

Aberrant Behavior Syndrome

by John Mallon

Well, I guess we can't put this off any longer; it's time to talk about one of the most unpleasant topics relating to llamas and alpacas — Berserk Male Syndrome, or BMS. Actually, in these politically correct times, the new term is ABS, or Aberrant Behavior Syndrome, so as not to leave out the "ladies" (and, yes, females do develop the behavior, although usually to a lesser degree, as they are not typically the territorial defenders that males are.) I want to be very clear about a couple of things before we start.

First, I do not hold myself to be an "expert" on this topic; in fact, I don't know if there are any experts out there. (If you are one, or know of one, I would sure like to spend some time speaking with you.)

I have dealt with berserkers since the early 80's, have had six or seven shipped here to work with for extended periods of time, have encountered dozens more in my travels, and have hundreds of calls referred to me by ILA, zoos, veterinarians and private individuals, so I think it's pretty safe to say that I have had more experience with them than most people have, but that doesn't make me an expert in my mind.

I am not here to preach, but to share the benefit of that considerable experience with you, in order to help you to understand this often-misunderstood phenomenon, and to help prevent creating a monster in your own backyard.

Another thing worth mentioning is this: to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever deliberately created a berserker. Please read that sentence again — it is important. The point is that nobody wants a berserker, yet there are more and more of them out there — how can this be? It is easy for me to understand how this is, with all the talking and consulting I do about it, but, for the average person, it seems incongruous that people who don't want berserkers are creating them.

The reason that these people are causing aberrant behavior to show up more and more is that they don't recognize, or refuse to accept, the reality of the warning signs.

If you've never encountered an ABS animal, you'll find it difficult to imagine one. It is an animal which will scream, spit, charge, attack, bite, butt and lay on top of people — it is a llama or alpaca that can kill.

Now, I don't mean to frighten you new folks; this extreme form of the behavior is relatively rare (but becoming more common — more about this later) and is totally man-made. ABS llamas and alpacas are not born that way, and it is not a heritable trait. It is also, (again, to the best of my knowledge) incurable, irreversible — not one documentable case of rehabilitation exists. Usually, full-blown berserkers have to be put down. (Well, maybe I do mean to frighten you a little.)

I should also mention that most of the animals that

are labeled "berserk" are not — they are simply spoiled, disrespectful, bad-mannered, undisciplined "brats" that have been "trained" in an overly permissive manner and bribed with handfed food treats.

I meet quite a few of these guys every month at clinics and have no problem dealing with them, seeing meaningful and permanent changes in their attitudes within just a few minutes. It's simply a matter of understanding the psychology of the prey animal, and communicating to him in a way that he understands that he is not allowed to push people around. Once he understands that, he easily accepts it and is unlikely to regress, unless, of course, his handler goes back to his old habits. (That's part of the beauty of the herd animal's makeup — his willingness to follow leadership unquestioningly.)

On average, I receive over a hundred calls a year on this topic, and the conversations are remarkably similar. Someone has had an unnerving experience with their "sweetest" llama. "He's always been very "friendly," they say, "coming up to us in the pasture, letting us handle him all over, following us around

the barnyard, giving us kisses ... visitors just love him and he gets lots of attention, but this morning, as I was feeding, he ran up behind me and chest butted me, knocking me down! Out of the blue, just like that!"

"Sweet" and "friendly" are the most often used words I hear

when these animals are being described to me. Those of us with no prior experience or understanding of prey animals fall easily into this trap, because, in other animals such as dogs and cats (the predators we are used to), the behavior would be "sweet" and "friendly."

Unfortunately, prey animals are very different, and what is submissive behavior in a predator (initiating physical contact, for instance) is aggressive behavior in a herd-living prey species. Simply brushing against a human without repercussions establishes the animal's dominance over the human, and this information is then "filed away" for future reference (say, when his testosterone starts to surge through his body and mind).

The subtlety of it all is what makes it so difficult for us to comprehend. Kisses seem so harmless, benign, even, that we just can't seem to resist, and continue on that fateful course convincing ourselves that "this really doesn't apply to me, or to this sweet little llama. How could this lovable little thing turn bad ... ?"

For years, it was believed that bottle feeding babies, especially males, was the cause of ABS. We know now that this is not true; that it is the improper over socialization that accompanies the bottle feeding, rather than the bottle itself. It's important to know the difference between the two.

For years, it was believed that bottle feeding babies, especially males, was the cause of ABS. We know now that this is not true...

continued on page 18

If you must supplement a baby, do it in a businesslike manner, with no talking, kissing, cooing or petting the animal. Sound easy? It's not, believe me. For one thing a baby llama or alpaca is the cutest thing we've ever seen, and if it's in trouble and has to be helped (we are literally trying to save its life), every instinct in our bodies cries out to comfort, soothe, love and encourage this baby to live, so we kiss, pet, etc., etc., thus planting a time bomb, set to go off in about two years when the hormones begin to flow.

Handling babies from birth, in a businesslike manner, and starting training early (in the first month or so) seem to be one of the best things one can do to prevent aberrant behavior in the future. It establishes parameters of acceptable behavior during the most critical learning period in the llama's life.

Young males living without conspecific companionship, that is, another llama, are at much higher risk of becoming ABS adults, even if never handled at all. The company of his own kind is crucial to the llama or alpaca (and any other herd-oriented animal).

I am very worried about what the future holds. There are unscrupulous breeders selling two- and three-day-old babies, complete with bottles, from local feed stores and Saturday night auctions. After years of seeing fewer cases of ABS males (and females) I fear that we may have a new wave coming, especially with the proliferation of "pet" breeders.

I don't like having to talk or write about this topic, but feel it is my obligation to do so, for the sake of the llamas and alpacas, the owners, and the industry.

Remember, ABS is NOT hereditary, but it is a strictly human caused condition, which only humans can prevent. For you new buyers, beware the "friendly" baby that is so irresistible.

What, exactly, is ABS (Aberrant Behavior Syndrome; formerly BMS, or Berserk Male Syndrome?) Bearing in mind that I am a layman, and as stressed, not an "expert", but rather, someone with 40 years' experience with prey animals and 18 years of full time involvement with llamas and alpacas specifically, particularly relating to behavioral problems, I'll give you my opinions and perspectives, based upon that experience.

Please understand that there are lots of opinions out there, some based upon very limited experience or knowledge — (sometimes a little bit of knowledge can be a very dangerous thing.)

Please also keep in mind what I mentioned previously — most of the animals that have been labeled "berserk" or ABS are simply spoiled, undisciplined brats, and can be brought around in a very short time with proper training.

Most of the spitting problems that develop (not necessarily having anything to do with ABS) can be prevented by avoiding the use of food treats in training, or hand-feeding grain at any

time. I know some of you don't want to hear this, but 18 years and thousands of llamas and alpacas and their handlers have proven this to be the case. I am trying to do right, not to be right, in presenting this to you, for the reason of hoping to protect as many llamas and alpacas (and people) from having to experience this unfortunate situation firsthand as I can.

As simply as I can explain it, ABS results from a llama's inability to differentiate between the species (human and llama), resulting in inappropriate (that's putting it very mildly) behavior toward people.

ABS results from a llama's inability to differentiate between the species (human and llama), resulting in inappropriate behavior toward people.

This is usually a result of improper over-socialization of youngsters by humans, but not limited to that cause. I have seen many llamas and alpacas which had been born into, and raised in, a perfectly normal herd situation, and not handled at all until after weaning, develop ABS. In most cases, these animals were forced to live without the company of other young llamas or alpacas, and transferred their affections and associations to humans. I have met many animals that have been sold as yearlings develop the problem, as well.

It appears that the greatest risk for future ABS occurs very early in life, during the most critical learning period of the animal's life, those minutes and hours and days immediately following birth. The potential diminished with age, but is still very much there. Some typical scenarios:

- A compromised cria, requiring intensive care, including, but not limited to, supplemental feeding. The irresistible eyelashes and distressed humming of the newborn makes it almost impossible to keep this place of business businesslike.

The snuggling and cooing and intense attention shown the baby causes it to imprint on humans and understand that there is no difference between itself and us. These are the "friendly" babies that follow us around, gurgling and humming, with tails flipped up over their backs.

This is a submissive "I don't want any trouble, I'm just a baby" body posturing displayed to other llamas or alpacas to avoid trouble. The baby, then, is treating us as if we were another llama; he doesn't mind us handling him all over, he shows no natural fear.

The problem arises when he reaches puberty and the hormones start to run his life (remember being, or raising, a teenager?) The male, being the designated territorial defender, then attacks

continued on next page

his human handlers when they enter his paddock (territory) to drive them out, just as he would any other llama or alpaca on "his turf".

- A youngster sold soon after weaning to a child, who wants a playmate, an equal, a living, breathing, Disney-like "pet."
- Compromised crias which have to spend several days at the veterinary clinic, often being cuddled by the veterinary assistants.
- Petting zoo "graduates." Petting zoos probably produce more ABS males than all other factors combined. The constant, intense physical interaction with people and hand-fed "treats" is almost guaranteed to produce dangerous adults.
- Any cria growing up without the company of peers (animals his size and age and species).
- Youngsters of any age that are over socialized — many "PR" llamas or alpacas "suddenly" develop behaviors. These may include llamas or alpacas that are used as children's birthday party attractions, county fair displays and other situations where there is a lot of direct physical interaction with people. There is an abnormally high incidence of the "he was our very best "PR" llama; Why, he'd let kids climb all over him and get kisses all day.

Let's finish up this discussion on ABS (Aberrant Behavior Syndrome) with some tips on prevention. It is crucial that we recognize the fact that this is a learned (taught) human-caused condition which is totally preventable and equally incurable.

It is up to us; some llamas and alpacas seem to be somewhat predisposed toward the syndrome due to an unusually low fear response. These babies, which we are naturally drawn to, can very easily be pushed "over the edge" with very little interaction with people, so be careful with these cuties ...

I wish, as much as anyone, that we could cuddle and hug on our llamas or alpacas without fear of repercussion, but it just isn't so. We should be satisfied with a mutually respectful relationship, and **MUST** assume the role of leader in that relationship — this is the world of the llama or alpaca and crucial to his well-being — a clearly defined social order.

Of the hundreds of behavior-related phone calls that I get every year, none are more heartbreaking than those from the distraught llama or alpaca owner whose veterinarian and llama or alpaca friends have told them that their "favorite, sweetest, most affectionate" llama or alpaca must be put down due to ABS.

They are calling me for a last hope, a reprieve, praying that I will tell them that this most drastic step is not necessary. In the case of a full-blown ABS animal, there is really no other choice. Imagine having to deal with that, then having to live with the fact that you caused it, choosing to follow your heart rather than your head and the available information.

Please be careful — the llama or alpaca you save may be your own

Happy trails!

TIPS TO PREVENT

I wish, as much as anyone, that we could cuddle and hug on our llamas or alpacas without fear of repercussion, but it just isn't so.

- Do NOT over-cuddle llamas and alpacas — it is as simple as that. Llamas are not psychologically adapted to being "pets" in the sense that dogs and cats (predators) are. As difficult as this may be, it is nothing compared to hearing that your favorite llama or alpaca has to be put down, a very strong possibility in the future.
- Whenever the youngster approaches you with his tail flipped up over his back, ignore him (it sounds easier than it is...) Better yet, startle him by making a big noise and movement toward him. You have to make his llama-like interactions with you a little unpleasant in order to dissuade him from more of the same. This is known as "nipping it in the bud".
- Gelding: While some current wisdom advocates waiting until fighting teeth have erupted before gelding in order to avoid abnormalities in bone growth (tall, stretchy, post-legged adults) and "breaking down" of fetlocks/pastern, I would prefer to have an animal a bit down on his pasterns at age ten or twelve than to have to put him down at age two-and-a-half or three.
- Give strict instructions to employees, visitors, family members, and anyone else who may come in frequent contact with him to comply with your "hands-off" policy. You must be ruthless about this — most people cannot possibly believe that such a little sweetie could become a life-threatening adult.
- Make the llama or alpaca move out of your way. If you enter a pen or corral and a llama or alpaca blocks your way, don't go around him to be "polite"; go through him, using a good firm bump of your knee to his ribcage if he is standing broadside to you, or a "goose" of his lower leg if he is stand-

continued on next page

ing otherwise. This is language the llama or alpaca can understand, how they communicate with one another — he doesn't take it personally and won't hold it against you, really.

- Do not allow the llama or alpaca to invade your personal space for any longer than the one second or so it takes for a nose-to-nose "how do you do." No nuzzling! Although, to us humans, this seems a very sweet and friendly thing for a llama or alpaca to do, it is actually an aggressive act on his part, "testing the waters" to ascertain his position in the social order. As the more dominant "animal" in the group, it is our prerogative to enter his personal space, but he is never allowed to enter ours.
- At feeding time, get your exercise by doing what my Australian friends call the "Mallon Macarena" — throw your hands, elbows, knees and feet around your personal space, creating an uncomfortable zone for the llama or alpaca who wants to steal food from your hand, which brings us to...
- Do not hand-feed your llamas or alpacas, for any reason, at any time. I know, I know, but please trust me on this one....
- If your llama or alpaca approaches you whenever you enter his pen, make it an opportunity to teach him some "business;" pick up a foot, handle his ears, tail, etc., but don't pet him.

WARNING SIGNS!!!

Some behavioral clues to watch for in Berserk Male Syndrome:

- The young llama or alpaca that follows people around, seemingly preferring their company to that of other llamas or alpacas.
- The llama or alpaca that does not object to being handled (this does NOT apply to those animals

which have been PROPERLY desensitized at birth) by people.

- The llama or alpaca that "casually" brushes against people in his proximity. This is the llama's way of establishing himself in the social hierarchy of the group or herd.
- Having been allowed to brush against
- s, it is now clear in the llama's mind that he is superior to us in the social order, and may exercise his options (spitting, bumping, ramming, biting, etc.) against us at any time in the future. Taking that a bit farther is the llama or alpaca who "bumps" his handler, usually the wife (smaller in stature) when her back is turned to him, most often when she is bending over to pick something up.
- The llama or alpaca that approaches with tail curled up and over his back, sometimes accompanied by the "submissive crouch."
- 'Gurgling' to people.
- 'Lipping' clothes, shoelaces — a prelude to biting.

With over 40 years' experience in the training of horses, dogs, and birds, John has devoted himself exclusively to all aspects of the llama industry since 1981. A popular featured speaker at regional, national, and international venues, and a longtime consultant with an international list of clients, John has averaged 50 to 60 clinics a year since 1994. Visit John's website at <http://www.johnmallonclinics.net>.

See his ad on the page 15



Originally published in the GALA Newsletter, May 2018