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## ■ Understanding Male Behavior... In the Alpaca

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hile I AM married to one, I make no claims to understand the behavior of the two-legged male. I do, however, feel pretty safe offering some tips about the four-legged, camelid variety.

Boys and girls of any species are different, that is for sure. The person who says that alpacas are always quiet and peaceful, only has girls. For

the most part alpacas ARE quiet, but boys in the midst of a disagreement are hardly shrinking violets. Breeding males of any species present challenges, and require more thoughtful and deliberate management. Breeding males are territorial and highly sexual.

To successfully shape the behavior of males, it helps to understand them. There are two elements involved in living successfully and easily with male alpacas: 1) understanding their behavior in relation to other alpacas, and, 2) understanding their behavior in relation to humans.

Convincing alpacas NOT to engage in natural behaviors is a losing proposition. I think an easier approach to males is to make fighting, or any other problematic behavior, unnecessary. Pay close attention and anticipate behavior, and you have a good chance to prevent what you don't want. This is much more effective, and safer, than attempting to correct what you consider to be misbehavior once it has occurred.

It is only possible to affect what you can control. Trying to make males that live together play nicely



all day and all night is impossible, even if you were willing to move out into the pasture with them! What you can control is their environment. A good setup will allow for handling breeding males easily and safely. On the other hand, many owners do not expect much from their breeding males in terms of manners.

However, an intact male alpaca can certainly learn to be respectful and cooperative, even when females are around.

This article is based on many years of observing camelids, my professional experience as an animal handler and trainer, my studies leading to a degree in animal behavior, and two very good articles on behavior. I intend to borrow heavily from an excellent article about dominance<sup>1</sup> written by Lore I. Haug, DVM, MS, DaCVB, CPDT and CABG... lots of letters after her name! Suffice it to say, she is well qualified to write about dogs and behavior. The other article is one of the few available about camel behavior in large herds.<sup>2</sup> Both articles are referenced below.

### It is not always about Dominance!

To begin with I would like to encourage alpaca owners to avoid the common practice of explaining every behavior they see in their alpacas from a dominance point of view. The dominance model is over-used to explain both behavior between alpacas, as well as behavior between alpacas and their human caretakers.

Males can get along... provided they don't take each other too seriously!

1. Haug, L., May/June, 2005. "Dominance, the 'Dirty' Word." *ADPT Chronicle of the Dog*.

2. Schulte, N. and Klinge, H. August, 1991. "Herd Structure, Leadership, Dominance and Site Attachment of the Camel, *Camelus Dromedarius*." *Behavior*, Vol. 118, #1/2.



**On the lookout for the ladies: typical very alert look on a male alpaca watching for females.**

What is wrong with the dominance model? In the first place we borrow the word “dominance” from the world of wolves. In fact, according to new research, dominance is not a particularly useful model for understanding wolf and dog behavior, much less domestic alpaca behavior. Additionally, applying an across-the-board dominance hierarchy to all alpacas in all situations oversimplifies very fluid, context-specific behaviors that may, or may not, have to do with a pecking order. It also assumes that aggression is the result of natural alpaca behavior when, in fact, it may be caused by human mismanagement.

Let’s begin with the animal that we all know and almost all of us love, and that is the dog. This is likely where all this dominance stuff in the alpaca world comes from. “Leader of the pack”, “being the boss”, “the alpha dog”, – we use these terms to describe our relationship with dogs, and because many people tend to see alpacas as nothing more than big dogs, we just take these same ideas right out to the barn.

Dr. Haug points out that dominance means different things to different people. Various professionals and academicians don’t even agree on the meaning of the word, although most agree that the

lay public has it very wrong. Dominance, according to most of the experts, should NOT be used to indicate a temperamental attribute, motivation, territoriality, or aggressive acts, even offensive ones. But this is exactly how we use the word in the alpaca world. Dominance is rightly used to describe the RELATIONSHIP between two individuals based on the outcome of some number of encounters involving conflict. Animals that prevail most of the time are considered dominant. Dominant-subordinate relationships developed to facilitate group living. According to Haug, “Hierarchies allow animals to live in close contact in competitive situations WITHOUT constant conflict and injurious, and potentially fatal, fighting.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of dominance is to realize that it is not absolute. “Every individual assumes the subordinate role at some point with some individual in some context, unless the individual is pathological.” For example, in dogs and wolves, most studies indicate that social and feeding ranks are completely different. With camels, natural feeding behavior seems to be completely devoid of dominance. Schulte and Klingel found that there are not hard and fast rules about who goes first, or who initiates a



Photos © 2010 Jan Pressler

**Male behavior is interesting and more dramatic than female behavior. Posturing, clucking, rearing, open-mouth breathing along with mouth smacking are behaviors you are likely to observe in an adult breeding male.**

grazing shift. With readily available forage, leadership would appear to be very laissez-faire. “During daily movements from the boma (overnight corral) to the feeding grounds... Several camels would be in the leading position for various periods of time, but a leader in the usual sense could not be recognized. Changes in front position were always completely friendly,

and the relieved animal was never observed attempting to regain its former position.”

In the camel, dominance is almost exclusively reserved for copulation. Males can drive and chase the females in a sexual context, but have absolutely no privileges when it comes to other things, like food and salt. “The lack of dominance-related behavior outside the context of reproduction is remarkable. It is interpreted as a reflection of the lack of competitive situations in the original environment of the camel in their wild state, where there were no defendable resources and, therefore, behavior allowing for monopolization did not evolve. This is demonstrated in the artificial situation of an extremely valuable and highly localized resource, like salt at the salt lick, where even the bull has no privileges.”

Carry a few flakes of alfalfa out to the field, or a single bowl of grain, and there will be fireworks, but it is about the food, NOT about social rank. We humans are, in fact, starting this fight, and we can prevent it by managing feeding time differently. Based on the environment that shaped their behavior, it would seem that alpacas, particularly males, should not have to compete for food. There are a number of ideas below, but once you see fighting as competition for food, and not an unavoidable issue of dominance, you can figure out what will solve the problem in your specific situation.

The practice of feeding males well away from each other defuses battles before they begin. Three feet per animal is often quoted as a rule of thumb. I think a better number would be 100 feet! Weather permitting we feed hay on the ground under trees, keeping the piles and the natural resting areas well apart. I know that many people do not like to feed hay on the ground, but that is where alpacas eat. They walk on what they eat when they graze, and they are used to eating from the ground. If you are really opposed to feeding on the ground, rolling carts can make good feeders. You can roll them around and move them to suit your setup. A bit of wasted hay is cheaper than building more paddocks, or paying veterinary bills!

The same rule of thumb – distance equals happy alpacas – applies to all resources. Don’t make your males fight over anything! Make sure that there is shade, water, mineral, and salt available to all members of a male group. It is a good idea to think of managing males as reverse musical chairs: there is always one more chair than players, so there is no need to defend, or compete, for limited resources.

### Pen Size and Composition

Other factors that you can manipulate are pen size and shape. It is natural to use the number of animals as a gauge for pen size – smaller numbers of animals need less space, larger groups need more space. This works pretty well, until you apply the rule to groups of males. It seems that distance from the coveted resource is key.

The camel literature would suggest that there is a distance that young bachelor males must maintain from females. According to Schulte and Klingel, “The bull was able to chase bachelors of age up to 5 years which were kept in the vicinity. Whenever they came too close to the herd, they were attacked and chased up to 50 meters or further away. In no case was there any resistance.”

There does seem to be a minimum sized pen that will work for boys, regardless of the numbers. Three males may need as much room as ten, if they are going to get along. The reason is simple: subordinate animals must be able to get far enough

away to signal that they are giving up any claim to the coveted resource, which, in most cases, is females. In a very small pen, no matter what they do, subordinates cannot provide the proper degree of deference and are always in trouble.

I wish I could give you an exact measurement for the minimum pen size, but many factors come into play. Not only the size of the pen matters, but also the shape, the contour of the land, the presence or absence of buildings, and the location of the females in relation to the shape of the pen. If you have males that are not getting along, you might think of offering more space or tinkering with feeding locations in relation to the females. Change what you can. For example, move temporary shelters or add temporary fencing to serve as a baffle that creates an impediment to chasing.

If the male pasture offers less flexibility, it may help to move the females. It is great when the girls can be completely out of sight. If the females can be seen, but only from a specific part of the male pasture, it can lead to fights – this spot will be the prime piece of real estate in the pasture. If you are in the process of setting up your farm, choose a pasture for your males that has hills or areas that provide visual cover for junior males, and one that is either completely hidden from, or completely in view of, the females.

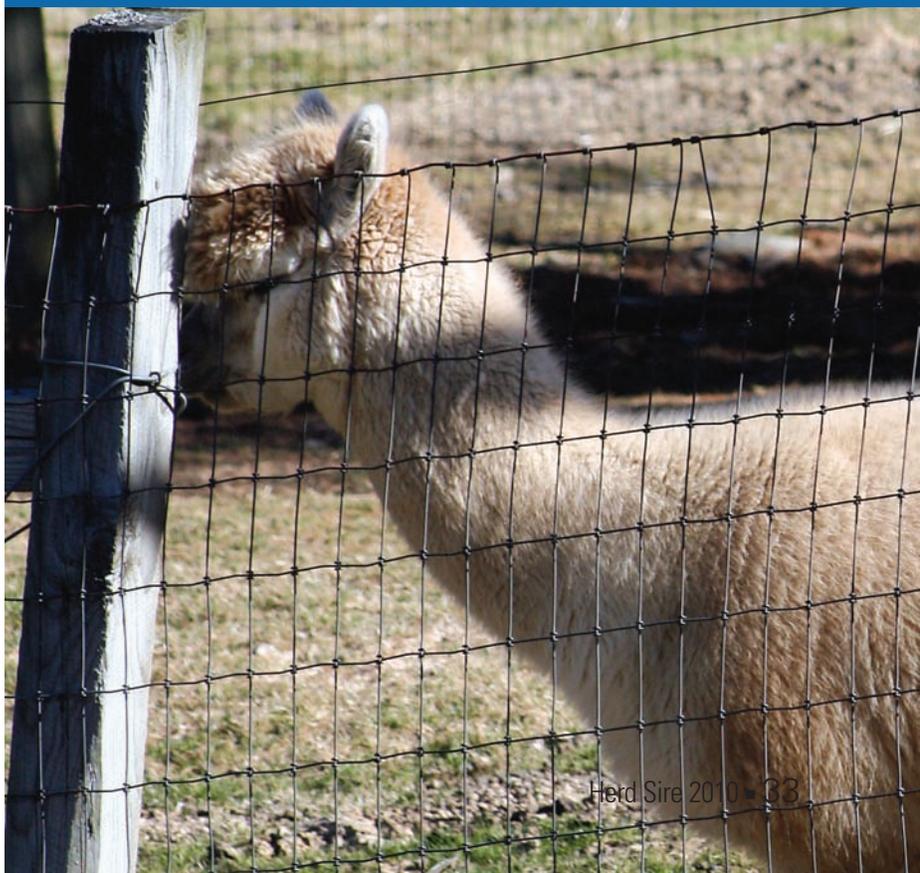
### Why can't we all just get along?

Is it natural for males to fight all the time? Is it the dominant male beating up on the subordinate ones? In fact, more fighting is observed between subordinate members of a group than between leaders and underlings. Truly dominant individuals rarely engage in aggressive encounters. According to Dr. Haug, "Dominance is NOT synonymous with aggression. Although aggression at times is used to establish dominance, agonistic encounters, particularly between familiar individuals, are normally resolved with non-injurious ritualistic behavior. Injurious behavior or escalating aggression is atypical and counterproductive to group cohesion."

"In fact, in many social species, the level of aggression shown by a particular individual is inversely correlated with the animal's ability to attain high social ranking. Studies in humans show



**"If I can't go over I'll have to go through!"**  
This male daunted by the fence seems to think he might push his way out to get to the girls!





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that escalating levels of aggression are correlated with impulse control disorders, not dominance, and, in fact, humans interpret high levels of aggression in other humans as bullies, not leaders.”

Temperament is probably both genetic and environmental. My own experience would indicate that the genetic component is more important. Hyper-aggressive males that cannot live in a group without risk to all members of the

group are a fact of life, and I think they are born that way. Ironically, these males are often not very good breeders. They are easily distracted during copulation, and are often more interested in what other males are doing than in breeding. Individuals that are aggressive in every situation are pathological. Alpacas that rely on aggression for every situation are almost always the same ones that have difficulty interacting with people. These males are not confusing humans with alpacas; they simply meet every encounter with aggression, regardless of who is on the receiving end. I have written many articles about how to work with these kinds of males as youngsters to interrupt their tendency to use aggression inappropriately. It is extremely important to re-shape the behavior as early as possible. Undoubtedly, these overly aggressive males are management problems, and given the fact that they may be passing their temperament along to future generations, I seriously question if they should be used for breeding. Castration certainly helps, but the tendency towards aggression makes these males difficult to manage, and not suitable for new alpaca owners.

### If I could talk like the animals...

Observing and understanding behavior can be a real help when it comes to management. On the other hand, trying to talk to alpacas in their language is not so smart. Returning fire by spitting back, wrestling, or other dominance approaches to misbehavior are easily misinterpreted by an alpaca, and may be dangerous to the human, particularly when it comes to breeding animals.

Communication between animals is incredibly nuanced, and relies, at least in part, on having the proper anatomy. The practice of using dominance exercises with dogs provides a cautionary tale (or tail). Dr. Haug, “Presuming that all dominant aggressive dogs are just normal obnoxious animals that need a dose of ‘leadership’ is unfair to the animals and dangerous to the humans around them. Although we are learning more and more about canine behavior, there is still a paucity of research on social behavior in dogs. The more we analyze canine behavior, the more we realize how complex it can be. What business do we have trying to translate and mimic a language that we do not even understand?”

To manage males successfully, you must manage their environment and work in a way that doesn't frighten them into behaving aggressively. Cornering an adult male alpaca and trying to wrestle him to a standstill will scare him. He may respond in kind, and it will have nothing to do with dominance and everything to do with self-defense. Good animal management – laneways, catch pens, good fences, and handling skill – are the same things that make managing males easy, too. With intact males, these things are not just nice to have, they are essential.

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For over 25 years, Marty has traveled the world, devoting her professional life to the well-being of camelids and the education of their owners. Her clinics, books, and videos have helped thousands of camelid owners more fully understand, appreciate, and enjoy their animals. Marty and her husband, Brad, operate the Camelidynamics Training Center in Bend, Oregon. She can be reached at [marty@camelidynamics.com](mailto:marty@camelidynamics.com).