Agility for Alpacas  
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1. Why do it?  
Well, I guess one has to ask the question why? To which I have a number of answers...number one of which is because it is fun and I believe that we could all do with a bit more fun in our lives - and that includes our alpacas’ lives.

Camelids are endowed with a reasonable sized brain enabling them to find food, evade predators, navigate around the countryside, function effectively as a herd and protect their offspring. Most of our animals are confined to a smallish area with food and forage brought to them daily. There isn’t much challenge or entertainment in that and I am willing to bet that they are bored. Alpacas rarely exhibit the stereotypical behaviours exhibited by some zoo animals or confined horses, such as pacing, self-harming, weaving and crib biting. However, if any form of habitat enrichment is introduced to their fields, for example paddling pools, mounds, brushes or appropriate toys, these quickly become well used, normally by the whole herd. We can also become our animals’ entertainment. When I walk into my alpacas’ field whether it is feeding time or not, they all rush over to see what I am going to do - perhaps some tibbits, perhaps some stroking, maybe they will be let into a new field..but they are definitely curious and interested. When I feed my camelids I go round my farm on my Gator, I feed the female camelids first, and leave the rest of the farm animals’ (pigs, sheep, reindeer, goats and equines) feed covered up by e.g. a towel or some hay. Every day a small subsection of the herd will leave the food I have put out for them in their feeders and revel in the game of trying to get the food I am attempting to hide from them. This is proof to me that they enjoy a challenge... and if you want to see curious and interested taken to another level - try agility.

Even if you have no desire to improve the quality of your own and your alpacas’ lives there are still a number of very good reasons to train them using a number of obstacles. These include:

- Facilitating learning,
- Developing trust and improving communication between handler and alpaca
- Correcting unwanted habits
- Encouraging coordination, balance and self-carriage whilst on a halter and lead rope
- Improving confidence
- Helping to find a use for males for example as packing, companion and therapy animals.

2. Great - so how do you do it?*  
Hopefully I have now convinced you that agility is the thing for you and your animals so here are some pointers on how to start.

- Use a correctly fitting halter. This is key as if your halter starts to slip forward as you give your signals, your alpaca will panic and/or plant and you won’t be able to negotiate the obstacle. Much has been written on the subject of halter fit, but essentially, the crown piece (the bit that goes behind the ears) must be snug to stop the noseband slipping forward. Make sure the noseband goes as far back towards the eyes as possible so that it is on the nosebone and not the compressible cartilage. The noseband does not need to be as tight as the crown piece as it should be the crownpiece that does the work of stopping the halter slipping forward. I recommend Zephyr halters as they are the most adjustable on the market.
Clip to the side ring on the front of the halter: This is a much more effective way of leading and giving directional information than the traditional way of clipping the lead rope to the ring underneath the chin. Don’t take my word for it, get someone to lead you around in the privacy of your own home or practice on the dog....

Get in front. Leading means that you need to be in front of the animal (not by their side) at all times. This will also help you with the brakes when you try and stop your over excited alpaca!

Use a wand or a guide (your arm). When I teach an alpaca to lead I use a Tteam wand as this gives the alpaca something to follow and trains it to walk exactly where you want it.

Halter train so you can a) stop, b) slow down and c) walk in a straight line.

Use a light, long lead. The default position of the lead will be with a slight curve in the lead, it should only be taut when you give your ‘walk on’ signal. I recommend Zephyr Training leads as they are long enough for you to give the alpaca an escape route to move into.

Teach them a very light - ‘walk on’ signal. I teach the ‘ratchet’ signal on my courses.
Be light with the pressure in your hand when leading. When I lead I hold the lead between my thumb and index finger. Close your hand over that lead and even think about pulling and you have instantly made it harder for yourself and the alpaca. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. If you haul on an alpaca’s head it is going to respond by shifting its weight away from you.

Be creative with your obstacles - use what you have already. I made a really useful platform out of two solid pallets. Every animal I have taught to do this obstacle more readily goes over bridges and/or into trailers as they are desensitized to different surfaces. I have also used children’s climbing frames, washing lines, garden steps, ditches, pergolas and ornamental bridges as suitable obstacles…. Try to get a range so that they can learn to walk over different surfaces, ‘slalom’ or weave through poles, jump over poles or logs and ‘limbo’ under things. These are all skills useful for life ‘out there’.

Let them look at the obstacle. They are assessing the obstacle so it is essential to let them lower their heads to look or sniff. Insisting or dragging them over at this stage tends to put them off the whole idea!

Start easy and build up to more challenging. When you learned to read did someone just give you a copy of Pride and Prejudice and ask you to read out loud. I suspect not - there was a number of steps including how to hold the book, which way up to hold it, which was the first page, and what those funny squiggles were on the page and how to pronounce them. Have some sympathy for your animals and then watch in amazement at how fast they learn and how they problem solve one obstacle using the skills they learnt from a previous one.
Similarly, if you are asking your animal to go over a rectangular platform, lead them over the short way before asking them to go over the long way. If they find the short way too hard, take them over a corner. Just one foot on the platform is a cause for celebration - do some other obstacles then come back to it.

**Chunk it down.** If an obstacle can be ‘descarified’ do it! Walking over a tarpaulin is a really useful skill as it prepares the alpaca for walking over different surfaces (e.g. disinfection mats at a show) or walking through water. Divide your tarpaulin in two, make a huge gap between the two halves, and walk the alpaca between them. If they seem very reluctant make the gap bigger. Decrease the gap with successive pass throughs and then make a small overlap of two corners. Make the overlap bigger. Voila! You and your alpaca have mastered the tarpaulin.
Figure 7: On her second pass through, the gap has narrowed

Figure 8: The new overlap appearing on the 4th pass through needs careful studying...

Do the obstacle yourself: Lead your camelid over the platform, through the tunnel, and under the limbo dancing line. If you don't go first the camelid will definitely think it is much too dangerous as even the human won't attempt it!
Figure 9: Toria leads Katia under the lowest 'bar'.

- Be calm, be quiet and don’t force them to do anything. If they can’t do it chunk it down or put it away for another day. There is such a thing as latent learning, which means even though you weren’t very good at something on one day, if you give the unconscious brain a change to mull things over you are both better when you start again - even if you didn’t practice or try to think about it in the gap between attempts.

- Don’t aim for extreme - aim for precise. Alpacas already know how to jump high and leap far, they don’t really need to be taught this by you. However, they do need to learn to listen to your signals. The smaller these are the more precise you can be. This could be illustrated by watching me reverse a trailer. I use much more wild reactive wheel turning compared to an expert, who makes small adjustments nice and early by using careful observation - you don’t need to guess who is better at trailer reversing! You can practice your precise signals by trying more advanced obstacles which include asking a camelid to step over a pole and stop after each foot is placed in front of the pole, stepping in and out of tyres, backing then progressing onto backing through an L-shaped obstacle.

- In doing some of the harder obstacles think about using clicker training. The audible marker sounds lets you be very precise in telling the alpaca if they have got what you are asking them to do correct or not.

I hope this article has encouraged you to have a go at training your alpacas to do agility or to even have a go at setting up agility competitions or displays at events.

If you would like more information please see my website (www.carthveanalpacas.com) for training courses, books and equipment or contact me on taylor.browne@clara.net

* If you need more information about many of the subjects contained in this article, have a look on my website under the Magazine articles tab. Most of my previous articles are available there and go into more detail on subjects such as haltering, leading etc.