

Click and Pack

By Laurie Mollin, Shangrila Llamas

Before learning the Click and Reward method of working with my llamas, our little red training pack sat in the basement collecting dust. Then we met some wonderful new llama people at a LAMAS conference a few years ago, Tim and Donna Parkman. They were looking for trained pack llamas.

Harry told them we had the perfect boy for them. He was right that Coffee Bean had the potential to be a good pack llama, because of his temperament, but he had never seen a pack. He had been Clicker trained though. The Parkman's said they wanted to come see him, so I had to get to work.

The last time I had tried to put that pack on one of our boys there was a rodeo. The most important thing I have learned from Clicker training is to break things down into steps. And that one way doesn't work with all llamas. They each have their own strengths and weaknesses to work with or through. Coffee Bean did great so the Parkman's bought him and Santiago and then later Domino.

This summer Mike Nicks came to look for a companion for his male llama. He couldn't decide on one of the three boys we had for sale so he purchased all three. He was about to go on a trip and asked us to keep them for a couple of weeks. He also mentioned he would like to train them to pack so I offered to work with them until he picked them up.

With Raphael it was something of a non-event. He'll do anything for a click and reward. I loosely tied him to a fence and had him target the pack. He sniffed it. I clicked and rewarded. I put it on his back. I clicked and rewarded. I buckled the cinches. I clicked and rewarded. We went for a walk with the pack on his back. The other two were not quite so easy.

Hercules was scared of the pack, so the entire first session was targeting the pack. The second session he did the rest of the steps. Vichyssoise was fine up until the cinching process. So I asked Deirdre to help and I took pictures. Between each step she is clicking and rewarding. Deirdre has put on the pack and taken it off at least five times within this session. So you are seeing Vichy tied at different places of the deck. This is an important step. The point is to get him comfortable with the pack and the process of putting on the pack no matter where he is tied.



1. Vichyssoise has already touched the pack with his nose (targeting) and clicked and rewarded, so he learns the pack is a good thing.

2. The next step is to have them stand still for you to place the pack on their back. Repeat this step with a click and reward each time.



Click and Pack (continued)

3. At this step he is just getting used to having the pack on his back with the cinches dangling. You could pick up the pack and put it back down. Click him for not reacting.



4. Deirdre is reaching for the cinch. She will pull it up and let it drop with a click and reward until he is comfortable with this step.



5. Now she is holding it tight against his belly to get him used to that. You can see his ears are back showing concern, but he's not moving around. Again you click for that.



6. Each time Deirdre went through these steps, she went a little faster and gave less clicks. Eventually he stood for the whole thing and just got clicked at the end.



Let me interject here that we are not packers. We do not do llama treks and we know there is a lot more to packing than this. But this is the first step. Also you don't have to go on llama treks to justify training your llama to carry a pack. Deirdre puts a pack on her llama Matador when we go down the 1/2 mile of our driveway to pick up Harry's Sunday paper. She also just used this pack with a banner attached in a parade that she and Matador participated in.

Most llamas accept a pack willingly with very little training. The reason to consider using the click and reward method is to make it a "good thing" to carry a pack, because they get rewarded for it. So they see that pack and know they are going to get some more food.

Click and Pack (continued)

7. After you get the pack on take them for a walk and get them used to hanging around with the pack on. Click and reward them for being good, not reacting to new stuff.



8. The final step is to stand still as you take the pack off. This may involve unloading the packs. Some packs have separate panniers, A saddle and pad.



9. The first time you unbuckle the cinch and it drops down you may have a reaction. So be prepared and reward them for standing still. Slowly take the pack off their back.



10. The end. (Sorry, couldn't resist.)



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