

How to Ruin a Llama or Alpaca.....

Over my 30+ years of ownership, training, 4-H/FFA projects and more, I have learned many things about these amazing animals. During this time, I have also seen a fair amount of animals start as amazing show, therapy, youth projects and more, ruined in a matter of a few years. People tend to forget that because they are tolerating what we ask, doesn't mean they are enjoying some of the things we ask of them. If there is one thing I've learned and that is moderation is key to an enduring and healthy relationship with Camelids.

Unfortunately, the main model of ownership in the camelid industries has been to sell pregnant females, breeding pairs, babies, etc. for youth projects and more. As a person who has done rescue for many years, I can tell you this model often times does not pan out well. New people tend to either over handle babies (Afterall, how could something that adorable turn out to be aggressive and mean?) or don't handle them enough for routine work. These animals as young adults (Age 2-3 usually) will sometimes turn into aggressive adults or are feral from lack of handling. Rescue groups frequently get the calls about animals that owners can't deal with or that have become scary for the owners. These types of animals require special placement or have to be euthanized for safety reasons.

Youth handling young camelids can end badly unless there is careful supervision and monitoring of the amount of time and work the youth do with them. Through the years, I have taken in and rehabilitated numerous burned out youth llamas. Llamas that were drug over obstacles over and over again, despite having done it right the first time. Kids that hang on them every day like a set of well-loved Legos, never turns out well. Camelids generally enjoy a good hike/walk, driving, etc. and I try to shake up what I do with probably 3-5 walks to every time I work on obstacles. There is a fine line of respecting these animals for who they are and forcing them to do things they don't want to do to excess.

I ruined my first batch of babies I had born on my farm. Yes, I drug them to many shows, and did lots and lots of halter and obstacle work with them. What I learned out of that was to adjust my expectations and amount of redundant work I did with them. I now take younger or newer animals to events for the first time and enter them in only a halter class and maybe a fleece class. I do this for the whole first year of their new show career. When we are at events, I take them out for walks or I show them and put them right back in their stall. I do not keep my llamas out for extended periods of time, nor do I allow people to do anything out of reasonable

expectations to my animals. After learning the hard way, I now wait until my babies are age 2-3 most of the time before I start showing them. I never allow youth to use my young animals either. The few times I have done this, the result has been a cranky and pushy adult.

I do a lot of therapy work with my llamas. Currently, I have 6 I use for this work and which llama I take depends on the scenario. Some of my llamas enjoy more one on one and quiet work. I have llamas that are very interactive and not much phases them. When doing this work, I am cognizant of what will be asked of them in a period of time. If they will be going to shows, fairs, etc. my visits during that time frame will be with animals that are not attending those extended events. When on actual visits with my llamas, I keep it down to 1-2 hours depending on the experience of the animal and their enjoyment level. If they are off or are not enjoying the interaction, I cut it short. When the visit is over and we get back to the farm, there is usually a reward of grazing on green grass or a bit of grain.

Camelids on the whole are herd animals that prefer the comfort of their pasture and minimal interactions. If handled carefully and respectfully, they can be versatile and happy for many years in other situations. A camelid that is respectful and happy while doing activities off the farm is more enjoyable for their owner! Over the years I have been fortunate to learn a lot of lessons that have made me a better handler and owner!

Niki Kuklenski and her husband Jeff are very involved with all aspects of owning llamas. They have owned two ALSA Elite Champions, many ALSA/ILR Performance and Halter Champions. Additionally, they have 6 Pet Partners Registered Therapy Llamas and 1 Miniature Therapy Horse. Several of their classic llamas are also PLTA certified packers. Niki is an ALSA/ILR Halter, Youth, Performance and Fiber Judge. Her day job is as a middle & high school substitute teacher by choice. Niki and Jeff drive, show, pack, therapy, rescue 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 history.

www.jnkllamas.com info@jnkllamas.com 360-592-2603

