Training your alpacas...why bother?
Julie Taylor-Browne, Founder of Camelid Sense.

Have more fun....
When I got my first alpacas I thought it would be easy to build a nice, friendly cooperative relationship with them. After all, I had had dogs, cats and horses....surely they couldn’t be very different? It didn’t take long to find out that they were different enough for me to have to learn how camelids feel about the things that we do to them – and to change the way I did things.

In the process of changing the way I was around them I noticed that they changed in significant ways too. Not only were they better behaved in terms of what I wanted them to do, but they were less frightened, more interested and much more cooperative and engaged in the process of learning new things. They suffered far less stress and had more fun, and do you know what? So did I.

Working with alpacas is a bit of a virtuous circle. Once you have started to work with them in a way that doesn’t scare them, you want to do more, because it is easier, more efficient and more respectful – and it becomes enjoyable for both parties. I enjoy training my weanlings to lead in January...it is fun thing to do in a rather gloomy month. We do the first stages in a pen in my nice dry barn and then we wait for a nice day to do the outside parts. The alpacas enjoy it as they visit new parts of the farm and learn new skills, as we tend to cover a bit of ‘show prep’ at this stage too.
Get out and about
No-one can deny that alpacas are visually appealing animals, they are a great crowd attraction, so in order to promote the breed or their products it is a huge advantage to ‘get them out there’. Last year my alpacas attended a local fete, did a visit to a residential retirement home and raised money at a fete in the grounds of a mental health organization. Friends of mine who are keen breeders, showed their animals at a number of shows, gave a talk at a local society on alpacas, accompanied by their alpacas and did a number of events selling their alpaca duvets and pillows once again accompanied by their animals. Doing this kind of ‘PR’ makes a huge difference to your business and is more interesting for your alpacas than being stuck in a field all the time! Demonstrations of alpacas going through obstacles are always in demand and people seem to love camelid agility competitions even more.

Build your business
Many of the people at these events see alpacas loaded and unloaded into a trailer and walked calmly and quietly to their pens. I usually walk my animals around whatever event is going on, mostly because my animals are so curious and enjoy a good nosey about. Many people will come up and want to stroke them and there may well be unfamiliar noises and sights for the alpaca. In order to build the impression that alpacas can be calm and well behaved, we need to put some effort into preparing them for these events, and if we are breeding and selling alpacas, for when they go to their new homes. When I was a bigger breeder I regularly sold animals to people who had looked around at other herds and bought mine because mine were so much calmer and friendlier. Please note at these events my constant refrain is ‘Alpacas don’t like being touched on the top of their heads, but they do like being stroked on their necks with the back of your hand…..’.
Every time you handle your alpacas you are training them...

If we are too quick, too rough or act too much like a predator we are systematically train our alpacas to be permanently nervous. Once we realize this, we have an incentive to change the way we are doing things. A calm alpaca doesn’t panic, doesn’t kush, doesn’t bolt and in fact, usually behaves just the way we want them too. A calm alpaca is also capable of learning things such as how to walk nicely on a lead rope or how to pick its feet up for toenail trimming. A scared alpaca is really only thinking about how to get away from you and/or whatever else is frightening it and get back to the herd as quickly as possible. This means that it cannot learn – no matter what you do. Whilst I don’t claim that alpacas are the brightest animals on the planet, they are certainly intelligent enough to do everything we require of them and then a whole lot more. Anyone who doubts this should have a look at some of the work Nina Faust (http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL27661A2C3633E0CF) has done with her alpacas and clicker training. Ten years of working as an animal trainer has shown me that the adjectives we apply to alpacas such as ‘stupid’, ‘stubborn’ and ‘difficult’ normally need be turned round and applied to us and the inadequate methods we are using.

My Ten Top Training Tips.

1. Work with your cria in a focused way, but don’t over handle them. Short periods of good handling are a great investment in their behaviour as adults.
2. Handle your animals in a small pen with 1–3 others. This makes them secure as others are there, but they have less space to move about in.
3. Stop grabbing and gripping them! Learn some other techniques, (preferably from me) which involve enlisting your alpaca’s
cooperation. Don’t rely on overpowering them – one day you will meet your match!

4. Take them for interesting walks in advance of their first outing to an event. Always walk in front of them on a loose lead.

5. Geld your non-breeding boys at 18 months. They are much easier to work with when they are not thinking about sex and violence. If you leave it until they are older before gelding, they have often ‘muscled up’ and have learnt that they are stronger and heavier than you!

6. Expose your alpaca to different experiences. Tractors, cars, dogs under control, balloons, candy floss and children in pushchairs are all things they are going to meet at some stage if you take them out. If you get them used to these one at a time you reduce the risk of a ‘melt down’ when they meet them all at once on their first outing!

7. If you are going to show them – prepare them for the experience. The judge may examine your animal from top to bottom – literally. Practice this on your animal and reward them for standing still whilst you are doing this.

8. Work them through obstacles at your farm; this will prepare them for life’s little obstacles off the farm.

9. Train them to load and unload, do this quietly and patiently, time taken at this stage will save much time and stress for all at a later one.

10. Find a more fun way of training your alpacas. Use Tellington Ttouch techniques and/or clicker training for that extra advantage!

You can find out more information on the techniques for doing the above, on training courses and equipment on my website: www.carthveanalpacas.com or contact me: taylor.browne@clara.net.