



PACKING WITH LLAMAS

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You can haul wood with a VW Bug, but why not use a truck? A friend once pointed this out to me when discussing the fact that some people utilize less than appropriate llamas for packing.

I frequently have people contact me wanting more information about packing with llamas. They always want to know what makes a good packer. How much can they expect to pay; where do they find them and much more? There are so many things that go into selecting qualified packers that are a good match for your individual needs.

The first thing you need to know about packing with llamas is that your animal should be at least age 3.5-4 years old prior to putting weight on them. Llamas do not physically mature before this, and if you pack them early, you will only ruin their conformation, compromise their long-term soundness, and you will have no pack llama and a pasture potato to support instead. Secondly, don't assume every llama will pack. Some potential buyers foolishly believe because it is a llama it will pack. That is like assuming every one of us would like to be a plumber. I would venture that about two out of ten llamas are good for packing. This number may even be a bit high.

What is the definition of a good packer? That de-

pends on what your needs are. Are you going out for a day, a week or longer? Do you carry a lot of equipment? Realistically, most llamas carry comfortably 65-75lbs., but some top out at 40-50 lbs. A few really do carry more, but promises of more are usually made by people that do not pack and do not breed pack stock. You have to test for yourself. You also always have to take in mind where you are going. Elevation gain, distance and factors of this nature change how much weight you can expect your llama to pack.

Because everyone's needs are individual, it is foolish to think that a llama's ability can be assessed without unbiased third party trail testing or long proven packing bloodlines. Currently, many long-term packers prefer llamas with a classic coat (abundant guard hair over a very short, sparse undercoat that sheds out heavily each year) for packing. These animals, if kept raked out, can thermoregulate themselves in heat and cold, stay well-protected from insects, sunburn, and rain and are simply more efficient in all different types of weather. True classic coated llamas from proven packing bloodlines are rare. When they are found, you can expect to pay \$1,500 and up for them. Prices depend on quality, bloodlines and more. Training

carries the greatest dollar value, and is a good value for the buyer because it means the llama can be trail-tested. Just because a llama has a classic coat, does not mean it is a good packer or built for it. You as a buyer need to assess the traits and qualities of this animal to figure out if it suits your needs.

There are many breeders that say they breed packers but don't actually pack, and there are also breeders who just want to dump their surplus animals. Try to find long established breeders of quality pack llamas from proven lines that have done well in the type of packing you wish to do. Look at their animals and see if you can ferret out obvious conformation issues that may shorten their packing careers (post leg, fetlock issues, angular deformities and more – see <http://www.nas.com/~jnkllamas/conformation.htm>). Go out on the trail with animals you are interested in buying. Test them in areas similar to what you will be packing in. Are they slow, out of shape, lying down, stopping for rest or holding tension on the lead? How are they on the trail with the pack? Do they rub their equipment on trees, do they balk at logs, do they refuse to cross water (or leap wildly across) or do they quietly follow you through any of the challenges you come across? Do they “get it” after a simple crossing and after that follow you through the next similar challenge on the trail? Your ideal packer will stand quietly for saddling and loading. Then while on the trail, this animal will quietly and ably follow you on a slack lead without eating and without stopping for a rest. Good packers will walk at your pace and cross bridges, streams, downfall and anything else you run across without hesitation.

An equally important part of your investment in a pack llama is good pack equipment. There are

cheap and old systems sold all the time on Craigslist, eBay and other places. Over the years, there has been a lot of improvement in packsaddles and packing equipment. Do your homework before you buy, not only will your llama thank you, but you will have him or her “running on all eight cylinders”. A bad or uncomfortable pack can cause a huge number of performance problems and make a great pack llama seem like a llama that can't even pack.

Some of the older pivot and aluminum frame packs cause unbelievable sores and scarring on llamas. I would highly recommend reading, *Evaluating A Llama Pack For Comfort and Function* by Gwen Ingram. It is an excellent source for finding out about the various popular systems on the market from a long time packing enthusiast. Another excellent

resource for packing equipment and needs is www.llamahardware.com
Happy Trails!

Biography-

Niki Kuklenski and her husband Jeff are very involved with all aspects of owning llamas. They own two ALSA Elite Champions, several ALSA Performance Champions and the 2003 ALSA National Performance Champion. Additionally, they have three Delta Society Therapy Llamas and two PLTA Master Packers. They also own their own classic breeding herd that is proven on the trail and in the show ring. Niki is a 4-H leader, ALSA/ILR Judge and high school substitute teacher. Niki and Jeff drive, show, pack, therapy work and educate with their llamas. Niki's passion is llama history and memorabilia. She spends most of her free time tracking down old pictures and llama owners to help preserve our industry's history.
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