



**Weaning, It's
A Process,
Not An
Event!**

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Every year many mistakes are made, across the country, at the critical juncture in a young alpaca's life known as weaning time. By definition, there is no exact way to wean your crias. As a matter of fact, there are probably 100 different ways to do it, and do it successfully. However, there are a few ways to do it incorrectly, and that is why we are here.

Our presentation draws on many years of experience. The birthing and weaning of hundreds of cria. We have consulted numerous other breeders about their philosophies. We have also solicited input from Dr. Julio Sumar & Maggie Krieger on the subject.

All of this was done in an effort to find balance between the more natural weaning process which occurs in South America & the more aggressive approach we use here in North America. Our North American approach is necessitated by many different reasons. Count among them, our rigorous National Show schedule and a strong awareness for the well being of the nursing, and soon to be expecting dam. Incorporating all of these many different considerations, we have developed the following 3 step process for weaning. It includes a period of preparation, a period of evaluation & a period for the process of weaning.

If you incorporate the three step process & use good common sense, a realistic approach, time, energy, and love; and you and your cria and dams will be successful.

Why are we qualified to give this talk?

We are qualified to talk about this subject because we have made mistakes. The result of those mistakes has been increased veterinary expenses dealing with the likes of Fatty Liver Disease or Ulcers, to stress breaks in the fleeces, and worst of all to a young alpaca's death. We have lost more than one cria during weaning as have many others. Because of those losses, we have come to understand how important the weaning is to the young cria, and to our breeding program. What was once an event for us is now a PROCESS!

The following is an outline for that PROCESS.

The Preparation:

Before the Weaning Process Begins:

A. In the best of all scenarios, a cria is very independent, has a terrific appetite, readily goes to the water, would rather be alone or with buddies, than with mom & has no fear. The reality is that this doesn't occur very often.

1. Therefore Know Your Alpacas

Well before the weaning process begins, note their separation from their dams, or the lack there of.

Obviously the more independent the cria is, the more probable the weaning will go well. This however is not an absolute given and you will be surprised how the reverse is sometimes true.

2. Note their eating habits & Note their drinking habits.

This is an extremely important issue. No cria should ever be weaned without excellent eating & drinking habits!

A. How do you achieve this? "Cria Creeps." Set up cria creeps where young alpacas can go, and have access to plenty of food and water, while the dams are unable to get there. This assures that the cria are not competing for food with the adult females and hence developing strong eating habits for themselves.

It also increases independence for the young alpaca, and as crias go to this area, so will other crias. Friendships are developed. These friendships are a life line later on.



Cria Creeps

3. Is the cria a male or female?

- A. One thing we would like you to take from this seminar is that each alpaca is an individual, and therefore; stereotyping is an absolute No No. However, as a tip, male cria tend to take weaning with more difficulty than do female cria. This however is NOT an absolute, so when weaning your crias, evaluate them as individuals.

The Evaluation:

When Should a Cria Be Weaned

Many breeders have criteria for weaning. Some of those criteria are as follows:

- A. Cria's Weight
- B. Cria's Age
- C. Cria's Independence
- D. Cria's Confidence
- E. Cria's Eating Habits
- F. Cria's Drain on the Dam
- G. Cria's Social Interaction with Other Cria

We suggest a blend of all of these, and once again that requires looking at your cria; and their dams individually. Let's look at these criteria one at a time.

A. Cria's Weight

Many breeders use weight as a decision maker. The generalized feeling is that once a cria is 65 – 80 lbs, that cria is ready for weaning. A word of caution... We have had cria in the 65+ lbs range at 3 - 4 months, who were in no way emotionally ready to be weaned.

B. Cria's Age

Six months is a common duration thrown around by breeders. We like to refer to it as a **starting point**, to evaluate an individual cria's readiness for weaning. It should be noted at this point, that a cria is physiologically developed enough by 4 months of age, to be separated from its mother. All three stomachs are developed and the young cria could live on grass as its sole food source. However the emotional nature of the cria is extremely fragile and the 2 additional months that cria has with its dam are critical to its health, and development. Even then, 6 months is only a starting point for weaning assessment.

Over the years and during the process of preparing this outline, as mentioned, we have consulted other breeders, as well as Maggie Krieger and Dr. Julio Sumar. Many of the insights you find here in this outline are a product of these discussions.

We find it appropriate at this time to tell you how the weaning takes place in Peru. This information is provided by Dr. Sumar.

As you know, South America follows a seasonal pattern, exactly opposite to ours. Our summer season is their winter season, and vice versa. Therefore, because of the conditions that prevail on the Altiplano during the Autumn, Winter, and Spring; virtually all alpaca births take place during January and February (our July and August), with a small portion of the births occurring in December, March, and April.

Dr. Sumar explained that by the time that cria is ready to be weaned in July or August, the weather conditions have become very harsh, and the food supply has become very scarce. Therefore, the Peruvian herdsmen allow their crias and their dams to stay together for up to 10 months. This allows the young and growing cria a food source with its mom that it wouldn't otherwise have.

If the Peruvian people had the resources, we in North America have for harvesting and storing hay, they would follow an outline of weaning similar to ours, at least in terms of an age to start a cria weaning.

(We certainly believe that the greatest majority of cria can be weaned by 6 months; however by now you must be getting a feeling about how we feel about the individuality of each cria through the process.)

C. **Cria's Independence**

This is an important and often times overlooked activity. If you see a cria glued to his/her dam's side, through the 4th & 5th months of his/her existence, chances are very good that you will have a challenging weaning. If that cria is constantly at the other end of the pasture during the day, then he/she will probably do pretty well.

D. Cria's Confidence

Some crias are the STUFF, and they know it. They exhibit no fear, are very engaging, and are at ease with the world. These youngsters are the minority, but usually because of their social nature they take weaning a little more lightly.

E. Cria's Eating Habits

We addressed this earlier, and would like to reiterate it now. Cria must have excellent appetites, and they should express this when they are apart from their dams. **Once you start weaning, it is imperative that you make sure your cria is eating. We have witnessed more than once, crias that mimic eating while with other more established weanlings. If you are not aware of and observing this, and then able to intervene, the cria eventually will die. Make sure the cria is eating & make sure the cria is chewing its cud.**

F. The Drain of a Cria is On It's Dam

Many breeders look at the dams for weaning input. This is a valuable tool, and provides some excellent insights into the cria/dam relationship. If you consistently see a dam kicking off or avoiding her cria, Mother Nature has probably made the decision for you; but there is no set time this takes place. Sometimes, the expecting dam (assuming she has been rebred) and the inutero cria become the focus of concern. Many dams pour their entirety into their cria, and the drain is huge. Considering that she is probably pregnant again and depending on her condition (Weight) or lack there of; many breeders will use this as weaning criteria. We certainly have!

G. Cria's Social Development

It is important to note that your cria is developing social relationships with other crias. If they have developed strong friendships or even buddies; weaning will be much easier on them. If they haven't and are glued to mom's side, they will probably require some extra nurturing through the process.

The Process:

The following is an overview of the weaning process at Crescent Moon Ranch. It incorporates the process itself plus all that we have discussed thus far. It also provides some tips to help you build trust with the weanling alpaca.

Weaning Procedures – An Overview

As mentioned in the very beginning of this, there are probably a hundred ways to wean. We encourage you to develop a program that works best for your ranch layout; and your schedule, **but with the cria as your priority.**

- A. For a couple of months prior to weaning, spend time with the cria. Quiet time, which allows the cria to begin building trust. Hand feed the dam, and the cria, hum to the cria, and just be with the cria without threatening movements or actions.
- B. At the very beginning of the weaning process, begin halter training the cria alongside the dam. When the cria sees no fear from the dam in this process, they will not exhibit as much fear themselves. They will also follow mom naturally. Theoretically the cria could be for the most part halter trained by the time he/she is weaned.
- C. **Remember weaning is a process not an event.** Do not ever remove the cria from the dam, and put him/her into a strange place (trailer, pasture, or barn etc.). You may move the dam and cria to special area for weaning, but give them several days there together before any separating occurs. When the actual separation takes place, we find **day weaning** to be a very positive way to wean. Consider separating mom and cria during daytime hours only, for 4-5 days. Separate the cria into the pasture or area which will be his/her next new home. Make it such, that the dam and cria can see each other through the fence line. Make sure the cria have an abundance of food, water, and other cria (when possible); and that they are **eating**. During the daytime weaning, spend some time with the youngsters. Try to get them to eat from your hand; grain, hummerdoodles, treats, whatever you use. Hum and cluck to them as mom would do. Continue to reinforce what you have been developing and nurturing for the last couple of months. In the afternoon put a halter on them and lead them to mom. Why not do a little halter training as there is a huge reward at the end of that journey. This positive reinforcement will also help nurture trust.
- D. Trust, Continue to Nurture It.
 1. Once the dam is removed from the picture, continue your relationship with the cria by, spending time with them, feeding them, and walking them. We have found that halter training is an excellent way to continue

development of trust between you and your cria; and that trust is an invaluable tool when the cria is taken to strange environments such as alpaca show venues or the show ring, etc. A process of halter training we have adopted with great success is what we call the “Pacy Pony.” This entails simply taking a low key, already halter trained cria, and using that cria to walk beside a newly weaned cria. Similar to using the dam in earlier training, this installs and reinforces confidence and trust for the young cria.

H. Use Comfort Food

As stated earlier, excellent eating habits are vital for the young alpaca. We can all relate to comfort food by our own experience (chicken noodle soup, etc.) The cria also will take comfort in treats that they like and this will help alleviate stress and build trust.

I. When Possible Do Not Wean Alone!!!

None of us like to be alone in scary places or scary times. This applies to crias as well. If you have to wean alone, please use extra caution.

Do's of Weaning Your Young Alpacas – (An Overview)

- A. Do familiarize yourself with the cria's personality well before the weaning takes place, so that you are aware and understand his/her behavior during weaning.
- B. Do spend time with the cria before, and during weaning; to develop and nurture trust.
- C. Do remember to make the crias weaning **a process and not an event.**
- D. Do weigh your cira before weaning and subsequently there after.
- E. Do make sure your crias are eating and drinking before and during weaning. A good observation tool is to not only view them actually ingesting food, but later on, witness the cria chewing its cud.
- F. Do wean in groups when possible

Do Not's of Weaning Your Young Alpacas – (An Overview)

- A. Do Not wean and walk away
- B. **DO NOT WEAN BY PUTTING HE OR SHE ON THE TRAILER, DRAGGING THEM OFF TO SHOW OR ANYWHERE ELSE FOR THAT MATTER!!**
 - 1. **Never, Never, Never, wean an alpaca by putting it on a Trailer and taking it away from its dam.**
- C. Do Not assume anything about the well being of your cria...see it or experience it.
- D. Do Not wean in poor weather conditions with out proper shelter.
- E. Do Not under feed your weanlings. Give them as much hay and water as they want.
- F. Do Not wean them to an area that is obscured from your ability to watch them.
- G. Do Not push the pace of your crias weaning. **Weaning is done on the young alpaca's time table not yours.**
- H. Do Not change the young alpaca's diet during weaning. This should remain a constant.

Warning Signs of a Weanling in Trouble

- A. Excessive pacing of the fence line (Anxiety)
 - 1. This is very common, and the reason we day wean. Pacing occurs in many weanlings for 3 or 4 days; but should dissipate quickly after the 3rd or 4th day.
- B. Watch for loose stool or no stool.
 - 1. If your cria is in high stress, diarrhea will be very common. If the young alpaca is not pooping, dehydration will be a major concern.
- C. Foaming Mouth, Crusty Mouth, & Bad Breath; are all potential signs of high stress, and possible ulcers.
- D. Weight Loss
 - 1. Weigh your cria the first day you day wean. Then weigh them regularly thereafter. You should be seeing steady weight gain.
- E. Mimicked Eating
 - 1. As a member of the herd, young alpacas will do what others in the herd are doing. If the young alpaca has no appetite however, it may only be mimicking the others.

Medical Supplies for Weaning Crias

1. Scale
2. Gastroguard – For Ulcers, used also as a preventative during stressful situations (Showing, weaning, ...etc)
3. Propylene Glycol
4. SMZ's (SULFAMETHOXAZOLE and TRIMETHOPRIM TABLETS, USP) 800 mg/160 mg Double Strength **Prescription only – For Coccidiosis & Respiratory Infections.**
5. Thermometer / Stethoscope – Listen right after birth, 1 week old, & Weaning.
6. Milk Thistle – for liver infection or Fatty Liver Disease
7. Conofite - Fungal
8. Panalog – “Crusty Mouth”
9. Triple Antibiotic Ointment – Any wounds
10. Comfort Food & Your Familiar & Trusting Face
11. Electrolytes
12. Probiotic
13. Pepto Bismol Paste

We have been blessed and entrusted with the care of these amazing creatures. They are hearty, and yet fragile. They are our pets and our assets. We have come to believe that the most crucial time in a young alpacas life, is the weaning; and it needs to be handled with much love.

14. Same food the cria has been on while with mothers. **Never Change a Weanlings Diet!**
 - a) Same Hay
 - b) Same Grain
 - c) Same Treats

