

TRAINING PERFORMANCE LLAMAS

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Training animals is always a multi-step process – but with llamas and alpacas it is quicker! These are among the most intelligent of animals. Helping them understand what you want of them is the hardest step. We don't speak lama (the genus which includes all South American camelids) very well, so we teach them by repetition, and building layers of understanding in their minds.

It is quite impossible to teach an animal to pull a cart in a controlled manner in one lesson – compare it to high school drivers education. Multiple lessons are required, each working on a different aspect of the training process. At the end, the cumulative process will result in a llama that can safely pull a cart – or a 16 year old human to know what he should do to drive a car. It doesn't always work with either species!

The first lesson to teach a lama is to trust in you, the professor. Depending on how the animal was raised and/or treated can make a tremendous difference in getting results at this stage. So can maturity. An adult lama has an attention span, the period of time he can work with you on trying to figure out what you want, of fifteen minutes to half an hour. A youngster, under two years, has half of that. Capacity, how much they can remember, is also less in a younger animal. Interestingly, however, lessons learned as a young animal often are remembered longer. This is another of the excellent reasons to work carefully with younger animals – they will long remember the fear they had of you when they were young!

Let us presume we are working with a properly treated, mature lama. We want to teach him to carry a pack with a modest load on the trail. This lama already knows how to be haltered, and to follow a lead – two big lessons properly taught at two to six months of age. Tie your lama in a corner, put a little hay on the ground. Comfortable place, right? As he nibbles at the hay, slowly put your sweater, a grain bag, whatever, on his back. If he spooks, put it back. Keep doing this until he accepts it. Untie him and take a short hike – say 100 steps or less. The lesson that the sweater or bag won't hurt him is being learned. Do it again later, and tomorrow and tomorrow. Pretty quick the whole exercise is easy, and remembered. Three or four lessons will usually do it.

The next step is equally easy. – carry a light load. Put half a bale of hay into two grain bags with a piece of baling twine in between. Follow the same process as above. Don't leave it on for more than a few minutes since the twine may be against the skin.

Time for a pack. We like the Mt. Sopris packs, some prefer other brands. Put the saddle on without fastening the cinches. Take your now-familiar short walk – again and again. When it causes no consternation, back in the corner, reach under and get the front cinch strap and buckle it. If your guy doesn't want to cooperate, start training in that regard. A few lessons showing that you can reach under their belly without hurting him are in order. A hint: straighten out a wire coat hanger. With the hanger in your right hand (working from the animal's left side) put your left hip against the llama's shoulder, facing toward the rear. Your body is the screen – reach under the llama with the hook of the hanger and get the other end of the cinch and buckle it.

After fastening the front cinch, fasten the rear one. Initially cinches should be tight enough that it is easy to put three or four fingers under it. When you have the animal under load, no fingers should fit comfortably. Again, take your walk, but increase the distance. Start working on trail conditioning. A llama just out of the barn after a long winter probably won't want to walk even a mile without resting. You want to work up to, say, five miles.

Then start with the load. A 25 pound load is enough to start with. Get your distance up to a couple of miles, then increase the load in ten pound increments. Remember to *always* keep the load balanced, and check your cinches often. A well conditioned llama can carry up to 25% of his *conditioned* body weight. A 300 pound well conditioned llama can carry up to 75 pounds. This is enough capacity for two people to be on the trail very comfortably for a week.

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