

Driving Info and Myths

By Niki Kuklenski

As a llama driver of over 14 years, I think I have heard nearly everything, and then someone says something to me about driving that makes me shake my head.

Driving a llama is a serious endeavor with many rewards and benefits. A good driving llama is a thrill to own. Unfortunately, through the years there have been a lot of misconceptions and shortcuts that have scared potential drivers away.

Over the years I have trained over a hundred llamas and people on how to train and drive their llamas properly. During that time, many have gone on to successfully win national driving titles and others have had satisfying drivers that could perform in a variety of settings. Many people sadly underestimate the abilities of a good driving llama. Having had the pleasure of owning the four-time National Driving Champion who could perform on the correct lead (like a horse), complete lovely figure eights at a walk, trot and lope, back up stick straight and had the smoothest transitions of any llama, I can attest to this.

Llamas with good equipment and athletic correct conformation are able to cover many miles (8-12 a day) without any issues. These two things are the biggest factors that cause people to have trouble with their driving llamas.

Good equipment that is properly made and fitted for a llama is essential. A llama cannot be expected to perform at this level with pony equipment or a llama set-up that was made by individuals who have not done this kind of driving. The equipment, myself and others that are hardcore drivers use, has gone through many revisions to create a quality product that is comfortable and functional for the llamas who wear it. I personally have worn out three harnesses over the years driving in various situations and terrain.

Llamas need spinal clearance on the surcingle of the harness. We found this out the hard way when some of our driving animals ended up with white spots where the fiber grew back in and sores in that area from the surcingles that rested flat on the back. The only harness that I know of that has the proper spinal clearance is the Flaming Star harness found at www.llamahardware.com.



A llama cart should have the proper balance so that when the driver is seated in the cart, less than five pounds of weight is resting on the surcingle from the shafts. Carts with 26" wheels are safer as they are harder to tip than the smaller wheels, plus they are easier for the llama to pull. There should be ample clearance between the llama's back legs and the cart basket area. Llama carts should have a swivel tree that the traces on the harness attach to allowing the breast strap to remain stationary and not chafe across the chest. The shafts of the cart must be level (horizontal to the ground and never pointing downward) and hit the llama about mid body. The tips of the shafts should not stick out further than about a half a foot from the llama's body, and never be so short that they could jab the llama's shoulder when turning.

All of the individuals I drive with use a single easy entry cart called "The Eagle" cart. This cart is not only beautiful, but also very functional. It can go from the show ring to the river and trails. The cart is well balanced and comfortable for llamas of all sizes. It is the industry standard for driving with all but one of the National Champions utilizing it since 2000. It has a 42" axle; wide enough for a stable ride and narrow enough to get through most gates. Would you believe it floats



which is when they are done growing usually and are ready to work. Males, geldings and females can all be great drivers. It is usually much easier to work on stopping a llama that wants to go, than to have one that won't walk up. Sometimes the mellowest llamas are the worst drivers, as they won't go! The type of driving llama you want depends on your comfort level and what kind of driving you want to do. Some people are not comfortable training their own llamas and would prefer to buy one. It all depends on what your abilities are.

I have done driving clinics all over the world, driven some exceptional driving llamas and coached some of the top drivers in

too? We have taken this cart in the rivers around where I live. The frame is powder coated and the seats are covered with marine vinyl fabric. The axle will flip below the frame to increase height approximately two inches for taller llamas. The shafts remove and there are shaft bags available (www.Llamahardware.com) for storage and transport. There is also a line of accessories like bags for your cart to hold goodies and more. I personally don't sell these carts, but did give a lot of input for its design based on my driving experiences. Contact www.llamatopia.com for more information on the Eagle cart.



the country. The current judges trainings for both show associations have my training materials that I wrote. With my own llamas, I probably drive 150-200 miles in a summer. We drive on trails, in rivers, the show ring and most recently one of my driving llamas was Cinderella's carriage in the local high school production. My current herd has four driving llamas and we are training others. Driving is HIGHLY addictive and very relaxing. Happy trails!

About the Author:

Niki Kuklenski and her husband Jeff are very involved with all aspects of owning llamas. They own two ALSA Elite Champions, several ALSA/ILR Performance and Halter Champions and the 2003 ALSA National Performance Champion. Additionally, they have two Delta Society Therapy Llamas. Niki is an ALSA/ILR Judge and middle & 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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In my personal experience, I have not encountered a highly successful driving team of llamas. For the type of driving I do, they just don't perform like a single driving llama. I also honestly, do not aspire to the drive-in-a-weekend program of throwing a new llama between two semi-trained ones. Most of the time this has dismal results with the end result being an untrained llama. The most successful driving llamas I know and have encountered, were trained with ground driving and good old-fashioned training time. By putting time into your llama, you are establishing a relationship and learning your llamas quirks and habits. It also allows you to establish your relationship with them so when you encounter a dog or some unforeseen situation, you will have their trust. This trust is a huge safety advantage when driving your llama outside an arena.

Llamas should be at least 3.5-4 years old before they do any serious driving. Just like with packing,