

Training for Packing

Basic Training

(Excerpted from Charlie Hackbarth's book *Tales of the Trail*)

You place your pack saddles on the fence rail, enter the catch pen, and close the gate. Curly and Moe, your new llamas, give you their complete attention. They have been through the catching process just often enough to know that it is something to be avoided. They stand alert, wide-eyed, and motionless.

Like their previous owner, you take a halter in your hand, spread your arms wide, and amble toward them. Seeing this giant albatross in motion, Curly and Moe retreat to the far end of the catch pen. You work them into the corner and slowly tiptoe up for the catch. They charge past you to freedom. You pursue them to another corner and they charge by again. This continues until your blood pressure rises to the level at which your fear of being run over subsides. You let Curly fly by, but with the reflexes of a cutting horse you step in front of Moe. He changes direction and you cut him off again. In a tremulous voice you tell him to stand; for an instant nobody moves while you both catch your breath. Moe makes a few more escape attempts, but you've got his number and he knows it. You move closer and cautiously put your arm around his neck, then slowly raise the halter toward his nose. He leans away from you and elevates his nose out of your reach. You place your hand along the other side of his face to bring his head toward you and scoop his nose into the noseband. But after an giving you an accidental head butt, Moe wheels away from your tentative grip and spins you into a staggering pirouette. Dazed, you complete your performance with a bow to one knee, whispering, "Toto, am I in Kansas?"

You might be in Kansas, but more likely you're only in a state of ignorance. You just brought the packs out a little prematurely, that's all. Llamas do make great pack animals, but there are some things that you and your llamas need to learn before packing can happen. If you're up for an encore, you can stay in the ring and continue to train your llamas the hard and fast way. If you survive the full fifteen rounds, you will be a competent, confident llama wrangler, able to handle any situation that comes up on the trail. Or you may be thinking, "There's got to be an easier way!"

Of course, if you are a complete novice, the quickest way to learn is to buy a book on the how-to's of llama packing and then sign up for a pack clinic to get some hands-on instruction about the process. If you have purchased older llamas that lack basic training or if you are starting off with young, completely untrained llamas, you will need to educate yourself so that you can properly train them. Although llamas are very intelligent, training any animal correctly takes time and patience, especially for the beginner. If I am the only source of basic llama training information that you can afford, that is unfortunate. I am from the old school, where pirouettes and face plants in the training pen are considered character-building prerequisites for the trail, and I still believe that there is some merit to that school of thought. However, I must admit that the older I get the more valid the modern methods seem to be.

I've heard so many people say things like, "I don't put the breeching strap on my llama" or "I don't touch him here or there because he doesn't like that." If your llama is afraid of something, all the more reason to show him that he has no reason for fear. If you let your llama have his way because you lack the courage to confront the problem, you

Training for Packing

will most likely end up with more behavioral problems. Good pack llamas are capable of amazing things, much more than most people realize. Don't baby them.

No matter what method of training you use, it is important to work with your llama on a regular basis. In other words, don't put your llama through basic training school and then turn him out to pasture until it is time to vaccinate. The more you work with your animals the more they will trust you, which means they will become better companions and easier, safer animals to care for.

You might feel overwhelmed after you receive your training manual, so to help keep you on track, I'm going to give you a list of what I believe your llama should know before you bring out the pack equipment:

- Desensitize the head. If you can put your hands on your llama's head, face, and ears, you have taken a major step in building trust and you will eliminate possible catching and haltering problems later on in your training.
- Train your llama to lead on a slack lead. You are defeating your purpose if you have to drag a lazy pack llama up the trail. It is tiring and frustrating, and sometimes stems from poor early training practices. Use an obstacle course when training your llama to lead, simulating things that you might encounter on the trail such as going around trees, over bridges, and through deadfall.
- Desensitize the body. If you can put your hands on your llama's back, rear, and sternum (the callused area between and slightly behind the front legs) and belly area without him moving around, kicking, or lying down, then the saddling process will be a "cinch."
- Desensitize the legs and feet. Training a llama to allow you to pick up his legs and feet is probably the most time-consuming part of the basic training process, which explains why this step is so often neglected. If you take the time to leg-train your llama, he won't kick, lie down, or move around when you are trying to saddle. In addition, toenails can be trimmed without having to use a chute, and foot and leg injuries on the trail can be treated without a rodeo.
- Train to load in a trailer and/or a pickup truck.
- Train to the picket (tie-out) line.
- Have a competent Boy Scout teach your llama to read a compass. This usually takes longer than leg training, but it is well worth it if you can't master the skill yourself.

When you have completed these steps, you will feel (and be) confident and in control. Then it's time to bring out the packs.

Training for Packing

Desensitizing Your Llama for the Pack

After your llama has been halter and lead trained and you are ready to desensitize for the pack:

- Tie your llama short to the fence to limit his/her movement.
- Start on your llama's left side in a non-sensitive area (the shoulder or upper ribs).
- Place your left hand on your llama's shoulder and use the palm of your right hand to pat. Reverse the hand position when you are training from the right side.
- Pat in one place (at a relatively firm and fast pace) until your llama accepts the pat.
- If your llama is standing still, move your pat hand 6 inches and begin again.
- If he swings his rear-end into you or moves away from you, move with him while continuing to pat. I call this "dancing with your llama."
- It is important to keep patting while you dance.
- When he stops moving (about 30 pats), move your hand six inches and pat again.
- Cover the entire barrel area from the sternum area (where the front cinch will be placed) to the pineal sheath and flank area (where the rear cinch will be placed).
- Avoid touching the front legs during the initial patting. Later you can edge up and connect with the back part of the front legs.
- If your llama kicks when you are patting the flank area, continue to pat until he stops. This is a great training method to correct a kicking habit.
- When you've covered the left side of your llama, go to the right side and repeat the process.
- Use the same method to desensitize both front and rear legs. Start high and move toward the ground. You'll need to move an inch at a time for the legs. Back up an inch or two when he moves his leg, and start from that point until reach and can pick up his foot.
- Repeat this process in the next few days to reinforce your training.
- Now you can start the saddling process. Pat your way to the cinch until your llama gets used to the process.

Training for Packing

The Gear

(Excerpted from Charlie Hackbarth's book *Tales of the Trail*)

Let's say, for the sake of my continuing on, that you have read and have acted upon almost every word that I have written so far. Some of you have gone against my advice and bought a couple of untrained, untested llamas, but that's OK. I realize that while there may be enough proven pack llamas out there to supply the people who do follow my advice, the fact is that both proven packers and people who follow my advice are in short supply. In any case, you have found a pair of llamas that show every indication of being great packers. You have followed the advice given in the training books and/or clinics and found some things that worked for you and some that didn't. It's nice to know that neither you nor your llamas were messed up for life because of something you did or didn't do. You have pirouetted your way through at least one successful "Curly and Moe boot camp" and now there is no question about your character, which is something that those who bought trained pack llamas may not have yet had the opportunity to test. Basic training is over, you feel confident and in control and ready to join the few... the proud... the llama packers of the world. It's time to talk about packs.

Selecting the Saddle

Selecting a pack can be almost as confusing as selecting a llama for packing. Most pack outfits have basically two parts: the saddle and the panniers. The saddle (with pad and rigging) is the most important piece of the outfit because it is the foundation for the load. The load is carried in two bags, called panniers, which attach to the saddle. That sounds simple enough, but there are some things you need to know and some questions you'll need to ask so that you can choose the outfit that best fits your needs—and, more importantly, best fits your llama.

The questions most commonly asked before purchasing a pack outfit remind me of the questions I asked before I bought LLarry, my first pack llama. The most common, of course, is this:

Which saddle type is the best?

There are many llama saddle designs being used on llamas today, but when all is said and done it boils down to two basic types that I classify as "costal" and "frame." Within these two broad saddle types there are varying degrees of fit, comfort, and convenience. *Webster's Dictionary* defines costal (kos' t'l) as being of or near a rib or the ribs. Add "and spine" to the end of that and, for our purposes, you have it. Probably the best example of a costal type saddle is the South American costal, which no doubt has been around longer than *Webster's Dictionary*.

The costal pack consists of a large sack woven from llama wool that is draped over the llama's back and tied on with a wool rope called a sogá. South Americans have not deviated from the costal for many, many years, probably because the materials and the means of making it have been available for many, many years. The advantage of the costal is that it is uncomplicated, lightweight, and inexpensive. The disadvantage is that it limits the amount of weight that can comfortably be carried because the weight is draped directly over the llama's prominent spine. Pressure on the spine is uncomfortable and,

Training for Packing

because the load is hanging on the back muscles on each side of the spine rather than being supported by them, the llama has to work harder to carry it. The load is also hard to keep in place, which tires the llama as well as the handler, who must constantly adjust it.

A llama saddle remains a costal type until it has a framework capable of supporting a heavy load on the back muscles without allowing a collapse onto the spine. An example of a frame-type saddle is the cross-buck pack saddle used on more traditional pack animals in North America. However, as far as I know, it isn't a requirement that a frame be made of wood or a rigid material—only that it be substantial enough to support and carry the load on the back muscles without collapsing on the spine. This means that at least a semi-rigid form will probably be necessary. The advantage of a well-designed, well-fitting frame saddle is that heavier loads can be kept more stable and are easier and more comfortable to carry. The disadvantage of a poorly-designed frame-type saddle, especially one made of rigid materials, is that it can be more uncomfortable than a costal-type saddle and just as hard to keep in place.

The saddle that best fits and most comfortably supports the load on the back muscles is the best saddle. Beyond that, durability and convenience are important considerations. Things you may want to ask yourself and the manufacturer are:

- Are the materials used in the saddle dense enough?
- Is the spacing above and beside the spine more than adequate enough to keep the saddle from touching the spine under a heavy load?
- Is the area where the saddle contacts the llama's back large enough to support a heavy load without causing discomfort, bruising, or sores? If rigid frame materials are straight, the saddle will bridge across the curve of the llama's back, making contact only at each end of the bridge and creating pressure at those points. The more contact the frame makes with the supporting back muscles, the more evenly the weight is being distributed. The better the saddle fits, the more comfortable it will be and the better it will stay in place.
- Will the llama's shoulders move freely when the saddle is loaded, and do rigid materials curve away from the llama to prevent digging and bruising?
- Assuming the frame fits properly, is the pad that goes under the frame adequate? Is it dense enough to cushion the load and absorb the shock during a jump?
- Do you have the option of buying a functional chest strap and breeching with the saddle? This rigging will help keep your saddle in place going up and down steep inclines while carrying a full load. Although some packers get by without using the chest strap and breeching, if you are going into steep country I recommend that you and your llamas learn to use them—especially if you are in your first years of packing. A chest strap is also important when you are leading in a string from saddle to saddle—it will keep the saddle from being stripped off the rear of your llama.
- Is the saddle durable enough for the uses that you have in mind?
- Is there any kind of guarantee offered if, after having checked out the saddle, you are not happy with its comfort factor or performance?
- How much does it cost? I've heard people express on occasion that they paid more for their pack outfit than they did for their llama. If you are one of these people, you either got a good deal on your llama or you bought an untrained llama or a

Training for Packing

llama of poor quality. A proven pack llama generally will be more expensive than one that hasn't been proven. The same is true of a llama pack, or anything else for that matter. Most llama pack manufactures are honest people who have spent a lot of time and money doing something that they believe in and enjoy. They are llama owners who think very highly of their llamas. Their businesses are small, and I'm pretty sure that no one gets rich from the sales of llama pack equipment. Changes in design and materials need to be made in order to improve any product, and each change is an additional expense. Some packs on the market are very good, some are satisfactory, and some are cheap copies or poorly thought-out designs that should not be used because they could seriously injure a llama. If you can't afford the pack outfit that you have determined to be the best for you and your llama, purchase it piece by piece until you have the complete outfit. That makes more sense (cents) than buying an outfit that is not suited for packing and then having to replace the outfit, or possibly even your llama.

- How much does it weigh? As with the llama, you'll want to be aware of extremes. I would suspect an extremely lightweight pack saddle of not having enough substance to comfortably support the load being carried. At the same time, as saddle weight increases, the amount of weight that can be carried in the panniers decreases. Most saddle, pad, and pannier combinations designed for overnight packing weigh in the neighborhood of ten to fifteen pounds. However, I would rather carry fifty pounds on a comfortable functional pack outfit that weighs thirty pounds than carry seventy pounds on an ill-fitting pack outfit that weighs five pounds and is soreing my llama and wearing me out trying to keep it on his back. Ask yourself whether or not the outfit is within reasonable weight limits and whether it could comfortably support a hundred-pound load if need be.
- How much will the outfit carry? Usually what is meant by this question is: How big are the panniers? A llama is only capable of carrying so much weight or bulk. In general, if you are looking at a llama from the side, a full pannier should hang within the area of the llama's trunk. Panniers that are too big or the wrong proportion or do not hang properly from the saddle will affect the way the load rides, which will affect your llama's comfort and efficiency. Ask yourself:
 - Are the panniers sized to fit a llama, and are they designed so that the load within them can be carried as efficiently as possible? More specifically, are the panniers designed horizontally to match the trunk of the llama's body? If the panniers have too much vertical length or they are hung too low, the load will sway or rock from side to side.
 - Is the pannier design so wide that the load will be hanging too far away from the center of gravity? This means your llama will have to work harder and your load will not ride as solidly as when it is compressed closer to the llama. Some panniers have compression straps that pull the load in closer to the llama.
 - Is there a means of tying the panniers down to keep them in place when your llama takes a jump? This will also help stabilize the forward and rearward motion of the panniers.

Training for Packing

- Are the panniers durable? Most panniers are made of materials that will hold up under normal outdoor use if they are sewn properly.
- What colors do they come in? I suppose this is a perfectly valid question. If you are concerned about your physical health, you might be interested in knowing whether the odds of survival are greater outfitting your pack string in camouflage to appease the visual pollution advocates or in neon orange in hopes of surviving the upcoming hunting season. Actually, you do have an option here. You can buy more subtle colors and accessorize with neon orange rain covers and/or neckbands for your llamas during hunting season and the odds are fifty/fifty you will survive both seasons. If you're concerned about your mental health, consider getting each outfit in a different color to avoid confusing yourself when packing up several different pannier sets for the same trip. Also, some colors show dirt more than others, although most panniers can be washed.
- Is simpler better? Don't buy a llama pack just because it looks simple to use. There is a learning process that has to take place in order to get a fully loaded llama to the top of the mountain with the least amount of effort, and putting on the pack is just the first step. It may seem complicated and take longer at first to try to figure out where all those straps go, but before long you will realize that there is a reason for having them and you will save yourself frustration and time by learning to use them.

Accepting the Saddle

I will begin by assuming that your llama has been trained to halter and lead, and his body has been somewhat desensitized to your touch. Brushing him will help desensitize, and should be done before saddling to clear the wool of sticks and burrs that could irritate or sore his back or belly. If he is not used to you putting your hands on his upper legs, belly, and sternum area, you will need to work on that a little before bringing out the saddle. I do this by patting the llama with my hand until he is accustomed to my hand being in a certain area. Start high on his sides and pat in the same place until he accepts your hand, then slowly work around his barrel until you have covered his entire underside where the cinches might make contact. Work from both sides of your llama. Once you have desensitized your llama so that he will stand comfortably (more detail on page 3), bring out the saddle along with the instructions on its specific use. Disregard the following instructions when you feel that yours are clearer or more appropriate for the saddle you are using. Continue to work in a confined area throughout the saddle-training period, and avoid obstacles and other challenges until your llama gets used to the pack outfit.

Establish the front and rear of the saddle, disconnect the chest strap and breeching, and make sure that your cinches are set up to accommodate saddling from the llama's left side. If you are a non-conformist you may saddle from the right side, or even from the rear if you want to make things really difficult. It's just easier to keep the rigging organized for the next person if you saddle from the "universal" left side. Pre-adjust the cinches to the size of your llama; you will probably guess wrong, but it's a good drill and

Training for Packing

if you're right, you've saved yourself some time and your llama some unnecessary agitation at this stage of the training.

Flip the cinches upside-down across the top of the saddle so that they are out of the way. Set the saddle and pad on your llama's back. If the saddle and pad are separate, just use the pad at first. Go on and off with it several times, then move it around on his back a little and rub it to make a little noise. Hold on to the saddle or pad during this process in case he tries to get rid of it. When he is standing comfortably, position the saddle for saddling. When in place, the front cinch will come across the sternum. The cinch strap coming from the saddle will be one to one-and-a-half inches behind the llama's elbow. Carefully lower the cinches over the opposite side. If his lower legs haven't been desensitized, he will probably get a little excited if the cinches make contact with his legs. Keep a hold on the saddle in case he jumps around, and remove it if necessary. Even when your llama is calm, continue holding onto the saddle with your left hand in case he moves around. Reach under the llama and find the front cinch with your right hand and connect the buckle. As you draw the cinch tight, push the wool away from the cinch buckle. Tighten the front cinch enough to keep the saddle from slipping around your llama. Follow the same procedure with the rear cinch, which will angle as far back as possible, bringing it directly in front of the penile sheath or udder. Adjust the strap that connects the two cinches in order to keep the rear cinch from moving any further back (you may want to estimate the adjustment at this point and make the physical adjustment when the saddle is off the llama).

The cinching process gets much easier with practice. Keep your head out of reach of the back feet in case your llama tries to strike forward. After he gets used to the cinching process, you can tighten the cinches as required. A common mistake for the beginner is not getting the front cinch tight enough. The front cinch needs to be tight when your llama is fully loaded. If it is tightened properly, it should be difficult to get your hand between the cinch strap and the llama. The rear cinch should fit snugly.

Test your saddle by pulling down on the side, as well as back and forth from front to rear. It should be difficult to move the saddle in any direction. When you have saddled, walk your llama around and let him get used to it. There is usually little reaction to the saddle once it is in place. Practice saddling a few times until you both get the hang of it. Make any adjustments while the saddle is off.

Chest Strap and Breeching

The chest strap and breeching are used to insure that the loaded saddle does not move forward or rearward on steep inclines. They also help to stabilize the side-to-side motion of the load. Although these straps may seem complicated, once you and your llama become familiar with them it will be easier to use them than not to. The chest strap and breeching are particularly useful to the novice who doesn't always get the cinches tightened properly or doesn't pack up the ideal load. Their use will cut your frustration level and increase your llama's comfort.

Start with the chest strap. Simply clip it into the saddle at the appropriate places and center it across the llama's chest between the windpipe and the shoulder joint. Be careful if you duck under your llama's neck to get to the other side; if he isn't used to this, he may panic and rear, injuring you both in the process. Tighten the chest strap snugly.

Training for Packing

Don't use the excuse that "my llama doesn't like the breeching so I'm not going to make him wear it." He will like your fully loaded saddle riding on his shoulders far less, and he will quickly get used to wearing the breeching. Begin by standing at your llama's left side with the breeching completely disconnected from the saddle. Once you and your llama get used to the process, you may choose to leave the chest strap and breeching connected to the left side of the saddle throughout the entire cinching process, but for now the fewer things you have in the way the better.

Connect the breeching per your instructions. Adjust the breeching so that it is plenty long—you don't want to end up short on the other side when you get there. Holding the end of the breeching, walk around the rear of your llama and attach the strap to the other side. Be sure to give him plenty of room, just in case he decides to kick. He may swing his rear toward you when you start around with the strap, which just makes it easier. Adjust the breeching straps on his rump and connect the diagonal breeching straps if you have them.

The perfect placement for the breeching is where the testicles used to be on a gelded male and below the genitalia on an intact male or a female. Tighten the straps that connect the breeching to the saddle and walk your llama around to get him used to the breeching. He will dance and possibly kick a bit at first. Repeat the entire process until you are both comfortable with it.

The Panniers

Begin with empty panniers and go easy at first. If your llama appears to be nervous, hold a pannier against the saddle and brush your hand across it to make a little noise until he gets used to it. Attach the panniers and secure them so that if he jumps or bucks the panniers will not flop or fall off and upset him further. Walk around for a bit and, when he feels comfortable, add a couple of pillows to each pannier. Rub the panniers with your hands to get him used to the foreign object on his back and protruding from his sides. If you have a rain cover, carefully lay it across the top of the panniers and rub it to make some noise. When you feel comfortable, take him through some obstacles such as a series of small jumps and a smooth post/tree slalom course where the panniers can rub without getting hung up. Avoid taking your llama through narrow gate openings or obstacles where the panniers could get hung up. This could cause your llama to panic, creating a potentially dangerous situation—not to mention the destruction of your pack outfit.

Next, begin adding bulk and weight to the panniers and take him for a short hike. Hike on a trail or in a large pasture or fenced area where there are some water crossings to go through and some brush to rub up against. Jump a log or two and go for a short run. Allow saddle straps to touch his legs. Anything to prepare him for what lies ahead. When taking the pack outfit off, just go in reverse order. You're set to go packing, now, and the more you go the easier it gets for both you and your llama.