



A Tale of Two Alpacas

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2010 brought some interesting challenges to Carthvean Farm (on top of the usual ones of how to run a farm and raise alpacas in Cornwall when I am travelling all the time!). Firstly, Kira arrived. Four year old Kira had developed a nasty habit of charging at and then knocking over the owner of the farm where she was agisted, and the owner's husband. In addition she was difficult to handle for

routine tasks and doing her toenails was something her owner dreaded. I think most people would agree that this wasn't acceptable behaviour from any alpaca. Sometimes people are surprised when a female exhibits this 'aberrant or beserk' behaviour, but it isn't that uncommon. I don't know for certain the cause of Kira's behaviour, but her owner thinks it might have been a loss of trust in humans following rough handling when she went for stud services the first time. Additionally, she had some interesting behaviour even before this experience such as clucking at people when they went into the field and what I call 'inspecting them'. This is a quite confrontational, eyeball to eyeball meeting with anyone who comes into 'their' field..

Kira wasn't quite on the verge of being euthanised, but it had been mentioned and the place where she was agisted had definitely had enough. I said I would take her, agist her, assess her and, if possible, retrain her.

Shortly after I had agreed to take Kira I had another phone call from an owner who had had enough with one of their female alpacas. Jude was a 12 year old import who had never been particularly easy to handle - she was big, tall and nervous - but an episode where the owner had had to rescue an alpaca who had got tangled in a fence had convinced Jude that people could not be trusted. She had developed an unpleasant habit of following her owner round the field screaming and spitting at him. At their wit's end, her owners phoned me and asked me to take her. Again, the 'E' word was mentioned and what with me being a) a soft touch and b) intrigued to see what I could do with her, I took her on as well.

In my experience, whenever you get any type of new animal, you have a honeymoon period. They are polite and cooperative with you and appear problem free. In reality however, they are conducting an alpaca SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis and studying you, the other alpacas, the field and the general environment in order to get a measure of the lay of the land. So it was with these two, they both looked like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, in fact, when you looked at them they would immediately look away and start grazing. However, after about two weeks we started to get the measure of each other.....

What I realised pretty quickly was that although superficially they exhibited similar types of behaviour they had rather different causes. Kira had become overconfident whereas Jude was one of the most nervous alpacas I have ever seen. Her aggression was born out of fear. In the dog training world the importance of identifying the different types of aggression has been recognised for a long time as the techniques for dealing with the problem are very different. Applying the wrong solution to the problem is likely to either not work at all or worse, to exacerbate the problem.

As readers may know from previous articles I have a series of small catch pens in my fields. I feed my alpacas and llamas in these and if I need to do something to them I simply shut the door on the pen and then wait for them to finish feeding before I go in. I injected Kira as soon as she arrived and she was as good as gold. I did it however, restraint free, that is I used my body position to line her up with the side of the pen and injected her in the loose skin covering her shoulder. The next step was to cut her overlong toenails which her owner had asked to me deal with. This time I knew she wasn't going to be quite as good, and my husband, Andrew helped me by holding her in the bracelet whilst I did her toenails. This time she decided not to cooperate and tried to leap and literally throw her weight around. I took over from Andrew and asked Kira to stand still with quite a firm ratchet (a technique we teach during workshops for helping the alpaca stand still and in balance).



Fig. 1 At the end of a long lead

Surprised that there might be someone else in charge, besides her, she got the idea very quickly and was no problem to toenail trim. After this Kira became really quite easy to handle for management tasks and I decided to

reinforce the idea that I was in charge by reminding her about leading. Kira was fine to halter but as we started down the long, narrow aisleway in the direction I chose to take, and not the one she wanted - she started to spit at me. Fortunately, two pieces of equipment came to my aid. The first is the long Zephyr leads that we use which meant I could easily slide away from her and the spit zone and the second is the white TTeam wands we use. I used a technique invented by Linda Tellington-Jones that we use for horses who tend to come in to you when you lead them. The 'Fan of the Peacocks' Tail' requires that you turn the wand around so the button end is nearest the alpaca, hold it half

way down and describe an arc with the wand between their face and you. This seems to be an impenetrable barrier that they stay behind and not turn into you. Now Kira's spitting was directed forward thanks to the wand and I was out of range she lost interest and started to watch the wand when I brought it in front of her again and to lead very nicely.



Fig. 2 Leading nicely



Fig. 3 Obstacle work.



I also did some obstacle work with Kira so that she could get the idea that I was the leader and not her. Working on more challenging leading engages their brains and makes them have to pay more attention to you and to learn to trust you as you lead them.

Fig. 4. Using the wand to prevent spitting.

These steps were all very positive, but once the honeymoon period was over, Kira started to come up to people entering the field and inspect them in the challenging way described above. After our handling and leading sessions, she had decided that she oughtn't to do that with me, but strangers obviously needed her closer attention. While she wasn't aggressive to them I didn't tell her off, but I did tell people not to try to stroke her neck or pet her. Kira's owner had warned me that she was very protective of her little sister so when the baby birthing season started I was keen to keep an eye on her. Sure enough, the minute the first baby hit the ground she was there with her nose in my ear, warning me that she was watching me should I put a foot wrong. I started to take an FFFD (Fabulous Flying Feeding Dish - a frisbee like thing we sell) with me and once I had to use it by holding it out at her nose level and strongly telling her to STAY BACK when she forgot herself and came charging towards me as I checked a cria. From that point onwards I had the FFFD in the field with me. I always kept an eye out for her and several times she would start to come over, but check herself. Clearly the problem wasn't over.....

It all came to a head when I had a poorly yearling who needed to have an injection once a week for three weeks. The first week I gave it to him in the pen, Kira didn't even notice. The second week, I gave it to him in the field. He was still weak and docile and didn't even try to run away. As I lent over to give him the injection I heard a thundering of feet and could see and hear a large, white, charging, screaming Kira in my peripheral vision. Fortunately I had a feed bucket by my hand. I stood my ground and swung it in an arc in front of me and told her to STAY BACK in a very loud voice. She ceased running towards me but then did a cartoon aggressive bull impression: pawing at the ground, vocalising and really looking like steam was coming out of her ears! Turning my back on her at this stage or walking away, would have been a mistake... Instead I walked very deliberately towards her with my feedbucket in front of me forcing her to give ground to me. After a few steps backwards she gave up eye contact with me, dropped her head and walked away pretending to be interested in the grass.

From then on, her behaviour improved. A few times when people came into the pasture (note 'the' pasture not 'her' pasture) she started to run over, then walk over, and each time

she checked herself in a sort of “hang on a minute I don’t do that any more do I?” way. Finally, she just stopped coming over.

Now I was pretty confident that she was safe around people I started to use her on the courses that I run here. Unbelievably she became everyone’s favorite alpaca to work with. She was the easiest to halter, inject, lift the legs to toenail trim and lead through the obstacles. I was thoroughly sorry to see her go back to her owner.

Meanwhile Jude was pursuing her bid to be the most frightened alpaca in the world. At first she refused to come into the pens for food, after a number of weeks she deigned to enter the pen but positioned herself so that at the first sign of a threat (i.e. me trying to close the door of the pen with her in it) she would run out. Whilst she never followed me round the field spitting, on one occasion when I was herding the flock into the barn she stood her ground and spat fully at me. She clearly thought something nasty was going to happen in the barn, and she was right! It was injecting and weighing time.

I have a good system for managing my herd of alpacas and llamas on my own (in fact this will be the subject of my next article). Initially this involved a mini catchpen of my own construction out of sheep hurdles set up in my handling facility, but this has been replaced by Geoff Bugler’s excellent Easy Pen. I was keen not to get into any sort of wrestling with Jude. As previously mentioned she is both taller than me and a lot heavier so I would inevitably lose, it would also scare the living daylights out of her and confirm her in her jaundiced view of humans. Because I used restraint free handling with her she was as good as gold in this set up. After that she was happy to be herded into the barn.

Working with her with me in the pens was another matter, however. She would scream, spit, leap, kush and just be generally terrified. When animals (or humans!) are scared, they are incapable of learning so we would have the tiniest of unsatisfactory sessions and then I would let her go. I tried my number one remedy for scared alpacas which is the body wrap, which worked to some degree but reducing 100% terror to 75% still doesn’t give you an animal you can work with!

A small breakthrough with Jude came at mating time. I had no intention of breeding from Jude, but she was around the mating pen and as she was open, firmly kushed and ‘got in the queue’. I observed that she would let me go right up to her when she was kushed and I crouched down beside her and did some Tellington Touch face work with her. At first her eyes looked like they would pop out of her head, but she started to relax, her eyes became softer and then she started to give me the weight of her head in my hand. This was definitely progress.

The next stage happened during a course here on the farm. When I give courses here I herd my alpacas down to my handling facility and let them choose who wants to be on the course. They seem to know the difference between injecting/shearing activities in the barn and a two day course. The ones that want to be on the course pop themselves in the pens and the others vote with their feet. Much to my surprise Jude elected to voluntarily go into a pen. Clearly I hadn’t traumatised her too much.

The students and I started to work with an amenable animal in the pen next to Jude, and here she lost it to a degree. First she started spitting at the alpaca in the pen with her and then at the alpaca we were working with. This is known as redirected aggression, where aggression cannot for whatever reason be directed at what is causing it. Finally she lifted her head and started spitting at us. As ever I had my FFFD in my bag and I can assure you



it is a very good spit shield! I held it between me and her and said NO. Each time she started spitting I moved it towards her firmly and said NO loudly. Each time her attack was less convincing and finally she stopped altogether. We were able to continue working unmolested for the rest of the session. About a month later she only spat once after that when I was moving an orphaned cria (that she felt protective about) from one pen to another. Since then she has never spat.

Fig. 5. Catching a body wrapped Jude.

Jude started to trust me more after that encounter and would go into the pens for feeding and let me shut the door. At first this is all I did, shut the door and a few minutes later, open it again. You will remember that I travel a lot, well in the autumn she had a break from any training because I was giving clinics abroad. When I started again, things were different. This is not uncommon and is known as latent learning. The animal is better than when you finished training them the previous time and this seems to occur when an animal has had time to 'process' previous experiences. Whilst Jude looked very nervous whilst I caught her with the wand and the catch rope, she wasn't out of her mind terrified and allowed me to snug the catch rope around her neck.



Fig. 7 Doing TTouch when she kushed or was scared.

When I came to do the TTouch on her face she remembered this from the summer and leaned her head towards me to receive it. She stood quietly beside me and wanted as much as I could give. She gave a huge burp which is generally a sign they are enjoying the TTouch and I decided we would proceed to haltering. I thought the sight of a new piece of kit (i.e. the halter) could frighten her, so used the 'snoot loop' a loop made from the catch rope. This is a technique described in Marty McGee Bennett's book, the Camelid Companion. This worked well and from there we were able to progress to haltering.



Fig. 8. Using the nose loop prior to



haltering

At the time of writing this, Jude is by no means perfect, but she is so much calmer and easier to manage that she is a very different animal from the one who arrived.

Fig. 9&10 ...and finally, the halter. Note nose loop still on at this stage.

To conclude I think the key to success in both these cases was that

a) I used no restraint and wrestling with either animal. Alpacas, as we know, are prey animals and us acting like predators in this case triggers their Fear response. For them to learn either to trust us, in Jude's case, or to respect us, in Kira's, they had to be calm when working with them.

b) I used the right tools for the job. I had a catch pen in which to work her. I used the wand and the catch rope so that I could keep my distance from Jude and keep her calm, the TTouch enabled her to relax enough to feel less fear. and then to start haltering her and of course I had my wonderful FFFD!

c) Alpacas are herd animals and pick up the tenor and mood of the rest of the herd and the humans who care for them, I don't grab or restrain any of my alpacas or llamas, so far, I have always been able to find another way. As a consequence my home bred animals are very laid back and teach newcomers to the herd how to behave

d) I took my time and didn't force the pace of anything. It took Jude six months to get to the stage of her standing in the pen quietly and calmly while I haltered her. In total, I probably did less than 3 hours work with

her during that time. I never work for longer than 15 minutes at a time. Kira was also here for over 6 months (waiting for her owner to move and collect her), and had about the same amount of work or possibly less from me.

You can find out more about training, courses and equipment on www.carthveanalpacas.com or contact Julie on taylor.browne@clara.net