

## Working with the 'Maestro'

### Report on my first visit to a Marty McGee seminar in the USA

Watching a true artist perform is a wonder to behold. That was exactly the feeling I had when I recently watched Marty McGee Bennett in action with llamas and alpacas in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Ever since we made the decision to become alpaca owners, I had wanted to find a training method which afforded these wonderful animals the respect, grace and gentle handling they deserved. I found Marty.

Back in September last year I bought my foundation herd of four Peruvian pregnant females and one Peruvian young male, but could not take delivery of them until January 2000. So I had time to start my search for a training method which I felt befitted my 'maternal' and 'protective' instincts which had overtaken me since discovering alpacas. I went straight to the American market and bought training videos from two of the better known American 'trainers' which I found, but each of them left me cold. One actually took my breath away in horror at his techniques! Then I came across a Marty McGee video and fell under her spell.



Marty demonstrating the 'taming the tiger' rope

I bought every single video she produced. Even though the majority showed and talked about llamas, and I was an owner of alpacas, it was easy to see the concept was the same for both animal types. Every spare moment found me avidly watching the videos, determined that when my animals arrived in January, I would feel full of confidence and put my learning into practice. Her gentle handling came over so much in the videos that I decided to write to her to find out more about her work and when she might possibly be coming to the UK. Imagine my surprise when she told me the last time she had come to the UK was in 1992. It was later in our exchanges that she told me she had held a clinic at the home of our very own Camelids Secretary, Candia Midworth.

We got on really well from the beginning, and within a very few weeks I found that I had arranged to start TTEAM practitioner training for alpacas and llamas with her, and I had the distribution rights to her products for UK and Ireland. Wow! The speed with which it had happened blew me over, and I still did not have any animals.

But oh how very different it all was when I started to put my new armchair confidence actually into practice.

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Why do they do that I kept asking myself; I am doing everything she suggests in her videos and books, but I was still not getting the same responses I was expecting. Maybe, I thought, the animals in the videos were really previously trained or are home bred ones who were used to humans. So I decided to see for myself and made contact to find out the earliest mutual date for some hands on training.



Llamas also thrive on this training method

The earliest I could make was the beginning of May. This coincided with a three day clinic Marty was running in her home town of Santa Fe so all fitted in nicely, and because she was on home ground we could spend some one-to-one time together afterwards. Perfect! I booked my flights and took off to be totally immersed in alpacas and llamas for a glorious 11 days.

Santa Fe is a beautiful old town which boasts the most fabulous adobe houses. A pre-requisite to any development is that all buildings must be built in adobe bricks and faced in this wonderful soft damask pink colouring, and no taller than two storeys. As you walk around the town it is easy to imagine the American cowboys and indians films we have all seen. Indeed you actually see the cowboys with their hats, moustaches and boots walking through the streets. They also have a very strong South American Indian population, and Santa Fe protects this heritage. I can fully appreciate why so many people go there for a holiday, and end up buying a residence there. Streets lined with galleries offering art of every imaginable type. Alpaca shops stocked full of wonderful garments and goodies. Restaurants offering food from so many cultures you could dine for a week without repeat, and people who are so polite and friendly.

The clinic was held on the lovely ranch of Bonnie Samuel and Bill deBois which is a few kilometers outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. They have a herd of very pretty alpacas and Bonnie is a real live wire within the American alpaca community; extremely good at promoting herself and her ranch, which is not surprising once you know she used to do the PR for American presidents. Wonderful lady, who has become a very dear friend. Bill is OK too!! Special thanks to them for opening their home to all of us.

There were twelve of us for the first two days and five for the last day. They came from all over the States to attend. Diane, one of the ladies present, had brought her own llamas with her in a trailer, and had travelled for eight/ten hours. Gail, who lives just outside of Taos, brought another six llamas to work with. All in all

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we had a good variety of animals at different stages of handling experience. Many of them had never been exposed even to a catchrope. Three llamas showing traits of dominance with their owner, one llama who had a fear of dogs, two totally untrained llamas who were very skittish, an alpaca who screeched as a human went near her, two weanlings and a cria. Also a young male who had been sent off with its mother to be re-bred, and had come back thoroughly spoiled by children whilst away, so was also showing human dominance traits.

The first two days consisted of the basic and intermediate training, showing the use of the catchrope, haltering, walking with a lead rope and general animal awareness techniques. The third day was advanced handling, consisting of shearing, toenail trimming, mating, injecting and learning to put a pack on a llama.

Out of the twelve that attended, only two had never been to a Marty McGee clinic before. Five of the participants had been to as many as six and even eight previous clinics. When I asked them why they still felt they needed to attend the clinics, they told me that they 'never stop learning'.



Learning how an alpaca feels under training

Gail has a llama trekking business which is registered with the tourist association, and has attended eight Marty McGee clinics, and when I asked her why she felt she had to keep coming back for more, she said, 'I can't afford to become blasé about the training of my animals, and I keep learning new things'. She is buying and selling llamas all the time, and in her experience she has seldom been able to use the same techniques when working with new animals. She also boards animals for people, as well as brokering, and in her opinion, and in her deep New York accent, 'animals get clued in to us humans, and we have to be just one jump ahead of them all the time'. Gail is under five feet tall, a real 'itty bitty lady' (the American expression I so quickly connected to) and to see her with her llamas, and the way they respond to her was quite an amazing sight I can tell you. She was terrific! But, by the end of the 3 days she had actually fallen in love with the two weanlings we had all worked on, so she negotiated with Bonnie to buy them. We all felt these were more her size, and she certainly looked very 'cute' with them. I have since been told by Bonnie that she takes them everywhere with her, including shopping in the main street, and on some of the shorter llama hikes. I have no doubt they will be very well taken care of and very much loved.

Diane had attended three previous clinics and loved her animals to pieces. However this was also reflected in their response to her and to others, and she was

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afraid she had lost control of them. They were quite dominant, and Diane had mistaken certain responses as returning her love. By the end of the three days, however, they knew who was really the boss and their behaviour became entirely different. Diane didn't have to love them less, or reject them, or punish them in any at all, she just had to dish out the love in a more constructive way. She also learnt how to put their halters on properly. One of her llamas had arrived with its halter on because she told us that it took her so long to get him haltered. By the time Marty had worked on Diane with halter fitting he was putty in her hands. She was grinning from ear to ear. It was amazing to see the transformation in Diane's own handling and in her llamas' responses to her.

The screaming alpaca was quietened, simply by using a different approach in putting the catchrope on, and by the end of the third day, we had her halter trained and even walking over obstacles without as much as a whimper.



Putting the lessons into practice in the wide open spaces of New Mexico

For me, I continued over the next few days, working with alpacas and blow-up animals in all of the remaining techniques Marty uses, with a few new ones created along the way. With Bonnie, we visited other ranches and talked to other owners both large and small. One of the ranches had 1200 acres and a very large herd of alpacas, plus one guanaco. What a sight to

behold! I was even introduced to a couple of very elderly females who were 18 and 20 years of age and very pregnant but still looking good! I suppose that's what they call 'business'!

Santa Fe being surrounded by desert is hot. Bonnie and Bill spend hours with sprinklers trying to cultivate one very small patch of green grass. But the animals everywhere were beautiful, so this told me that the green green grass of home does not automatically produce better animals.

So what did I discover that I was doing wrong when I converted my armchair training to the real thing. Simple:

1. I forgot to breathe! Once Marty had pointed this out, I quickly recognised when I was holding my breath, and as soon as I took a deep breath and relaxed the animals response to me was amazing.

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2. The halter fit is the most fundamental part of any work done with our animals. If it does not fit properly, the animal fears us instantly, and will shake its head, roll it round, move it up and down, pull away from you, you name it. Nine out of ten reasons for the animals head responses are due to a bad fitting halter. Problem here is that most halters have been designed round a horse halter, instead of an alpaca/llama, which is not the case with Marty's halters.
3. We believe we are training our animals. But this is the wrong approach. It is us that need the training. Just because we think we can handle our own animals, does not mean we are trained. A good trainer can handle almost any animal they are presented with in a very short space of time.

I am very proud to be training under Marty, and extremely pleased with everything I have learnt from her thus far, and look forward to the progress I will make over the coming weeks, months and years, as well as the help I will be able to offer to others who have a desire to follow this route.

Marty has agreed to come over to the UK next year, around July time, to do a series of clinics. I know she is very pleased to have this opportunity as she remembers her last visit to the UK with much affection. If anyone would like to pre-book a date to hold a clinic on their premises, then I would be pleased to hear from them.

Marty has also agreed to come over in October to attend our 'Back to Basics' conference, and more details about this will be released later.

Before I left Marty, I gave her an acronym of her name which summed up what it was all about. To me MARTY stands for;



Meaningful **A**nimal **R**elationships **T**hat will last for **Y**ears