A load off your mind......transporting your camelids the stress free way.
Julie Taylor-Browne, Cameldynamics Instructor
and founder; CameldSense.

Transporting your camelids can be the easiest thing the world ‘oh they always just rush in’ or such a nightmare you get cold sweats when you even think about it. A friend of mind recently told me how she had offered to help a mutual acquaintance move his alpacas to a new farm. Very few of them were halter trained and many of them had never been in a trailer before. Those that had, apparently had very bad memories of the experience because they didn’t want to go in again! Various methods were attempted, including herding from behind, dragging those on a halter from the front and bodily carrying them in. In short the whole exercise took hours and a significant number of people and the friend has promised to never, ever move house again.

So here are a number of tips I have learnt over the years of working with camelids. At the end of every clinic I do a loading demonstration and help load any recalcitrant camelid visitors in a way that is as fun, respectful, efficient, kind and safe as possible. So far, in ten years of teaching and dozens of clinics I have never failed.

Most people routinely move a relatively small number of animals. These may be stud males, females going for mating, animals going to a show, animals that are sold and going to their new homes or possibly animals going to the vets. I suggest that in these circumstances it is usually better to lead them with a halter, although sometimes of course, you have to move larger numbers of animals when it is more efficient to herd them in. I will cover this aspect in the last part of this article. I also know a number of people transport their animals in vans, large cars and step up trailers (i.e. those without ramps, but the following principles will still apply.

1. Putting a halter on an animal is not a substitute for teaching it to lead.

On the courses I give, we usually train the camelids over the course of two half days to stand still and accept a halter quietly, to lead, to do some obstacles and only at the very end of the two day course do we ask it to enter a trailer on its own or with another ‘newbie’. Now you may immediately cry ‘but I don’t have that amount of time to train each animal I want to show!’, but in fact the actual amount of work each animal on the course has is usually no more than an hour over the whole two days. So never fear. If you don’t believe this is possible, I would like to invite you to come on a course to find out for yourself.

Teach your camelid to lead
So step number one. Teach your camelid to lead. See my previous article in Alpaca world or reproduced on my website:

www.carthveanalpacas.com/articles.html

2. Trailers are scary things. Help your camelid by doing some preparation work for loading.

It can help your alpaca to used to the idea of going in a straight line between two guidelines. We usually do this using the labyrinth, shown below. It also helps to lead it over some different surfaces, for example a rubber mat. In my obstacle course in my field I have a wooden structure made out of pallets. Its original purpose was to teach horses and camelids that they can go over bridges without the trolls getting them, but I have also found it excellent ramp preparation as it reverberates when the alpacas walk on it. For those of you with step up trailers or vans, you could start with a low platform, such as this, and then put another on top to raise the height so they need to jump on and off. Tunnels made with tarpaulins are also a good obstacle and preparation for loading.
3. Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey......

It sometimes appears to me that some people have trained their alpaca to lead the day before a show, and that trailer preparation may be missed out altogether. It does the alpaca industry and our reputation as owners no good at all when we have to drag and carry our animals onto a trailer at the end of the day. They often ‘plant’ or kush or lie on their sides and roll just when we are tired at the end of a long day and just want to go home.

*If they look they will load...*

We can overcome this at the preparatory stage if, when we ask them to lead, walk over a different surface or go up that scary ramp, we don’t use force. A little slack in the lead, a bit of patience, correctly lining them up with the direction we want them to move in, and a gentle ‘walk on’ signal will work miracles. Alpacas and llamas are not stupid, they know very well what we want from them and increasing the strength of the signal we use or repeatedly telling them to ‘walk up’ won’t make any difference. What they want is some time to explore the new challenge, the freedom to look at it and a gentle and understanding person at the end of the lead rope. None of us are saints, and tempers can get frayed, at the end of a show, for example, so don’t expect to be a great handler at this stage. Train them before and it will go better on the day!

4. Set yourself up to succeed with your body position.
Camelids are like horses, in the sense that they see no reason to step on something new without seeing you do it first. Use a long lead and go into the trailer first leaving lots of lead between you and your students. Keep your camelid students lined up with the trailer ramp/trailer entrance/van door so that they are looking into it. Your lead should have a little slack in it at this stage. If they wander off at all, get out again, line them up using your lead/s and get back in and go to the back.

Create an escape route by getting out of their way.

of the trailer. Let them look at the trailer entrance, and at the ramp if there is one. Count to thirty potatoes (one potato, two potatoes, etc etc) then use your walk on signal. We teach the ratchet signal for this and use Zephyr training leads because they are both long and light. This will probably get a front leg or two on the ramp. Go back to giving them a little slack, but not enough to let them back up. Wait for a few more potatoes and give your signal again. They may rear a little, but providing you are not hauling on the lead, this is simply because the surface and the incline is unfamiliar to them. Stay at the very back of the trailer until they join you there. If your lead rope is taut, they will use an equal and opposite pressure to lean back on the lead, making your task even harder, so a slight ‘belly’ in the line is essential.

Going....
5. Other secrets of success.

☐ Give them an escape route. Because camelids are prey animals, in an unfamiliar situation they will look for an escape route. If your trailer has a front ramp or a crew door open these. This will also make it seem less like a scary dark cave.

☐ Put an acrylic mirror at the front at their height.

☐ If the ramp is made of rubber matting, put some straw on it to make the surface seem more familiar. On metal ramps this makes them more slippery so don’t do this.

☐ If you have an animal who knows how to load take this animal with you and let them do it together or put the experienced one in first.
Some people swear by leaving the trailer in the field with their animals with hay in and letting them use it as toy or field shelter. This will certainly make them less afraid of the trailer but you can still make them reluctant to go on when they are on the lead rope.

‘Shy loaders’ can sometimes be tempted in with food. Stand once again at the back of the trailer and rattle their ration. Time feeding them so they are hungry when doing this exercise!

If you know anything about clicker training, you can clicker train them to go in. Shape the behaviour you want by clicking and rewarding them for merely looking at the trailer, then for walking near the trailer and then for putting a foot on the trailer.

Use stock gates or hurdles placed along side the ramp to guide them into the trailer and prevent deviations from course. I am usually on my own when I take my animals to an event and the stock gates save me precious time when loading and unloading.

6. Don’t forget unloading.

The trailer ramp or the descent from a step up is normally the more exciting and eventful part of loading and unloading. The ramp both looks and feels different from how it looked during the ascent and animals may choose to attempt to leap over it completely or partially. You or any helpers should not be in the way at this point. Don’t try and lead them down it - get out first and get clear. They will work it out - your job is to ensure no-one gets hurt, either camelid or human. You will need long lead (s) to make sure it is possible to get fully clear and that you are able to maintain control of the animal once it has landed.

Safe unloading
7. And finally, herding animals into your transport.

I once had a difficult llama and her adult daughter sent to me for some training. She was truly difficult in a number of ways, not least her ability to leap out of any containment we put her in. She roamed freely round my farm, fortunately choosing to stay with my own herd rather than the neighbours’ sheep and cattle. Her owner sold her before I had managed to halter train her and the transport came to pick her up, turning out to be an adorable little horse transporter with a very wide ramp and side entrance. I had been hoping for a rear loader, but as the Rolling Stones so aptly put it - you can’t always get what you want.

The day before the transporter came I spent a lot of time planning. I used many metres of temporary fencing made of white electric horse poles with two rows of horse tape - if stressed she could easily jump this, but my aim was to not get her stressed. It was simply used to cut down the number of her options. She came into my pens for feeding in the morning of the loading and I haltered up her daughter and hoped that she might follow. This was by no means guaranteed, so as I led her daughter down, I had someone herding with wands from the rear. I only needed one person as I had narrowed down the possible escape routes and was funneling her into the loading area. We then managed to get her into a largish, high sided holding area. Had I been unable to narrow down the area. I would have needed two people with herding tape and wands. A bucket of food might have worked, had she not followed her daughter. Had this not worked either, I would have brought the whole herd down to the loading area, then separated her and her daughter out.

When the transport arrived we blocked off every option using sheep and alpaca panels, opened every door and window on the transporter and put delicious looking haynets in the van. We let her out of her holding area and put next to no pressure on her from behind, although one of us did stand behind the most tempting low sheep hurdle to block off this escape route. Because she wasn’t stressed she was able to be curious. In short, the ‘difficult llama’ thought it all looked very interesting and marched straight in. It took longer to dismantle all the hurdles and herding tape than it did to actually load her. The transporter (who normally dealt with horses) was very impressed with how easily llamas load! Preparation, I suggest, was key here.

You can also use a number of the ‘tricks’ suggested in the list above. You can open all available doors, but place hurdles in front of them to prevent your carefully herded animals entering from the rear and exiting immediately through the front.

Herding tape and temporary fencing can be borrowed from any horse owner. Obviously you don’t need them to be connected to electricity. I do suggest two lines of tape as just one line tempts them to go underneath, whereas two look more impenetrable.

I hope this has given you some ideas regarding stress-free loading. For more information on courses and/or equipment such as leads and halters see my website: www.carthveanalpacas.com or contact me by email: taylor.browne@clara.net