

CARTING WITH LLAMAS

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Based on lessons from John Conboy, Schoharie Llamas

What do you do with a llama? One of the answers is ‘teach it to drive.’ It’s in the book—the *Guinness Book of World Records*, that is—Floyd Zopfi, of Wisconsin, accomplished the largest animal hitch ever, using llamas. Fifty-six of them, fourteen long, four across, almost the length of a football field. They were an impressive sight! It can be done.

First, a few precautionary notes: there are a number of steps in the training process, only 10-15%, or so, of animals will be successfully trained, and the equipment is not inexpensive. Today, professional cart-trainers often begin by training your llama in a three-abreast hitch, with the untrained llama in the middle. A few hours of this will tell you whether your llama is suited for carting. It is quite impossible to teach an animal, in one lesson, to pull a cart in a controlled manner. Compare it to high school driver’s education. Multiple lessons are required, each working on a different aspect of the process. In the end, the cumulative process can result in a llama that safely pulls a cart, or a 16-year-old human who knows how to drive a car. Of course, it doesn’t always work, with either species!

John Conboy, Schoharie, NY, is an outstanding trainer. He began with two geldings that hadn’t been worked and had bad habits. Working slowly, with a barrel of patience, John got his animals to trust him, and ultimately they became good cart llamas. He added a third llama, Firecracker, who wasn’t quite bright enough to learn the verbal commands, but was a good worker. John now refers to Firecracker as the “diesel engine” of the group. He stays in the middle, with the other two outside. A great hitch.

John, his wife Patti, and I tried out five of our llamas one day. Our goal was to find candidates for driving. My selection process wasn’t very good. Fleming used one speed—slow. Strobe laid down and Latin Lover refused to participate at all. Only WMF Alexander did well. We had hoped several might accept further cart training, but got only one, which, as it turns out, is about

A good cart llama prospect is over 3 years of age, alert, curious, attentive, calm, not easily spooked, and not afraid.

average. John says that if a llama has a chance of becoming a cart animal, he can be green-broke in a couple of hour-long sessions. The process isn’t complicated. There are some prerequisites. Start with adult animals—over three years of age—that are attentive, and do not spook. Select llamas that have

spirit—it is easier to tone a llama down than to wind it up. When you have him on lead, he must follow without hesitation. He is always alert and not afraid. Curiosity is a great feature in a cart llama.

Since your llama is already trained to accept handling, putting on the harness shouldn't be a problem. Harnessing is really rather simple. The saddle is around the llama just behind the front legs, held in place with a cinch. The collar around the neck is what the animal pushes against to go forward, while the strap around the llama's rump, called the breeching, is the brake. The llama wears a driving halter without a bit. The lines (reins) go to the halter rings on either cheek. It takes about ten minutes to harness up—longer if your llama is not well-trained.

With the llama tied fairly close, bring the cart up from behind, with the poles held high. Drop the poles down alongside the llama and make the attachments. Of course, you have already exposed your llama to the cart, so this is not a scary process, right? Bring the other two harnessed llamas alongside and hook everything together. It's time to go.

Start with the driver, plus a rope handler walking along each side up front. It is best to have experienced llama handlers to correct any problems that arise. The first lesson is primarily familiarization for you and the llama. Lead the llamas at a slow walk in a familiar place. Be patient. Your llama will not understand for a while. The driver gives oral commands to the llamas, which are reinforced by the rope handlers. "Walk on" or "Walk" is the common command to go. "Whoa" is stop, "gee" is a right turn and "haw" a left turn. "Come gee" or "come haw" are U-turns, where the llamas learn to step-over. You'll be amazed how fast the llamas learn. Your llama will begin to catch on somewhere around the half-hour mark, if he makes it that far. Often you'll know in the first few minutes if it isn't going to work out.

Often you'll know in the first few minutes whether the animal will make a good cart llama.

This same process is repeated for a second llama. Then the two green llamas are put together and driven with the two walkers along to correct any bad habits that may develop. After that, it is only time and miles until everything comes together and you are ready to enter a driving class in your local llama show.

If we can help with llama or alpaca problems, call, write, or e-mail us.

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