

“DE-LLAMANATION” OF THE DRIVING HORSE

There Is No More Terrifying Beast To A Horse Than A Llama!

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Desensitization of the Harness Horse to Llamas

When we drive our horses, we truly rely on them to have their flight instinct in total control, trusting in us that we will not ask them to go anywhere dangerous. Most of us end up driving on roads with ditches at some point, and most of our carriages don't handle this uneven terrain very well. It is critical that we can keep our horses ON the road, no matter what the traffic, wildlife, or livestock we encounter.

Now, as we all know, in the entire world there is

no more terrifying beast to a horse than a llama. At least that's what my horses have told me. Never in my entire life working with horses had I heard and felt a horse blow in fear before!

I was riding a green gelding down a paved road past a field with a few alpacas. At first I thought he was suffering some sort of seizure, or perhaps a blocked nasal passage. But hardly had I started to think these thoughts when I very quickly became concerned with more important issues ... like, was he going to stay upright as he accelerated across the pavement, and would I be able to maintain any sort of contact with the saddle as we cleared the ditch on the other side.

Now, since that particular horse wasn't going to be used in harness, I dealt with the issue by employing a rather common strategy; avoidance!

My next encounter with a llama led me to take more drastic action, as it also occurred on a paved road and involved blowing followed by bolting at high speed. This time it was with a mare (still under saddle) that I intended to drive. Even more importantly, I intended to drive her at my friend Gordon Fulton's place, and he has a llama. So drastic action was required!

The De-Llamanation Process

First, find a llama or alpaca to BORROW. It's easy to find them, and even easier to buy them, but not so easy to catch them. They are naturally curious, but also surprisingly quick, and suspicious of people with treats. Bring the beast home and confine it to one end of a safely fenced paddock.

THE DE-LLAMANATION PROCESS

Now, bring your horse(s) in to the other end of the paddock. Always make sure that you position yourself between the llama and your horse (seriously! If they're going to jump, it'll be away from the llama and not onto you). Your horse will see the llama from a huge distance away, and may become distracted.

The first phase of de-llamanation is also excellent for conditioning and knocking a few pounds off those easy keepers. You may find that your horse at this stage finds food less important than just staying as far away from "that thing" as possible. Gradually start feeding the horse(s) closer and closer to the llama's fence. Let them live together for a month or so.

The second stage of training involved riding or leading the horse past the llama, which is still in exactly the same place as it has been all month. Putting a saddle or harness on a horse results in a total brain reset (bet you didn't know that), so the llama will be viewed as an entirely new and terrifying monster. Treats may help, and I have found that licorice treats are extremely palatable to both the horse and llama (and my dog, which is very weird).

If your horse should shy and try to run off, gracefully dismount and lead her back to the llama, and reward with a treat. This works especially well for very food-focussed horses (like Canadians). Gradually work up to staying on the saddle, offering treats for staying close to the llama.

The third stage would perhaps be letting the llama out of its enclosure to interact directly with the horses, but I had had enough of the smelly creature, so I returned it to my neighbour!

OK, so this has all been pretty tongue-in-cheek, but the training process is valid! In my opinion, it never hurts to deal with a problem head-on. Do it in such a way that you introduce the "obstacle" away from

the "obstacle", it might be a stroke or kind word, or a food treat. Be prepared to adjust your training to your horse's needs and take the time. Be creative and try different approaches until you discover what works for you and your horse. That way, you'll create a more confident partner, and you won't find yourself looking for an escape route the next time the grader comes by. Safe Driving!!



Above: Gradually start feeding the horse(s) closer and closer to the llama's fence

Below: Here we are, at the Chinook Pleasure Driving Show, at Gordon Fulton and Geri McNeil's farm. Gord's llama is standing in a pen just to the left of the the ring. Notice the mare's ear is still cocked towards the terrifying beast!

