

Choosing a Driving Llama

Dan Whittaker
Dawn to Dusk Llamas

Most all llamas can pull a cart. We are looking for the llamas that can actually drive the cart on command. I don't want to count out any llamas, but if we choose correctly, we can have better results in less time. Both sexes have proven to be successful drivers. The female llamas seem to be very focused on the issue at hand. The national champions have been both intact males and non-breeders. This is a great opportunity to put those boys to work. I consider driving training to be advanced training for a llama. Before jumping to cart training, the llama needs to be halter broken, lead and obey. He needs to be able to be touched all over. Standing still is a major plus. You can start training at 1 year old with ground driving and empty cart pulling. You want to wait until 2 years old to get in the cart for any period of time.

Temperament will be the most important thing for best results. Some temperament can be learned, but don't count on it.

Temperament to look for in drivers:

- Alert presence, doesn't miss anything
- Mixes well with other llamas, but not necessarily a leader
- Self confident when alone
- Not timid
- Likes and trusts people (non aggressive)
- Willing to learn and do new things.
- Avoid over mellow (slow to move)
- Known blood line of temperament
- Avoid the freeze and fee llama. This llama seems out of itself when being worked with, and then explodes to escape when it feels the opportunity. Remember this llama is going to be driving us around.

Conformation is important for a pleasurable drive for the llama. Watch the llama moving out in the pasture:

- Watch for smooth shoulder and leg movement
- Watch for labored breathing (faring nostrils) may be a sign of overweight, or health problem
- Watch the llama walk from front and rear. Avoid llamas that look like they are walking on a tight rope (left rear leg in front of right rear leg and same in the front)



Rope walking

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- Avoid llamas that wobble from side to side when they walk freely

The llama does not have to be a perfect specimen. The llama may have the heart to drive, but if it is struggling to pull because he/she is overcoming a structural fault we are doing a disservice to the animal. If you are planning on teaming your llamas, you want to avoid excessive leg arching (swinging out of the line of step). The teamed llamas legs can hit if it is bad enough. Watch someone run the llama straight away from you and back toward you.



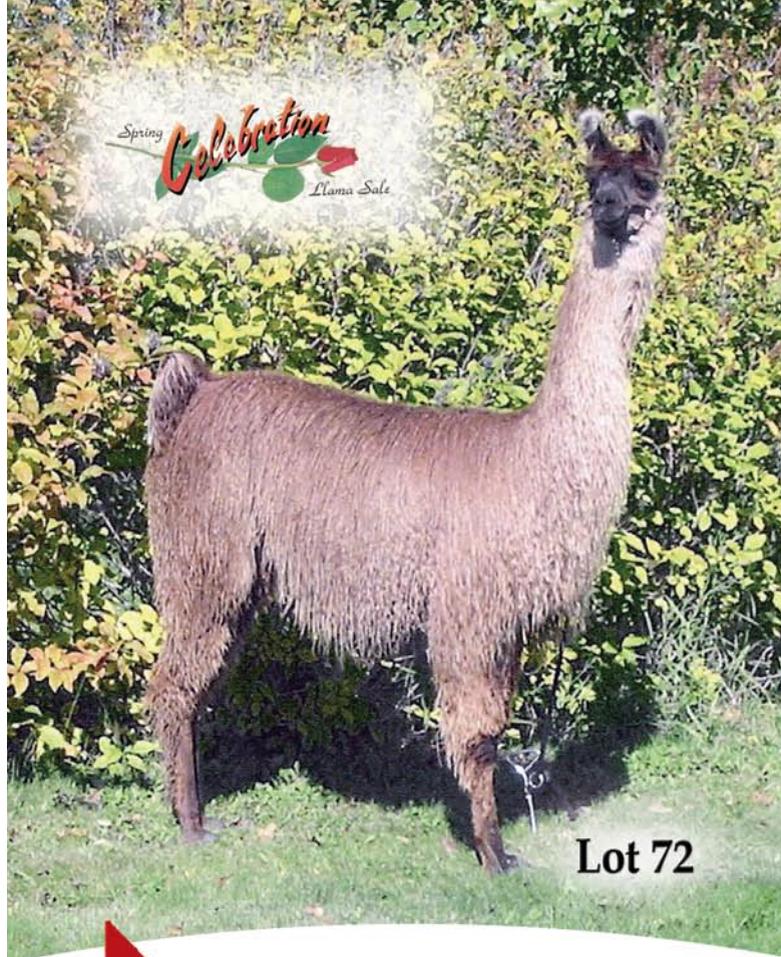
Arching legs in rear

The size of your llama is going to define your length of ride. My personal preference is as big as I can find with the above traits. With smaller llamas (under 41 inches at withers), consider having a team or watch for overexertion by the dropping jaw, dripping noise, and excessive nostril fair.

Putting it all together, we want a tolerant, healthy, free fowing, large as possible llama. Heavy wool should be sheared for the driving season. If your llamas don't fit perfectly on our list, still give them a try. If their conformation isn't perfect, take only short drives, parades etc. Driving is the coolest thing I've done with my llamas.

Dan Whittaker
Dawn to Dusk llamas

My wife Melody and I have been raising llamas in Stillwater, MN since 1994. We began driving team llamas in 1997. I am actively involved as the web designer for Lamas of Minnesota, our local 4H organization, judging and superintending shows. Our driving clinics give the teaching tools to continue training llamas to drive. We are now making and selling carts and collar style harnesses.



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Notice the difference of entering the carts and the center of gravity or height of the seat.

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where the llama would be holding them up and a little higher than level. The weight should be less than 10 lbs. Now have the person sitting in the cart move back and forth to see the weight change at the poles. Most llama carts have seat adjustments to shift the driver's weight, slots etc. Therefore as the driver with a passenger, it is your responsibility to keep the weight shifted correctly.

- Pole length determines the distance the llama is from the cart. The pole length and the seat position and cart design all put together make for how much actual weight the llama will be holding up. The llama's energy should be in pulling you, not carrying much weight. The other consideration is the llama's leg motion straight back. Too close, his hocks can hit the cart when running or hard pulling up an incline. Some llamas feel crowded when too close to the cart. The poles should never be pointing downward when hooked to the llama.
- Seat height or center of gravity is also a consideration. The lower seat gives a more stable ride at higher speed turning like a sports car. The taller seat may give you a better field of view. The height is achieved by the design of the axle location, wheel size and construction of the cart.

Cost can be from \$450-950 for the carts alone plus the dreaded shipping cost. The pony and cob carts are not llama

carts. They are usually too tall for llamas and too wide at the end of the poles. Some are converted by using smaller wheels and different poles. Another consideration is if the cart can be converted to double llamas in the future. Four-wheel carts are substantially more expensive. Take care of your cart, resale value is 50-75% if it was a good cart originally.

Harnesses are the connection and distribution of pulling power. The harness has many jobs. The llama harnesses are mostly made from nylon to keep the weight down. The leather harnesses can get very heavy, to keep weight down the pieces are made very narrow which can cut into your animal. Like the horse harnesses you have different style options, breast or collar. The breast style harness has the llama pushing the harness



This a nice buckle option for harness attachments.

with his chest. The straps run across his chest and shoulders to pull the cart. With the collar style, the llama pulls with a padded distribution at the base of his neck and shoulder area. The collar styles have provisions for double llama driving. The breast style harness would need an extra strap or accessory for this option. Another article would need to be written to get into all the pieces of a harness and their duties. Ease of installation is an issue at first but you get pretty proficient. Some harnesses use a spring style clip for the connections instead of buckles to the nearest hole. This is a nice option when the fiber gets heavy or your llama changes size, also if you need to snug up the straps after you drive and the harness

settles. The costs are from \$150-300 for each harness, which usually includes driving halter and driving lines (reins).

The driving halters are a touchy subject. Most drivers and makers are convinced their style is the best. When our llamas don't drive or respond to rein commands we have a habit of going for the magic equipment fix. After many changes we find the llama needs more response training. The pulling back for immediate braking with all the driving halters are designed to make the animal's face very uncomfortable with fair success at best of immediate response. Once again I revert back to a well-trained animal. This brings another subject, open reins or closed reins? Open rein driving is not using the turrets (loops) on the back saddle which gives the driver straight hand to halter control. The closed driving brings the reins down to a loop and then to the driver. I like running my llamas and find that open rein driving is a little livelier with very good response. The closed lines are well liked by ALSA and should be used in a show situation. I would suggest training out of the turrets and when the llama responds to your signals move your lines into the turrets. I have found that the placement of the turrets for double driving limits the signal to one of the llamas, be aware of

If you get the opportunity, test-drive other carts and harnesses. If the equipment is chafing the animal, I would definitely investigate the equipment fit. Avoid having excess straps hanging down; also the weight distribution of the cart hook up may be disturbing your animal. These kinds of things may detour your llama from wanting to move out. I make and sell what I think you and your llama will be comfortable using. If it is a show or parades or just that picturesque drive down the rural road, your llama's ears will be up. Yes, it may get in your pocket book and time, but the return is worth it. Don't forget; take care of your equipment and it will take care of you. It's time to take the reins!