

Berserk Male Syndrome or...Novice Handler Syndrome?

By Marty McGee Bennett - CAMELIDynamics

Berserk Male Syndrome

Berserk male syndrome is a phrase that has been around for a long time. As near as I can tell llama breeder Paul Taylor originally used the term BMS in an article in late 1980 or early 1981. Paul wrote an article in the 3L Llama Newsletter in March of 1981 clarifying what he meant by the term.

Paul said, "It seems to be the end result of a series of confusing and negative interactions with humans, beginning with the breakdown of the normal standoffishness that herd raised llamas show in their relationship to humans. A male llama that has been bottle fed or constantly petted and fondled as a baby will show no hesitation about initiating contact with humans, as in the mild case of the pushy llama who runs up to be petted or bumps with his chest against people in the pasture with him. Such a llama is apt to be pushed or slapped to keep him away; this conflict can escalate over a period of time, possibly with changing owners or eventually the use of a whip or club to keep the animal at bay. The final result seems to be a tangled combination of the normal llama behavior for dominance assertion, breeding and defense."

While I don't disagree with the characterization, I don't like the term because 1) berserk male syndrome makes it sound as if it is some random bad luck thing that just happens like Choanal Atresia, not so. It is we humans who are responsible; and 2) the behavior is not restricted to males.

In any case camelids do not have a monopoly on this particular problem, domestic animals that become aggressive occur in all species. Dairy bulls, bottle raised cats, puppies and foals all are prone to difficulties in their interactions with humans.

What is aggression... more questions than answers

Today the phrase BMS is used to describe those llamas and alpacas who are doing anything from innocently pushing the bounds of proper behavior to those animals that are completely out of control and dangerously aggressive. It is a confusing state of affairs.

I get calls from worried llama and alpaca owners on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis. These owners are worried about the potentially aggressive or already aggressive behavior of their animals. The rest of Taylor's article went on to advise llama owner/breeders to allow young llamas to be socialized by the herd so that they develop the normal standoffish behavior. I agree that allowing young llamas and alpacas to live in a herd is a good idea.

On the other hand, what if you, like many camelid owners, don't have a herd? Many new owners have one each—male, female and new baby. What about the young llama or alpaca that voluntarily leaves the company of the herd to interact with humans? What about the orphan or youngster who must be treated medically on an ongoing basis? The current advice within the camelid community ranges from a complete hands-off policy until young camelids (especially males) are six months old to intense handling as a newborn to varying approaches in between.

I think that in order to decide how to prevent aggressive behavior it is important to gain awareness of what it is exactly and what causes it. Perhaps more importantly to recognize the early warning signals of aggression and act then. Why do some males become aggressive and others raised in the same circumstances turn out fine? Can it happen to females? Is gelding aggressive males the magic bullet?

The Novice Handler Syndrome

Perhaps it would help if we reorient our thinking about aggressive camelids and put the onus where it belongs—with the humans. My suggestion is that we coin an additional term "The Novice Handler Syndrome." It is my experience that aggressive animals happen because a variety of factors coalesce. Camelids are born with different personalities and tendencies. Humans have different behavioral styles, levels of confidence and experience. Environmental factors such as multiple owners, age of weaning, herd composition also play a part in the behavior of a llama or an alpaca.

A precocious animal whose approach to new situations is to control them combined with a new owner lacking in experience = problem. The same new owner with a naturally timid animal = no problem. A young camelid with early medical problems (even if he is raised in a large herd) who is later sold to a new timid owner=problem. A young male camelid is raised alone with no other llama or alpaca babies to play with. The owners have young children. The children encourage aggressive play behavior directed at humans. The young male camelid eventually outweighs the children and reaches puberty when the games get serious=problem. You get the picture. Sets of circumstances are responsible, not one factor, and usually a person new to camelids is part of the mix.

How it Starts....Nancy Novice So how do we humans navigate these dangerous behavioral waters? The first step
continued on next page

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I believe is to own the problem. Once we accept that the behavioral change has to happen with the humans in this particular animal's environment, we can realize the limitations of a "fix" and set about changing what we can. The easiest thing is prevention through awareness. One very important facet of the "Novice Handler Syndrome" is the tendency of the human to misinterpret the beginnings of aggressive behavior for friendliness.

Allow me a short description of how the NHS is played out leading to a real problem. Nancy Novice has her first llama or alpaca baby. IT'S A BOY! The baby lives with two adult females (Nancy's entire herd) in a small pasture. His instincts tell him to play, wrestle, bite, and bump. We have a couple of immediate problems. First there is not a lot of room to run and not much to do. Second the other animals in his environment don't want to play and in fact they say something like "Get away from me kid you bother me." Young stud is majorly bored.

The high point of this young animal's day is when Nancy comes out and sits with him. This two-legged "thing" is nothing if not interesting and far from being rebuffed he is the star of the show. He starts finding out about this thing in his environment by interacting with it. At first, he is a bit timid and walks up with his neck and nose extended for a greeting. Fine so far. At first the baby gets Nancy's undivided attention. From Nancy's point of view everything this baby does is worthy of putting in the baby book.

The reality is that there are chores that Nancy must do in the barn such as mucking out the stalls. The baby decides he wants to interact with her. He wants her attention so he picks at her clothes, puts his nose in her face and rubs against her while she is working. A week or so later this youngster is now running up to Nancy skidding to a stop and putting his nose in her face. I can bet you that by the time this baby is 16 months old—maybe a lot sooner than that—Nancy will be calling me, or somebody, to ask why her beautiful, friendly, perfect, baby boy is now rearing up and wrapping his legs around her waist every time she turns her back on him.

Young llama or alpaca babies that rub, lean stand closely, walk right up and put their nose in your face or crotch and fail to yield space when you move toward them **are not being friendly**. These behaviors are really the beginnings of future aggression. Your young camelid is exploring his environment and checking out the boundaries of what is allowed. He or she is asking you very important questions. The conventional wisdom of ignoring youngsters who behave this way is, in my

experience, not the answer. If you do nothing to discourage this seemingly "friendly" behavior it usually escalates.

What Now? What is Nancy to do now and when did she give the impression to a young perfect baby boy that he could practice breeding her? Should she slap him, push him away every time he comes near her and yell NO BAD boy! ? I wouldn't recommend this course of action. It surely would have been better if Nancy knew to discourage her young suitor earlier on. There is certainly nothing wrong with a young llama or alpaca youngster soliciting a nose greeting with neck and nose extended and then waiting politely for Nancy to lean forward to participate in the greeting. Sticking

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his nose in Nancy's face any time he felt like it is crossing the line of allowable behavior.

I believe if Nancy had flicked him on the nose with her fingers (like she was flicking a piece of lint off her sweater) the first couple of times this youngster entered

her personal space without permission the problem would have ended before it got going. I don't mean to suggest that Nancy needs to scare him away only that she needs to be clear about the fact that she has personal space and he is not allowed in it. A foot and a half is my personal space. A human need only stop an animal from entering this space; we do not need to chase the animal away.

In my opinion Nancy would be making a big mistake to push this young guy away when he approaches or to yell. Yelling gets everybody's blood going, escalates the situation and indicates that you are afraid. Speak like you mean it firmly and powerfully and tell the young camelid what you want him to do, which is STAY BACK. NO is a very overused word and is a lousy command. NO is the answer to a question not a command. The unspoken thought after you say NO is... DON'T JUMP ON ME. Better not to even think it!

If you are currently dealing with a young camelid who has headed down this road and is already at the point of rubbing pushing you may need more than your fingers to back these little guys up. A Frisbee is a great tool. Use a very short staccato bip on the nose along with a firm STAY BACK. You are creating a force field around you. Remember when you use the Frisbee there is **no follow through**- simply reinforce the edges of your space with the Frisbee. Visualize that the animal is hitting the Frisbee rather than the other way around. The point is not to hurt this youngster but to startle him. Get a few Frisbees punch a hole in the edge and tie a string on

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it so that you can hang one anywhere you are likely to need one. Carry one with you AT ALL TIMES until the youngster gets the idea. It is important that every human in your young camelid's life behave consistently. If you have children keep them away from this youngster until he understands how to behave. If you have farm visitors put this guy on a halter; if he is halter trained, or put him back in the barn.

Insist on Respectful Behavior It is not a bad idea to geld him. Gelding uncomplicates the problem but doesn't solve it. You must still learn to behave differently and set limits. Female llamas and alpacas can become disrespectful and difficult too. Clucking ear threats and spitting are the more likely outcome but I have met females who were physically intimidating. My policy is to treat male and female babies no differently. I insist on respectful behavior from both sexes.

Babies do best if they have other babies to play with. With other babies around in many cases, the whole problem becomes a non-issue. If you are going to have a single baby, think about forming a baby camelid playgroup. Contact other breeders that are going to have single babies. Make arrangements to board your female and baby at their farm for a month or two and then move both mothers and babies to your place for two months. The hassle is well worth it and you will both benefit from the enjoyment of watching the babies play together.

Avoid the Dangers of Overcompensation

Overcompensation is a major facet of the "Novice Handler Syndrome" leading to the old "I will show this animal who is the boss attitude". I prefer to think of myself as the teacher rather than the boss. If you prefer the boss analogy, that's fine, but how about being a boss of the new millennium instead of the 40's. Enlightened managers, teachers and bosses know that coming on like Attila the Hun creates major difficulties.

Many trainers use the word dominance to describe how to behave around an animal. The issue of dominance is a tricky one. Humans come into an animal's life as being entirely different from them and very powerful—omnipotent actually. We control everything about the environment, no question. I don't think it is a good idea to participate in dominance contests with animals. Assume you are in charge, don't feel like you have to prove it and by all means don't give away your place of preeminence by encouraging animals to behave disrespectfully towards you. Setting consistent limits, being respectful of the animal and being careful about asking too much too soon are all good ways of avoiding confrontation.

Using training methods that do not rely on force or intimidation are important when training camelids particularly the ones that test the water. Tying an alpaca or a llama and forcing him to submit to excessive grooming, dragging him to teach him to lead, physically holding him to put a halter on or to pick up his feet will all provoke the young animal that has decided to be physical with humans.

Dangerously Aggressive Animals

One last difficult issue... what about the animal that has already gotten **dangerously** aggressive, that is bumping, hitting, charging, vocalizing and biting? Sell him to someone who doesn't know any better? Auction? Petting zoo? Keep him behind a chain link fence for the rest of his life? Once an animal learns that aggression works to make him/her feel more secure it is very hard to convince him to give it up. Training techniques that rely on force or reciprocal aggression usually escalate the behavior. When treated this

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way most aggressive camelids will become selectively obedient to those humans that have dominated them and of whom they are afraid.

Dominance is not a static thing. Just because you were dominant on Tuesday doesn't

mean you get to be top dog forever, so if your approach is to address this problem with dominance techniques, it would be best not to turn your back. There are some training and handling techniques that I share individually with people who are determined to give these animals another chance but as a general rule I don't encourage people to keep these animals around, particularly if you have children. The irony of the situation is that most people who have the emotional constitution to deal with these animals don't want to and the people who can't stand to see any animal euthanized and decide to "save" these animals don't have the inner ballast to deal with them successfully. If you have helped to produce or maybe just ended up with a llama or an alpaca who has become **dangerously** aggressive—that is one that attacks and bites- it might be best to take the responsibility and have him put down. In many cases this is a kindness. A quick painless end is highly preferable to a severely limited, confusing, lonely long existence.

Go to CAMELIDynamics.com for more information from Marty and a schedule of her up-coming trainings.

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