

A Trainer's Toolbox

What would we do without tools? Man is a tool user. Before we knew better it was thought to be the thing that separated us from the rest of the animals. Now we know better everything from birds to chimps use tools for all kinds of things. As a trainer of alpacas I couldn't live without my tools. To be sure my most important tools are my two hands but I would be severely hampered without the rest of my toolbox.

Having been around the camelid community for so many years I have designed many of my own tools, they simply didn't exist before. I have worked to make my tools as user friendly as possible as well as durable.

If you only plan to herd or catch one alpaca a month a clunky rope and heavy herding poles may be fine but if you are working with alpacas on a daily basis it pays to have tools that make the job easier and less frustrating. Whether or not you are a carpenter, a tennis player, a skier or a dentist, good tools can make the difference between adequate performance and exceptional performance and between grace and frustration.

CATCHPEN



This is hands-down THE most important piece of equipment that EVERY farm MUST have. To be truly functional each barn or pasture must have access to or have it's own catch pen. I cannot believe how many farms I visit that do not have one of these. A small paddock is NOT a catch pen. Anything larger than 10' x10' is in my opinion NOT a catch pen. Working with alpacas in a confined space is SO much easier. Don't use a catch pen and you must use your muscles ALL the time. Chasing animals into a corner makes them wary and hones their flight response to the point that they will keep you perpetually at arms length. Use a catch pen consistently and your animals can relax and enjoy your barn visits knowing that you won't grab them. There are many catch pens on the market and you can get heavier less portable varieties from your local feed store or buy the kind that has been made especially for alpacas or llamas. I much prefer pens that have only horizontal bars and do NOT have squares. Any pen that has little openings is one in which an animal can get his mouth, head or leg stuck. Horizontal bars are best with only one vertical support. 8' x8', 9' x 9' or 10' x 10' feet is great. Anything larger gets progressively more difficult to control. I much prefer square to any other shape.

WANDS



Wands are the best! You can call them sticks, herding poles or whips if you like but they work like magic so I prefer wands. Herding animals is an art and these babies are like fine paint brushes. Whether you decide to get the more refined variety I sell or use a fiber glass tomato stake using an extension of your arm is the WAY to move alpacas from point A to point B and as or even more importantly a way to sort one or more animals away from the herd. The magic of using an extension of your arm has to do with flight zones and the alpaca's natural behavior, not to mention the added benefit of having much longer arms! Alpacas are shy and they worry about being grabbed around the neck and restrained. I have written reams about alternatives to this but the fact is that most alpacas have or will be grabbed around the neck by someone at some time in their lives and they worry. Use a wand and the alpacas can think about what it is you are asking of them instead of blindly running away from the dreaded arms. This means that when you move into a group of alpacas they will not run in a bunch of different directions. Get really good at using your wands and you can manage a larger group of animals in a larger space all by yourself. Use wands to herd and move animals from place to place and to sort them and you will teach them that the wands and later that your arms have meaning. An alpaca will learn to go where you direct him. He learns to stop when a wand is in front of him and to go when it is behind—a VERY useful piece of knowledge.

I use this later when I am teaching an alpaca to lead. I can help overly energetic animals learn to slow down and encourage slower ones to go forward.

HERDING TAPE



A herding corollary is herding tape. I have seen people use everything from garden hose to climbing rope. My herding tape is 40' long bright white and a bit over an inch wide—very visible but still manageable. Herding tape allows you to build a fence in a second. Alpacas are easily herded and in general they take the path of least resistance. Unless you are moving animals into a very confined space or herding them at something frightening herding tape is a great way to manage larger spaces.

CATCH ROPE / TRAINING ROPE



Use a rope to catch your alpacas and they won't have a reason to fear your hands and arms. A light-weight smooth rope about 11 feet long is perfect for catching and haltering alpacas, I use a special kind of marine nylon that doesn't stick to the fleece. With a special clip attachment on my wand I can attach my catch rope to the

end of the wand and catch the alpaca from well outside arms length. Using a catch rope and wand together is the ultimate in catching ease. After a very few catches with this system alpacas stop running away from me and I can just walk up and halter the animal.

A double ring arrangement allows me to clip a snap to a ring around the neck up high- just behind the ears. Up at the top of the neck the rope offers leverage over the alpaca's balance. Keep an animal in balance and you make him feel safe. Alpacas that feel safe act out less and are MUCH easier to handle. I can use the catch rope for balancing the alpacas head while I put a halter on. I have developed a system for haltering from one side that is safer for the handler and easier for the alpaca.

THE HALTER! The Crowning Glory of Equipment



The importance of a properly fitting halter cannot be overstated. Alpacas can only breathe through their noses and have a very short nose bone on which to rest a halter. Alpacas wearing a halter that will slip forward (or even if it feels as if it will slip) down the nose bone and on to cartilage will feel as if their very lives are on the line and in fact they are.

An alpaca's head is proportionately smaller when compared to his body than other animals that are typically haltered. The whole business of haltering an alpaca is made much more problematic by his long neck. For all these reasons we have ourselves a very challenging animal to halter. Put an ill-fitting halter on an alpaca

and you have made your leading job a hundred times harder. The following is just a partial list of behaviors that are often related to halter fit: hard to stop, hard to move forward, won't settle down on the lead, jump or kick for no apparent reason, spit, explode backwards out of the halter as soon as the buckle is loosened. Many halters are deliberately constructed so that they will NOT slide back close to the eye. I think this is the exact opposite of the way a properly fitting halter should be. An alpacas face is wedge shaped. A halter that will not slide back on the skull by definition must feature a small diameter noseband. A halter built like this not only means that the noseband will be resting perilously close to the edge of the nose bone but will also be tying the mouth shut. An alpaca in a halter that is unsafe as well as uncomfortable is not going to enjoy his association with humans and is going to act out when on a halter and lead.

Good tools don't make the sculptor any more than clothes make the man but a fine artist appreciates the value of good tools.

Marty McGee Bennett

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