived I sensed that this wasn't going to go smoothly. Paco recognised him and started to get very nervous, his breathing got faster, his nostrils flared with each breath as his sympathetic nervous system (the fight or flight one) took over. The vet had arrived with 'help', a nurse, and another vet had come to help restrain him. Imagine what Paco felt at this stage, a prey animal surrounded by what could clearly have been some very hungry humans. Asking them to back off, I held Paco in the Bracelet, and did some TTouches¹ on his face and he allowed the vet to take the dressings off, inspect the wound and redress his leg. Let me stress though that this was not pretty, or elegant or anything that I would have wanted to have on YouTube as an example of my handling skills. It took a while, I let him go on a number of occasions so that he could calm down, and it took longer than if we had all piled in and sat on him. However, no-one got hurt and he didn't kush. This was pretty important as it was a very nasty open wound on his upper front leg on the point of the elbow and we were trying to keep it both clean and accessible for dressing.

In discussions with the vet it transpired that this was going to be a complicated case. Similar granuloma type wounds he had seen in horses had taken a minimum of three months to heal with the need to change the dressings and clean the wound, 2-3 times a week. There was also the probability that the wound would need debriding, a painful procedure. I decided that Paco and I needed to come to an understanding about how he was going to behave during the vet visits.

All the handling and all the steps described below were carried out in my handling facility which has a series of 8ft x 8ft pens under cover. As it was rather crowded in one of the small ones with the two of us plus vet nurse plus two alpacas I took down the partition between two of the pens and made it into a rectangular 8ft by 16ft pen. In this way, I could give Paco frequent breaks between steps in the intervention and let him walk around. When I did this he was pretty happy to be caught and held again. Every time I caught him I used the midline catch with my body at right angles to his side so at no time did he feel trapped, cornered or grabbed.

My first approach was to get him used to being held gently and lightly in the bracelet. He had arrived in poor condition due to the long-standing infection in the wound and I felt quite justified in giving him a generous food ration. After he had eaten I caught him every day using the midline catch (a technique I teach on my courses and which you can see illustrated in Marty McGee Bennett's book, *The Camelid Companion*), encourage him to stand still and give him some Tellington Touch on his face. Fortunately he loved this and would calm down and enjoy the human contact. Gradually he became calm enough for the vet to enter the pen and take the dressing off. Paco particularly loved TTouch on his lips and nostrils and would go very quiet. He wasn't perfect all the time, there was a little threatened kicking when the tape holding the dressing on was pulled

¹ Both of these techniques and the others referenced in this article can be found on my website, www.carthveanalpacas.com.

off and he wasn't very keen about having the tape put back on again but on the whole he was very good for the first month.

Fig.1 Paco in neck wrap and body wrap, modelling his bandage.



Sadly, after the first month he had to have the wound debrided, we had hoped to use just local anaesthetic, but he wouldn't stand still for that so we had to give him a sedative intravenously. This involved some fairly firm holding on my part and from then on, TTouch alone just wouldn't suffice. He was fine with just me, but had lost trust when the vet entered the pen.

I reached into my metaphorical tool bag and pulled out the clicker.... Fortunately Paco was very fond of food and had been previously introduced to clicker training on a two day private course I had given to someone. I was keen to use a relatively 'green' animal on that course so Paco and his friend had been the students on the course and had enjoyed a weekend of being reminded about being haltered, led, toenail trimmed and taken through the obstacle course. So when I brought out the clicker and the food, he had very fond associations with them and we clicker trained him to stay still whilst

his dressing was changed. Just as an aside, I like to use a very 'low value' food for clicker training so use hay nuts (or pony nuts) as the reward. In this way I can use a high rate of reinforcement using something which is not very delicious and one which they don't obsess over, like carrot or apple. We began clicking (marking the behaviour wanted) and rewarding initially when he stood still and then raised the bar to get a click gradually through the vet entering the pen, kneeling by his leg, then touching his flank, then his upper leg and then finally the dressing. I estimate that I used about 25 hay nuts and it took about 10 minutes to get to the stage when the vet could take off the dressing. Given that treating Paco was going to be a long term project I thought it was time well spent!

We also experimented with body wraps, shown in some of the pictures. These are a Tellington Ttouch technique, which often have the effect of calming an anxious animal. I am a big fan of these, but we found that the neck wrap only was the best configuration. When we put on the figure eight wrap (i.e. round the hindquarters) Paco had a tendency to kush which as we were working with a wound on the point of the elbow was not helpful!

This worked really well until, guess what, both vets needed to examine the wound and have a really good poke around in it. At this stage I put him in my mini pen with the vets outside it where at least he could feel that they couldn't get to him and they could touch his leg through the bars. At this point he realised what was going on and he kushed. The vets could actually get a good look at

the wound in this position, but it wasn't going to be a good long term strategy as it wasn't possible to keep it clean, nor dress it in this position.

Fig. 2 Paco in neck wrap and loose lead configuration



Back to the drawing board... because of course now, the clicker training and rewarding was beginning to pall for him, I was still holding him in the bracelet and I think he had quite negative associations now which outweighed the positives he was receiving. So my next offer to him was to put a head collar on him, and tie him with a quick release knot to the pen, lined up with the wall so that he had limited ability to move sideways or forwards, but could have gone backwards, up or down. I also used a neck wrap with him which definitely calmed him down. Even the vet requested that we used one as she could see the difference it made. She approached him slowly and gently and I clicked the stages as before. He tried initially to kick her with his hind leg as she touched his front leg, but I started to click only when all four feet were on the floor and he soon got the message. Since then this has been the method we use every time, reinforcing me in my belief that it is worth halter training every animal for unforeseen future events!

Would this method have worked had we tried this first? I honestly don't know, but I don't think so. There is a lot written about stress in animals being caused by a lack of control and in the initial stages of treatment he had had little control over what had been done to him. Working with positive methods that promote both calmness and a sense of control meant that Paco was able to communicate his unease with our methods and be listened to. The calmness meant that he could *learn* to stand still.

All the above sounds like I did huge amounts of training with Paco, whereas nothing could be further from the truth. All I did was use the interventions to do the training. At no time did I work with him in between vet visits (apart from when he was used on the course and that was when a novice handler did the training...).

Turning down the H.E.A.T.... I like to think about the components of our interactions with our camelids in terms of four components; Human, Environment, Animal and Tools. In the case of Paco I think the following were important in dealing with him over the five months he has been with me.

Human: I needed to be aware about how I was interacting with Paco. If I was nervous, holding my breath, or gripping tightly, Paco would pick up on this and would want to escape from me. I needed to know how not to corner him and how to use the midline catch and the bracelet so that at no time was I grabbing or wrestling him. I needed to be light in the way I held him and I needed to be careful that my body position was beside him, not in front of him (which would make him turn) or behind him (which would make him move off). Having skills such as knowing how to do TTouch and put a halter on in a way that is very calm and gentle is another useful skill, as is knowing how to do a restraint free injection on my own. My vet also had a very important part to play. She was gentle, quiet, slow and understood that this was a long term issue so getting it right was really important. She approached the task in small chunks, giving Paco the time to accept and understand each stage. We all need to talk quietly and calmly throughout the procedures.

Environment:

I think it was important to have Paco in a calm environment away from the rest of the herd. We all need to concentrate and focus and having other animals milling around would not have helped. Having the one good (calm) friend with him worked really well. The other factors of the environment which helped were that a) they knew the pen as I had housed and fed them in it. b) The pens were small to enable easy handling and were under cover. c) There was food there! I also always had good hay in haynets there for the odd snack.

Animal: By doing the TTouch I was able to calm Paco and get him focussed on enjoying this, rather than panicking about what people were doing to his leg. Using clicker training engaged him and he associated it with fun activities, and of course, the food he loved. By putting his friend in, he was reassured by Dakota's calm presence. It has long been understood that licking and chewing calms animals down so by always combining vet visits with a decent meal we had a more contented animal. We had to herd them into their pen every time from the field and getting them into a pen with food made our job much easier! We can make our animal's lives easier by making sure we go at their pace, and make sure that they understand and consent to each step.

Tools: These included Tellington touch, a well fitting halter, and the neck wrap. The techniques included the midline catch and bracelet, clicker training and food. It was also useful to have a long leads for him to be able to move should he feel the need, and to be able to tie in a quick release knot.

And now? Paco is ready to go home now after five months with me. I will miss him and I think he will miss our regular interactions, his wound has healed and he will enjoy being back with his herd. I also think his owners will also find him a lot easier to handle now!

Find out more about CamelidSense training on www.carthveanalpacas.com. There is a section with previous articles on many aspect of easier handling, a page on training opportunities and an online store with books, halters, equipment and much more. Julie can be emailed on taylor.browne@clara.net