The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Driving Llamas

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Llamas by the Llakes

Cohutta, GA

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We have all marveled at one time or another, seeing a driving llama being put through the paces of driving. Maybe we wished to be the one sitting in the cart driving that llama. Perhaps the key for each one of us to arrive at the point of driving and sitting in the cart is out ability to identify the habits and traits that make for an effective driving llama. The truth of the matter is the foundation of llama driving lays in the skills and talents of the individual llama. Just because we have one or more male llamas out in the barn of pasture that we’d like to do something else with beside feed, does not mean that they are prime candidates to drive.

Not long ago, I was reading a book about the unique qualities and abilities that distinguish one individual from one another. The author identified the habits, skills and talents that individuals had acquired that propelled them to great success. I don’t want to make this article a book review by any means, but there are certain human traits that are recognizabilt as qualities for success. In much the same way, we can distinguish a successful driving llama from other llamas bu certain characteristics that driving llmas strongly possess, that their fellow llamas seemingly don’t possess. The reasons for this certainly will vary widely from llama to llama. I thought after many years of training and working with llamas, and more specifically driving llamas, that we might review “The Habits and Tendencies of Highly Effective Llamas.”

**Lineage**

Historically, llama driving for all intents and purposes has been practiced in North America for about 30 years now. During this time, many of the more successful driving llamas have come from certain lineages. Certainly, it isn’t to say that other llamas from outside this group have not been successful, of course they have. On the other hand, several males and females from these bloodlines have shown the ability to be successful driving animals, and for whatever reason, these traits and abilities passed on to a large percentage of their offspring. Although this is not meant to be a study of why these groups have consistently produced driving llamas, it might be interesting to track. This concept or line of reasoning is not unprecedented. In other groups of animals, it has been well documented that certain breeds have indeed shown a higher degree of ability to perform as a driving animal. Numerous examples do exist. Perhaps we are unknowingly or knowingly beginning to select for those traits we feel best exhibit what a driving llama should be.

Some llama owners have made an effort to find offspring from driving lines in order to have a jump start in their training efforts. In those cases where they have selected offspring from proven driving animals that have been very successful for the most part. Again, this isn’t to discount other successful llamas that drive from other groups or backgrounds.

**Personality**

Personality is always a fundamental ingredient in the success of a driving llama. Certainly other factors have an important part in the formula. But if the llama doesn’t have that right mix of personality traits none of the other factors we discuss will matter. The lack of any of the fundamental traits will actually cancel out or have a negative effect on all the other factors and result in failure. You might liken this to an old wagon wheel with the wooden spokes and the hub in the center. Personality and temperament of the llama is like the hub of the wheel. The spokes that extend from the hub are the other traits or driving skills. If you don’t have the hub of the wheel (the personality) the spokes (the other driving skills) have no support and the wheel will fail.

**Age**

This isn’t as critical as some might think. I have known llamas to learn these skills as young as 12 months and as old as 11 or 12 years. Other factors as mentioned are far more important. Young llamas can begin learning basic skills as young as 8 months of age. Such things as carrying small items on their back, being out in the public, cars, dogs, people, etc… These are all skill that will be useful much later in their training. Older llamas are often more settled and more willingly to learn new skills that younger animals who are still trying to find their place in the herd.

**Size**

Today llamas are found in a variety of shapes and sizes. Twenty or thirty years ago llamas were generally more uniform in size and shape. Diversity is certainly key in the llama world today. Llama breeding has begun to evolve where we have much more of a selection and a variety of fiber types. But the issue of size when considering a driving llama is not always a critical one or the most critical one. Certainly, if all the other factors were equal then you would want a big, large boned llama. Our reasoning for this, of course, is that a large boned llama should have more power and giddy-up if and when should need it. On the other hand, if the harness and cart are properly sized and fitted to the llama most of the weight of the passengers is handled by the cart and not the llama. Thus, the smaller boned or smaller sized llamas do a fine job driving.

**Gender**

Just as size isn’t a determining factor neither is the gender of the llama generally a factor affecting whether a llama can drive or not. Other questions however do come up from time to time regarding gender. This includes whether males should be gelded prior to driving. As with most things there is no hard and fast rule regarding gelding driving male llamas. I have seen both intact and gelded males work in the harness just fine. And this has been in a variety of driving conditions including with other intact males, females, etc… No problem.

Female llamas also make very good driving llamas. Some females are unable to produce crias and as a result, find their way as a driving llama. But most females because of responsibilities back at the barn are not used for driving if they are tending to the crias.

**Skill Level of the Driver**

Rule number one for the new llama driver (not the llama) is that there is more to it, than just jumping in the sear, grabbing the reins and hanging on for the ride. Training is a two-way street for not only the llama, but the person sitting on the sear and holding those reins. If you don’t know what you’re doing, how is the llama going to learn? Preparation on your part is critical for you to be successful and for your llama to have a positive training experience. If you have other individuals who drive in your area ask for advice. There are also driving books available and videos that are very useful and provide helpful tips and pointers.

**Moving Out**

The term “moving out” in the driving world refers to a llama’s willingness to move forward when asked. Simply speaking, when you ask him to walk on, he does so without being pushed, shoved lead etc… A llama that moves out when asked generally means he has been well trained, the driver and llama are working well together and, most importantly the llama is enjoying the driving experience. Conversely, llamas that don’t move out when asked need more training and work and it may be an indicator that they are not enjoying the driving experience and more importantly not suitable as a driving candidate.

Certainly the skills of a driving llama are unique above all other llama skills in the llama world. Driving skills demand training, communication, team work, time patience and many others. This small list of seven items is certainly not all inconclusive, but includes some of the most important elements for the beginning driving llama and driver. In many ways these represent the hub of the wheel that the spokes depend on for support. Because of this, the llama you select must be up to the demands and requirements of the task of driving for you to be successful. Selecting a driving llama takes time, work, and often, some research.