

Clicker Training for Obstacles

by Laurie Mollin, Shangrila Llamas

Our friend Deirdre Martin, Shangrila's Matador's owner, decided to try out one of our weanlings Shangrila's Astro on our obstacle course. He had just attended a PR event where he had done really well with Clicker Training. He is a chow hound and will do pretty much anything for food. Luckily I had my camera with me. All these pictures were taken in one session. This was the very first time he had gone over the obstacles. We were both surprised at how willing he was to play (for a click and reward).



The first jump he just sort of stepped over but he still received a click and reward for the effort and not balking. This made him much more enthusiastic. The next jump he actually did jump over. Deirdre brought him to the next obstacle to teach him back. She walked him into the obstacle of landscape timbers and had Astro slowly back up.

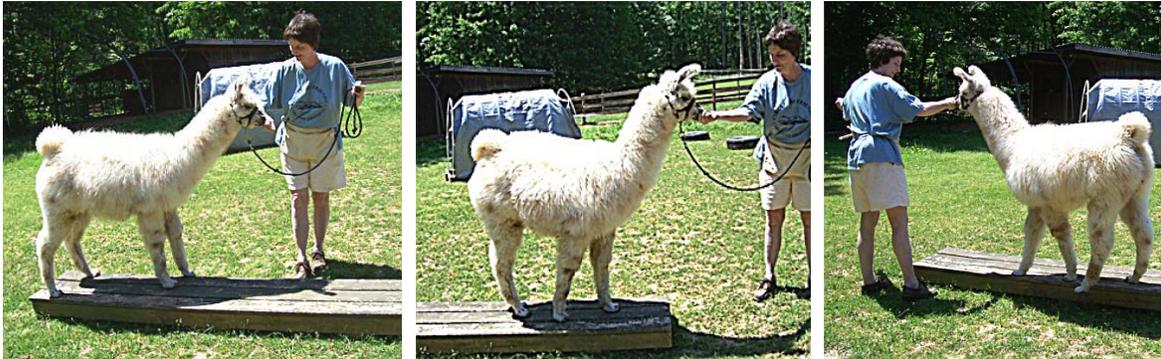


We use a "Back" command to get them to back out of the restraining chute so he knew this word command already. He still did well and stayed within the obstacle. So of course he got a click and reward. Then she took him to the bridge. He wasn't too sure about this one so she took it one step at a time. The most important thing I have learned from training with a clicker is to break it down into little steps, and to click and reward even the smallest accomplishment. First he had to put one foot on

the bridge. To do this Deirdre used a little pressure on the lead until he was on the bridge. Then he was clicked and given a little grain. And I mean a little, just a few pieces of grain. Then he followed Deirdre's closed hand onto the bridge and was clicked and given some grain. By getting Astro to follow "the hand" she did not have to tug on the lead.



You can see by using the targeting of her hand she was able to get Astro to complete the bridge on a loose lead. She then had him do the obstacle the other way with less clicks.



Teaching a llama to target a closed hand is one of the "handiest" training tricks I have learned to do. I have llamas that will follow my closed hand (fist) from the middle of the pasture into the barn. I may have to click and reward part way there if I have food and a clicker. If they have done this before I can get them all the way in even if I do not have food. This works so much better than shaking the grain bucket when you just need one llama. If you have grain and no clicker I have found you can use a word like "good" and give just a little grain (never an entire handful). But the clicker is still a better marker because it is consistent. Saying a word is not as precise in timing or sound.

Even if they have mastered a command and will do it on cue, go back and click and reward it every once in awhile, so that they see the benefit of doing what you ask. Something as simple as putting on a halter is worth adding to a training session. It makes the halter a good thing, not just what gets put on before getting a shot. It's sort of like recharging a battery. One of Deirdre's favorite obstacles is the "Tunnel". When she took



Astro over to it, he was in the groove and was willing to follow Deirdre in with a little coaxing and a few clicks and rewards. It went so fast I just had time to get the ending picture. We usually need to get them comfortable with the tunnel itself before they will go in it.

Astro and Deirdre then when up the ramp obstacle. She clicked and rewarded him for that and then worked with him to walk down the stairs on the other side holding his head down so that he did not

jump off the obstacle instead of walking down step by step. You may notice that we have "training wheels" on this obstacle. The llamas are much more willing to go up the ramp and stairs with the gates attached on the sides of this obstacle. Of course you don't have this luxury at the shows.



Deirdre walked Astro up the stairs to our deck which she starts training our babies to do when halter and lead training. She also likes to bring them into the house in case they end up as therapy llamas.



And every llama needs to jump into the trailer at sometime so this is how she usually ends her training session with them. So when we do take them somewhere it is not a big deal to jump into the trailer. It's a good thing.



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