

How to train your goat



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I have worked professionally as a detection dog trainer and love watching how animals behave and learn. Using positive reinforcement (reward based) training, I have enjoyed training dogs, cats, chickens and goats. By using the techniques described here, your relationship with your goat will be based on respect and trust. By building this relationship, not only will your every day interactions be rewarding, but the things that can be traditionally difficult in goat husbandry such as hoof trimming, managing bucks and transporting your goats, can be easy and stress free.

There are some basic principles common to all training (of all kinds of animals to do all kinds of different behaviours and actions). These are: observing your goats and getting to know goat body language breaking down a task into small steps and building on each step without stressing the goat positive reinforcement negative reinforcement A word on negative reinforcement: This is a technical training/animal behavior term that does NOT mean punishment. I believe there is never a case for hitting a goat or using force such as a cattle prod.

Negative reinforcement means that when a goat stops doing an undesirable behavior, a negative or unpleasant feeling or consequence will stop. (Don't worry, this concept is easy to understand in the examples I will give.) I shall describe these principles by illustrating how I train for 4 different behaviours: hoof trimming walking on a halter being relaxed when transported in a vehicle or trailer managing the behaviour of dominant bucks A little on goat body language: Spend time with your goats and get to know their sounds and body language. The benefits are enormous.

Most importantly, you will be able to recognise early signs of stress, so that the situation can be changed and your goat is not stressed out with potential health problems. Secondly, if you look at your goat and something doesn't "look quite right" you can contact your vet sooner rather than later and avert a potential crisis. Signs of stress in goats can include their ears back, and not making eye contact as well as increased respiration rate. Another interesting observation is that goats use a sneeze as a method of communication. It loosely means "pay attention" - not yet identifying danger but becoming a bit more vigilant.

Hoof trimming The key to hoof trimming is to start young and break it down in to small steps. When the kids are born handle them all over. As they become older, continue touching them all over including the ears and top of the head which they dislike. Intersperse with touching favourite areas such as on the chin/neck and under the chest. Touch also down the back of the legs and handle the hoofs but don't lift the hooves up at this stage. It is easiest to run your hands down the back of their legs (all 4, don't just always do the same one leg) when they are being fed, so that they are distracted.

Here the positive reinforcement for the desired behavior of keeping still and not fidgeting when being touched is either being touched where the goat likes it or eating their feed (if it is done at mealtimes). Don't rush the process. Just do a little each day so that the goat is very comfortable with the process and shows no signs of stress. Then slowly increase the steps bit by bit by lifting the hoof off the ground ever so slightly, separating the two halves of the hoof between your fingers, feeling the cold knife or secateurs

blade against the edge of the hoof, bending the leg at the knee so the goat is balanced on only 3 legs, etc.

Finally you can attempt the actual hoof trim, doing a little at a time and building up to eventually trimming all 4 hooves in one session. I have found for the front legs, it is easier to set the feed bin at a lower height and push gently on the goats withers while pulling a front leg gently out and back from under the goat. The goat will end up happily eating on its front knees and be very stable, rather than balancing on only 3 legs while you trim the front hooves. Negative reinforcement does not mean punishment. It means that the stopping the unwanted behaviour produces a good outcome for the animal.

In this case of hoof trimming, if the goat starts to fidget when you have its leg in your hands, it will lead to being off balance or in an awkward or uncomfortable posture (a negative situation for the goat.) Assuming you are supporting the goat and holding its leg in a reasonably comfortable position, then when the goat stops fidgeting, it will regain its balance and comfortable posture. When the negative behaviour (fidgeting) stops, then this is a positive outcome for the goat (comfort) and reinforces the good behavior of standing still.

By following these steps and using common sense, in a few weeks you can have a goat that is easy to handle with only one person and relaxed and continues to eat its feed while it has its hooves trimmed. Walking nicely on a halter Teaching a goat to walk on a halter is once again easiest when done when the goat is young and when broken down into steps: Start by letting the kid sniff the halter and just get used to it being draped over its neck at

meal times when it is distracted. Next, put the halter on the goat's head (after first adjusting the buckles to the size you think will be a good fit).

Just leave the halter on for a few minutes during feed time or other times when the goat is distracted such as when the goat is being patted or brushed. (if you didn't guess the correct size first time, leave it for today and try again later. Don't try and do too much fiddling with buckles and sizing at this introduction stage.) Continue increasing the length of time that the kid has the halter on for a few days until the kid pays no notice to the halter at all. Then attach a short lead and walk around initially for a few minutes at a time with the lead attached but no tension on the lead.

Pick a boring neutral open space if possible for this, as you don't want the goat veering off towards your favourite plant and having a fight on your hands first up. Next introduce the correct walking position with you choosing the route: Use favourite treats such as sunflower seeds or raisins to reward the goat every time the kid moves up beside you in the correct loose lead position for walking. Use the treats both to encourage the goat to start walking and to reward for walking in the correct position.

Practise changing direction and increase the distractions like walking closer to tasty plants. Using the raisin rewards is positive reinforcement. Gradually cut down the treats and only reward for really good or consistent walking. If the goat pulls or lags on the lead do one of two things - if the goat has been genuinely suddenly spooked or startled, stop, reassure her and calm the goat down before moving off again, luring with the rewards. If the goat consistently lags or worse still, stubbornly brakes with her front feet with the

attitude of " I'm not going anywhere! then use tension on the lead and pull as hard as it takes to get her moving.

Note that it helps when you do this if your body language is also resolutely going forward with shoulders squared and looking ahead rather than turning and looking at the goat and trying to cajole her into moving. Then, most importantly, the instant that the goat starts to move, release the tension on the lead. This is negative reinforcement at work: For the negative behavior of not moving, the goat has the unpleasant sensation of her head being pulled and pressure on her face from the halter.

As soon as she moves forward, the lead is slackened and the negative sensation of the halter pressure stops: She is in effect being rewarded for walking forward. Finally, for easy successful walking, know your goats and their personalities and make allowances for this. For example, I walk two goats on leads to some local bushlands every day. One goat is very outgoing and curious and always wants to be the first to stick her nose into everything. The other goat always stands back and watches what happens with the first goat before she comes up to explore.

So I walk the 2 goats on different length leads. The curious lead goat is on a short lead right beside my knee. The more shy goat is on a slightly longer lead lagging just behind with her head abreast the other goat. To force her to be in the lead or up front equal to the more curious goat would just be a continual struggle against the goats' personalities and be stressful for the goats and frustrating for me. It should only take a few minutes a day for a week or two to have your goat walking beautifully on a halter. Stress free travel

Even if the thought of taking your pet goat on the family outing in the car doesn't appeal to you, there are times when it may be necessary to transport your goat such as to the vet or a goat show or a stud for mating. It is a huge advantage if the goats are relaxed about travel and arrive at the destination stress free. Even if you haven't accustomed your goat to vehicle travel as a kid, it is not too late: For that appointment in a few weeks time, you can make a lot of progress towards a stress free trip. Firstly, get the goat used to the vehicle in its own environment.

Whether it be a trailer (covered) or a horse float or the back of the family station wagon or van (with appropriate restraining cargo barrier for the safety of you and the goat in the event of an accident), the principles are the same. Park the vehicle with the engine off and the door open. Lead the goat to the vehicle but don't force the goat in. Let the goat just sniff the outside in its own time. When the goat is comfortable with the vehicle lure the goat inside the open door using the goats favourite treats.

It can also help if you sit in the section that the goat will be in, to encourage the goat to come in and interact with you for treats and pats. Next, after the goat is totally comfortable with hopping in and out of the transport space with you in it as well, then close the door (with you still in with the goats) for short periods. Try not to slam the door. Make sure the goats stay relaxed and reward with treats. Extend the time inside the closed area up to 5 minutes or so.

The next step (with you still in the back with the goats offering reassurance) is to get another person to start the car engine for a minute or so and then turn it off before the goats get agitated. Increase the time with the engine on

and then start to add other driving noises such as the car radio, the ventilation fan and the horn. At this stage the car hasn't actually moved. Next, with you still in the back for reassurance, get your driver to move the vehicle and do very short trips of a minute or so around your property or yard. Extend the duration of the trips to around the block.

Only venture further a field when you can be sitting in your normal seat and the goats are confident and relaxed enough to be in the cargo area by themselves. This is where a trailer is at a disadvantage as the goats can't see you when they are travelling. In a van or station wagon they still have eye contact with you in the front seat. Then take the goats on frequent local trips: Take the goats to pleasant places (good grazing or rocks to climb on , etc) so that they associate the travel with pleasant outcomes. If the only travel that they ever go on is to the vets then naturally the goats will be stressed when they travel.

The goats soon learn to relax and lie down and chew their cud when they travel so they don't tire themselves trying to keep their balance around corners and braking, etc. Goats that aren't so relaxed will try and stay on their feet. What about toileting and travel? In a trailer it doesn't really matter if the goats relieve themselves but it is a different story in the family car! Generally a relaxed goat will not pee or poo on short trips of less than 30 minutes. At worst they may drop a few little black marbles which are easy to clean up.

Relaxed goats will need walk breaks on longer trips just like the dog, to relieve themselves. But be warned: Stressed out goats will urinate in the car. Needless to say, this is difficult to clean up and eradicate the smell from the

car. So if you are not confident that your goats are good relaxed travellers then take the necessary precautions by putting down newspaper, plastic lining, etc in a small area that the goats are confined to. I take my goats in the family van for regular bush walks on the scenic large granite rocks in my local area and also further a field.

I have no problems at all and many other goat people through out the world (especially us lucky ones with mini goats) enjoy including their goat companions in their family outings. Managing bucks Adult bucks that have been involved in an escalating dominance struggle with their owners or who have been used to being dominant with a different owner before coming to your herd can be difficult to handle and downright aggressive and nasty. The information here is mainly designed for young bucklings and what to do to prevent nasty behaviour.

I will only comment briefly at the end of the article on what to do if you already have a problem buck. All goats are totally driven by herd behaviour and establishing their place in the herd. When goats are as young as a couple of weeks they will start to test their place in the herd with very low level behaviour. Initially they will just nudge or push you to get you to change direction or get out of the way when at the feed bins or going through gates, etc. As humans, we are very UNaware of herd body language and we tend not to notice these tiny little nudges or just instinctively move out of the way.

Round one to the goat! We need to tune in to these little nudges and gently push back and make a point of changing direction regularly when we walk with the little ones beside us, so that they are the ones that have to change

direction and get out of the way. Another way the young goats test for dominance is to try and get higher than you. Occasionally when you are playing with them it is fine to let them climb on you, but be very careful not to let them do it often. Especially when we are sitting with them they will try to put their front hoofs on our shoulders and stand over us. Don't let them do this.

In these ways, we are cementing our dominance as humans over the goats. Get all people who interact with the goats to be aware of these ways to establish dominance. All too often the main goat handler has the respect of the goats, but the goats see the human partner or children as being less dominant and behave badly with them. As the goat approaches adolescence this gentle pushing, nudging and testing and challenging for dominance will increase with it happening consistently until they get the message that the dominance order remains unchanged: All humans are dominant to the goat.

As the buck matures and comes into rut and especially if there is a doe on heat nearby, the buck will challenge again by gently pushing, nudging, etc and he yet again finds out that the human won't yield and he is still second fiddle to the humans. Notice that I have mentioned nothing about the traditional problem behaviours of rearing, head butting, charging to knock little children over etc. This is because a buck brought up from a young age as described above never does these behaviours. In natural herds in the wild and in our domesticated situation, all goats who think they are less dominant before they challenge the hierarchy will start with small dominance challenge behaviours like gentle pushing and shoving, to see if they can get away with it, or if they will be put in their place. They do not escalate immediately to

full head butting otherwise the less dominant ones in the herd would always be copping a full confrontation and injury with each minor scuffle. (Obviously not a good survival tactic). Contrast the situation of a buck who thinks he is less dominant before he challenges to the opposite situation: That of a buck who goes into a challenge thinking before he starts that he is the dominant one.

One buck pushes another who pushes back, who then head butts and the other one rears up for some height, and the first one responds. In a matter of seconds there can be a nasty full on fight for dominance. Escalation can happen very quickly in the wild between two dominant bucks. In our stud herds it can happen with the introduction of a new buck. Where the new buck has been dominant in his old herd, a challenge with our existing dominant buck could escalate quickly and become very nasty.

A third situation is where the buck thinks he is dominant to the human handler because we have ignored his small challenging behaviour when he was younger, letting him get away with the small pushes, etc. Now that he is an adult things get very difficult indeed. If we ask him to do something he doesn't want to such as move away from the fence nearest the doe pen he will challenge us. Because he thinks he is dominant he will push. We reprimand him or push back so he escalates his behaviour and rears up or head butts to maintain his position as the dominant one.

We now have the classic problem nasty buck on our hands. This behaviour can be fixed but it takes a lot of time and patience. We need to go right back to scratch and establish our dominance at every opportunity. This rehabilitation is best started when the buck is not in rut. Every time you go

near the buck challenge him by pushing him gently. If he pushes back or rears or head butts, then grab him firmly by your side until he stops struggling. If he doesn't push back, reward him with heaps of praise, a pat on his favourite spot or a treat.