

Halter Fit... the Most Important Handling Advice by Marty McGee Bennett

ATTENTION!!! The information in this article could save your camelid's life—AND is guaranteed to make yours easier! I am continually amazed at the inattention paid to halter fit. Camelid owners are faced with a very tall order... controlling the behavior of an animal with a tiny head at the end of a long stalk! It is possible to totally immobilize the head and have the body whipping around like the boat in a choppy ocean. The set and length of the neck make controlling a camelid by the head a tall order notwithstanding the fact that most alpacas and llamas are shy and do not like to be approached or touched by strangers. When compared to handling a horse, whose anatomy makes the job easier to begin with, llama and alpaca folks have very little in the way of equipment. We do not have a bit, or a saddle, or leg and seat aids; we don't carry a whip, nor have spurs. Granted we are not riding our animals but we still have to control them. We have one each halter and lead rope. Don't pay attention to how the halter works and what it does and doesn't do and you are missing a huge piece of the training and handling puzzle.

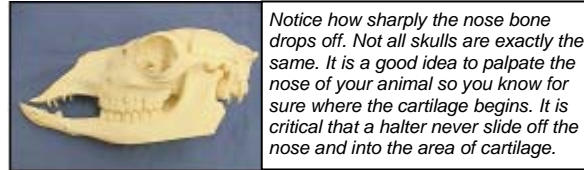
I have worked with hundreds of difficult camelids that were difficult only because they were in fear for their lives every second they wore a halter. I have seen problems from kicking to kushing evaporate because I changed or adjusted a badly fitting halter.

Red, blue, black, brown, polypropylene, nylon, leather, X-style fixed nose band, three-way adjustable, there are a lot of halters to choose from. It is CRITICAL you understand and appreciate how important halter fitting is to your camelid. Your success as a handler and trainer depends on it. Paying attention to halter fit is easy, and there are few other changes that can make such an immediate and dramatic difference in behavior.

The issue is not only what type of halter you select, but how it fits. Many owners believe that if a halter can be attached to the animal's head—it fits. NOTHING could be further from the truth.

Alpacas and llamas are semi-obligate nasal breathers. This means that they CANNOT survive if forced to breathe solely through their mouths. Anything that compromises the nostrils or the nasal passages is not only uncomfortable, it is life threatening. When compared to other animals the nose bone in camelids is comparatively short and drops off sharply. [See photo of skull.]

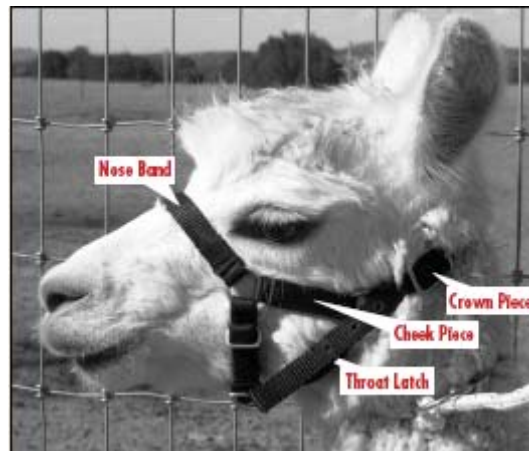
Add this to the awesome leverage that a camelid's long neck affords, and it is easy to understand why these animals are often reluctant to allow us to halter them. Haltering and halter fitting is further complicated by a camelid's horizontal headset. Because a camelid carries his head with the nose oriented horizontally rather than vertically (like a horse) a halter that



slips off the bone must literally overcome gravity to return to its original position.

The Elements of Halter Fit: The Big Three

Safety: A properly fitted halter's nose band not only rests on the bone but stays there NO MATTER WHAT. It isn't enough for the halter to start out on the nose bone, it must stay there when the animal pulls back, bucks, rolls, grazes, steps on his lead rope, breaks away from the handler dragging his lead, or scratches his face with his foot. The smaller the animal the shorter the nose bone and the trickier he is to properly fit. It is particularly important to understand the dynamics of halter fit if you intend to use your halter for any type of restraint. It is incredibly frightening for an animal to be tied or restrained, in a halter that feels as if it could slip off the nose bone. Imagine how you would feel with your feet tied to the bottom of a swimming pool with just enough of your nose above water to barely get a breath. This experience might give you some idea of what it is like for an alpaca or llama to wear a badly fitting halter in a restraint chute. Animals that have been restrained in an ill-fitting halter never forget the experience. I have worked with many alpacas and llamas that were totally calm as I worked with their head with my hands and I could easily put a catch rope over their nose—in effect haltering them. Show these animals a halter and they would immediately panic.



Correct halter fit: This halter fits correctly up near the eye on firm bone and is snug enough that it will not slip off the bone under any circumstances.

Comfort: Preventing harm to your camelid is the highest priority of halter fit. From your camelid's point of view the second most important aspect of wearing a halter is comfort. Your animal should be able to do everything with his halter on that she does with her halter off. These activities would include eating and grazing, ruminating and yawning.

Well fitting halters do not rub raw spots or create calluses on your animal's head even if left on for a few days. Once the halter is adjusted properly your llama or alpaca should quickly forget that it is even there until you use it to communicate with him.

Effectiveness: The halter is the most important piece of equipment you own. Essentially alpaca and llama trainers have a halter and a lead rope. It only makes sense to select a halter that is truly effective as a tool of communication. A halter that does not allow the handler transmit signals to the head with a light hand or one that does not turn the head of the animal when signals are applied is not as effective as it could or should be. A halter that is so loose or made of a material that is too soft will simply spin around the nose when a signal is applied. Teaching an animal to lead with a halter like this is an exercise in frustration for both camelid and handler.

Types of Halters

When the camelid phenomenon first began, it was a challenge to find a halter—any halter—which would remotely fit a camelid. Many people had their own halters made or used modified sheep or foal halters. Now the reverse is true. It is just as frustrating these days to pick and choose from all the types of halters available. There are three types of halters with variations on these basic themes: fixed nose band, x-style and adjustable.

Fixed Nose band: This type of halter features a continuous loop for the nose band that cannot be adjusted. The crown piece may be adjusted but any variation in the nose band is achieved only by changing to a different halter in a different size.

X-style halter: A halter in which the crown piece and the nose band form a continuous loop. It is not possible with an X-style halter to adjust the nose band and the crown piece independently from one another. Loosening the crown piece provides slack in the nose band; tightening the crown piece takes up slack in the nose band

Adjustable Halters: These halters feature adjustments in both the crown piece and the nose band. These two elements can be adjusted independently of one another.

Another important aspect of a halter is the way in which the possible adjustments can be made and how they fasten. Some halters have a slide arrangement others feature buckles and holes and still others use fastex or spring loaded clips. Halters usually come in nylon, leather or polypropylene, in a variety of widths.

I want a halter that is safe, comfortable and is effective as a tool of communication. I use the following criteria to choose a halter that fits this bill:

- I want a halter that has a wide variety of small adjustments and can be adjusted easily without taking the halter off the animal.
- I want a halter with a short cheek piece and one in which the throatlatch and the nose band travel through the same ring under the chin. These two features taken together encourage the halter to stay further back on the nose bone where it is safe.
- I want a halter that includes rings on the nose band allowing me to lead from the side ring and increasing the clarity of the signals I give through the lead rope as well as the leverage I have over the animal's balance.

A two-way adjustable halter—a buckle halter with adjustments possible in both the crown piece and nose band—meets these criteria better than any other type of halter I have found. The proper halter is one thing, but how you adjust is on your animal is everything. The same halter on the same animal could be safe, comfortable and effective, or it could be unsafe, uncomfortable and useless. The outcome is totally dependent on how the handler adjusts the halter.

X-style halters are fine for animals that already know how to lead. They are usually comfortable and do a good job of staying put on the nose once properly adjusted. They fit a wide variety of animals. On the down side they don't convey signals from the handler to the animal as well as a halter with an independently adjustable nose band.

I DO NOT like or use halters with fixed nose bands. They are more often than not unsafe, uncomfortable and do a poor job of communication as well. These halters are inexpensive to manufacture and are quite prevalent especially for smaller animals and are often used on alpacas. This is very unfortunate in that a smaller head makes it even more important to have an adjustable nose band.

Putting Your Halter on and Making Adjustments

1. Before putting the halter on the animal adjust the nose band opening so that it is bigger than you think you need. A good rule of thumb is to open the halter to within one or two holes of its largest adjustment. Adjusted this way the nose band will easily slide up the nose close to the eye and will still have slack available. If, on its largest setting the halter will not slide well up on the nose in front of the eye with slack still available, your halter is too small! If there is no slack available in the nose band when you buckle the crown piece, you are not allowing for normal movement of the jaw or mouth. It is quite common for owners to literally tie their camelid's mouth shut. A nose band that fits this way is usually unsafe as well because it is prevented from sliding all the way up the nose bone.

2. Snug up the crown piece. The crown piece must be tight enough so that the nose band cannot slip off the nose bone — even when significant forward pressure is applied to the nose band.
3. Next, take all extra slack out of the nose band. Leave enough room for your animal to ruminate and eat comfortably.

The most common re-adjustment I make on a halter, which is improperly fitted, is to loosen the nose band significantly and tighten the crown piece to take up the slack. The net effect of these adjustments is to cause the nose band to slide further up toward the nose on firmer bone. From a safety standpoint I would rather err on the side of adjusting the halter too close to the eye and a tad snug in the crown piece than to allow the nose band to slide too far down the nose. This is especially true if your animal has not been led before or you intend to use your halter for staking out, tying or restraint.

Dynamics of Adjusting the Halter

Many camelid owners are unaccustomed to seeing a halter nose band this close to the eye and are reluctant to adjust the halter this way. Concern for the eye is misplaced. The skull does a fantastic job of protecting the eye orb. Once on the face a halter cannot poke an animal in the eye and the graduated shape of the nose prevents the halter from slipping up over the eye.

Halters high up on the nose bone disappear from the animal's view and are less obtrusive than when they are closer to the front of the nose. In order to be firmly on bone and to be safe the halter must be very close to the eye. This is true for many llamas and virtually all alpacas. Depending on the size and head shape, llamas under 3 months of age and alpacas under four months of age may be too small to wear a halter comfortably. These animals have such a small amount of bone to work with that you must tighten the crown piece to the point that the halter is uncomfortable otherwise the halter is unsafe.

It is my belief that llamas and alpacas are distracted and annoyed by halters that rest in what I call the danger zone—the middle area of the nose bone. When the handler puts forward pressure on the halter as in leading it feels as if the halter could slip off the bone. The animal is literally waiting for the ax to fall. Animals wearing halters with the nose band in the danger zone may: become extremely resistant to wearing a halter, kush when asked to lead or will bolt or panic suddenly as if for no reason.

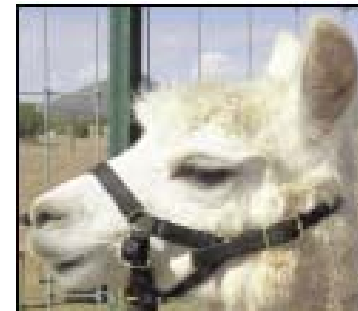
When discussing halter fit owners always ask me to quantify how to do it. They want to know how to adjust the halter in terms of numbers of fingers or inches, how much room to leave in the nose band and the crown piece, and where exactly on the nose bone the nose band should rest. I cannot make quantitative guidelines that will work for all animals. You must think about halter fit proportionately.

Halter Fit Problems



Fixed Nose Band

This halter is typical of the halters used on alpacas these days. It is a fixed nose band halter and rests right at the edge of the nose bone. While this halter may not be compromising the alpaca's ability to breathe, I think it is creating a distraction that will interfere with performance.



Bad Halter Fit

This halter is adjusted so it rests on the edge of the nose bone. If this halter slips forward even a little bit, it could compress the nasal cartilage and compromise the animal's ability to breathe.



Halter Compressing Nose Bone

This halter is compressing the alpaca's nose bone. At the least, this halter will distract and distress the animal. If the alpaca is left tied and unattended, it could kill him.

The Crown Piece

The adjustment of the CROWN piece is what determines how far the nose band can slip forward. How much room you should leave in the crown piece is totally dependent on the length of the nose bone. This means that the crown piece can be adjusted more loosely on a big headed llama than it can be on a small or young alpaca. It also means that a very short nose bone requires a very snug, if not tightly fitting crown piece.

The length of the nose bone is different for adults versus weanlings or babies and for llamas and alpacas. The portion of the nose bone in front of the eye might be 3/4 of an inch long on a weanling alpaca and 2-3 inches in length on an adult llama. Young animals whose heads are simply too small to fit both safely and comfortably in any halter, need to grow some more. I think it is only fair to wait to put a halter on and attach a lead rope until you can satisfy both requirements. You can certainly do some halter training working with the head and even putting a halter on without tightening it up completely. I urge you to wait to attach a lead rope for purposes of teaching your camelid to lead until the animal is old enough to wear a halter safely and comfortably. Keep in mind however that very loosely fitting halters are annoying and you may take steps backwards by haltering a youngster in a sloppily fitting halter. It may be better to wait.

The length of the nose bone also varies from individual to individual. I have palpated nose bones and found that they were much shorter than I expected them to be. In many cases these alpacas exhibited extreme behavior related to haltering.

Also halters tend to stretch when warmed up by the animal's body heat, changing the way a halter fits. On a big llama, halter stretch is of little consequence, but on a weanling alpaca tied to a fence it can be extremely significant.

The Nose Band

Adjusting the nose band has far more to do with comfort than it does with safety. The nose band must allow the animal enough lateral movement to ruminate, eat and graze unencumbered. Again this varies depending on the size of the animal and his jaw.

Adjusting the halter so that it is close to the eye is not only safer it also means the nose band is much closer to the hinge of the jaw. When the animal chews there is less lateral movement at the hinge of the jaw than at the front of the mouth. Have a look at your animal while he eats. Because of this fact you can snug up the nose band close to the eye a bit more and still leave plenty of room for eating and rumination. A snugger nose band is more effective for communication.

Many people complain that they have a certain llama or alpaca that is much harder to fit—these animals usually have a very steep nose bone and a shorter nose.

When haltered in the traditional way the halter slides right down the nose bone like a car on a steep icy hill. Adjusting the halter as I suggest also solves this problem.

The Halter Design

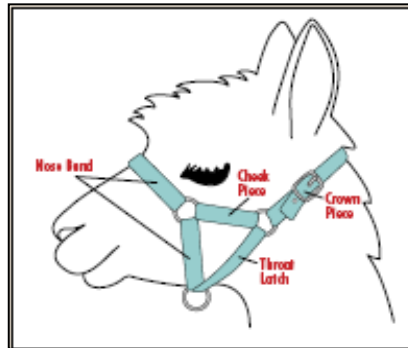
Many halters on the market are not proportioned to be worn as I describe. No matter how hard you try, you won't be able to adjust them as I have described. This is because the parts of the halter are not the right length. In some cases the nose band is simply not big enough to allow it to be worn close enough to the eye to be safe. Buying a larger halter with more room in the nose band may not solve the problem because the crown piece may be too long. Some halters have a cheek piece that is too long. A long cheek piece causes the crown piece to slip down the neck.

A low crown piece is not unsafe but a halter is most useful for communication when it stays at the poll—immediately behind the ears. With certain halters if you tighten the crown piece so that it is up behind the ears (where it should be), a cheek piece that is stiff and too long forces the nose band down into the danger zone.

Some halters feature a fleece lining under the nose band ostensibly for greater comfort. A fleece lining inside the nose band is no substitute for proper fit. Fleece lining on a nose band that is already too small only makes it tighter and more uncomfortable—akin to adding another pair of socks when your shoes are too small.

Adjusting a Halter

A properly fitting halter is safe and comfortable. The nose band rests firmly on bone and stays there NO MATTER WHAT. There is enough room in the nose band for the animal to chew without interference.



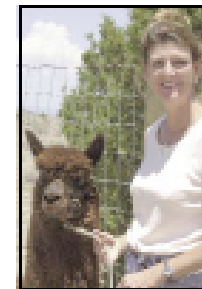
- Before you put the halter on always open the nose band so that it is larger than you think you need.
- Snug up the crown piece. Tighter for animals with smaller heads
- Take the slack out of the nose band. Larger animals need more room.
- Always carefully examine the nose bone before you put a halter on an animal you don't know.
- Recheck halter fit after about ten minutes.

If you have doubts about animals you have haltered after reading this article put your current halter on and adjust as usual. Really look at your animal. Does the halter interfere with the freedom of movement in the jaw? Does your llama or alpaca have to struggle to get a mouthful of grain or hay? Do

his nostrils flare more with the halter on than off? Take hold of both sides of the nose band of the halter and tug forward. If you can pull the halter forward off the bone, your animal can too and is in danger.

I was recently teaching a clinic I call "Showing Off" at an alpaca show. We were conducting a practice show to teach folks new to showing what is expected in a show and how to handle behavioral problems in the show ring. Most of the alpacas were behaving pretty well. One poor guy was having a terrible time, his alpaca was rearing, barging ahead and circling constantly. I watched the man leading this alpaca. He wasn't leading with a really heavy hand or anything else that I felt I could correct. I looked at the halter fit and it didn't look too bad. I watched him struggle for a few more minutes and decided that I should have a closer look. I gave this gentleman a different alpaca and took the ner-do-well off to the catch pen to have a closer look. Sure enough the halter was just a tiny bit too loose. It was a good halter that I could adjust. I took up one hole in the crown piece and lead the alpaca back to the mock show. I am not exaggerating it was as if I had switched alpacas. He walked along like a perfect gentleman and was totally settled. I gave this alpaca back to the original handler and he too could lead the alpaca with NO problem. It was absolutely amazing AND absolutely halter fit!

This is one of many examples in my memory of positive behavior changes impacted immediately and directly by the seemingly simple act of equipping your camelid with a properly fitting halter. If I have scared you about halter fit, it is for good reason. Paying attention to halter fit has a direct impact on the safety of your animals and your success as a handler. Use these guidelines and you can rest easy knowing your animal is comfortable and free from danger.



Marty McGee Bennett has been a fixture in the alpaca business almost since there was an alpaca business. After meeting Linda Tellington-Jones in 1987, Marty dedicated herself to bringing Linda's work, known as TTEAM, to the alpaca community. An accomplished author and teacher, Marty has just completed work on a new book, *The Camelid Companion*, the definitive guide to handling, training, and managing alpacas. Marty and her husband, Brad, travel the world over in their mobile home, teaching and lecturing on camelid handling topics. Marty can be reached at marty@camelidynamics.com or visit her website www.camelidynamics.com.

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