

The First Step Toward The Ring

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We have all been to goat shows and seen that poor little goat that has not been halter broken, has only been worked with a chain or has at least not been trained correctly being dragged across the ring and we hear that all too familiar sound of COUGH, COUGH, GAG. Not only does this take away from the professionalism of the goat's presentation but it also can be an issue that we as goat exhibitors need to address in regard to humane treatment of our animals. I can tell you as a judge that much of an animal's final placing is determined as soon as that animal enters the ring. Quite obviously, the goat that walks into the ring with its head up, acting like a champion will get more looks than the goat that enters the ring with its head down fighting the chain regardless of the quality of the goat itself. I am often asked, "What does a judge look for when judging a market goat show?" This should be a very easy question to answer, but it is not, due to the "showmanship" factor. Yes, I agree that just because a showman may not do a very good job in presenting the project, it should have nothing to do with that animal's placing in its market class. But let me tell you that, especially in close decisions and even in presentation of your animal in its weight class, it is CRITICAL that you present your goat to its best advantage. I truly believe that for you to present your goat to its best advantage, you must correctly halter break your goat.

When it comes to halter breaking your prospects, there are two things that you must have to be successful. First, is a halter that fits your goat and second is a huge dose of patience. In regards to the first issue, there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all halter. Quite obviously a goat that is ten months old wears a different size halter than a goat that is three months old. Now I am sure you are saying, "That is obvious", but I challenge you to look around at the next show you attend and see how many halters are being used that do not fit their goats!! I am comfortable it will be a rather large number. A correctly sized halter is one that goes behind the ears of your prospect with the nose band being just below the eyes of your kid. The lead then comes under their chin and out the halter on the LEFT side of the goat. A halter that is correctly sized and fitted will allow the most comfort and likewise create the most painless environment for breaking your goat to lead. A halter that is too large will allow the nose band to drop too low on your kid's nose and can actually cut off the kid's airflow. Another problem with oversized halters is that if the noseband is too long it will pinch under the kid's jaw and can choke them from the bottom side just as easily. I have discovered that finding a halter to fit an extremely young goat is almost impossible. My advice is to buy a small quantity of rope from your local supply store, get a couple of "pig sized" hog rings and make your own. The other issue in regards to fitting the correctly-sized halter on your prospect is putting it on your kid correctly. I can not tell you the number of times I have seen halters that are being worn backwards or even up-side down. This is just as much of a problem with "old professionals" as it is with rookies to the goat world. (The sheep world and cattle world are also guilty!) As I previously stated, the lead for the halter should come under the chin and exit the loop of the halter from the goat's left side. I do realize that goats can be lead from either the left or right, but this is still not an issue when CORRECTLY placing your halter on your prospect. The second issue is that the lead for the halter comes under the chin, not over the ears of the kid. A halter's lead that pulls from behind the ears is placed on the kid upside down and will never teach the goat to lead correctly.

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The second requirement of patience is one that is much more difficult to overcome. You are going to find that when it comes to halter-breaking your prospects, that they are as different than humans. Some will break and lead to halter with as little as a couple of hours of effort, others will take weeks. If you happen to be like myself and be one of those people whose patience can sometimes wear PRETTY thin, just take a little break and believe in the saying that often times “great things come to those who wait.” (Ha Ha)

Once you have correctly placed on the halter on the kid the fun is ready to begin. Tie your prospects to a solid wall with its head slightly above shoulder height and with six to eight inches of slack in the halter. Never use a gate or fence. You never want to allow your prospect to get their legs tangled in anything that could damage them if the animal happens to throw a “hissie-fit.” At this point, I should address the issue of tying. How many times have you heard of stories in which a “new to the world of halters” animal has been tied with a square knot and after a fifteen minute “stomp-down fit”, it takes an act of congress and a really sharp pocket knife to remove the halter form around the post to which it was tied. Learn to tie a slip knot or use a quick release of some fashion. It is not difficult! Just ask any Boy Scout. Once your animal is tied to the wall or the post, you **must not** leave the goat unattended. I have seen animals that, when tied for the first time, just stand there and chew their cud and I have seen animals absolutely blow a cork and act as though they are possessed. Regardless of the response, you need to be there just in case something happens that might require you to intervene to potentially save your goat’s life. Actually, I recommend that anytime you have your animals tied, you never leave them unattended.

Once a year, I hear of someone who had a prospect tied to a gate. This goat was already halter-broke and ready to show. Someone called for assistance and, after being gone five minutes, they return to find the wether hanging from his halter with a broken neck. You simply never know when an animal that is “puppy dog” broke will lose their cool and just go bananas. Word to the wise: always keep an eye on your animals when they are tied. I have also seen people use a bicycle inner-tube. You simply place the inner-tube around the post and then tie the halter to the inner-tube. As the kid pulls against the tube, it will stretch and then as the kid gives in, the tube will pull the kid back to the wall or the post.

Keep in mind, the idea of tying your goat is for them to “break” the halter. They must learn that no matter what they do, they can not get away from the halter. If you feel sorry for your prospect and do not let them fight the halter and “break” to its control, then you are never going to achieve the results you desire. I am not saying that you never need to intervene, but I am saying that you have to let them realize they are fighting a losing battle! I generally like to leave the kids tied for fifteen minutes to an hour. During this time the “fight or flee” response should be fulfilled and then you can start handling your prospect. Remember that you want your prospect to trust you, but at the same time, they must learn that you are the boss and that whatever you want is what they must perform. In the initial stage of halter breaking, this process needs to be done every day and often two or more times per day. Keep in mind that the more effort you put into the process in the beginning, the easier it will be to correctly present your prospects in the showing. During this phase of breaking, I like to place my hands on the kids as much as possible. Practice setting their feet and handling them like a judge will

do. All this practice will make the goat more comfortable when it comes time to actually enter the show ring. Notice that up to this point I have not mentioned attempting to lead your goat. Too many times, we attempt to drag the goat around before it respects the halter. Until the goat will allow you to comfortably handle it and set its legs in addition to being comfortable with you being in close proximity to its head, trying to lead the goat is a rather futile effort. Once the goat reaches this goat point, I like to start by attempting to lead the kid in a small circle. DON'T try to drag the kid around. A gentle tug and lots of patience during this phase of breaking is essential. If you have carried out the wall tying steps correctly, the process of getting the kid to walk is generally rather simple. But there is that occasional goat that just does not understand the program. I have often seen people grab the tail of the goat in an attempt to get the kid to walk. A goat's tail is not its go-button! Although this seems to be a nice handle, grabbing a goat's tail only causes them to tuck their tail and look NASTY as they walk around the ring. If help is needed, get someone to walk behind the kid to provide some assistance.

Now that you have your animal leading comfortably to the halter, it is time to proceed to the chain. I like to put the chain on the goat's neck and let them wear it for a couple of days while I am still working them with the halter. DO NOT leave the chain on the neck of the goat when you are not present. If the goat hangs the chain on something in the pen, that chain can quite rapidly become a noose! After a couple of days of getting used to the chain, I then start holding the chain while still leading the goat with the halter. It is generally a fast transition to the chain if you have successfully broken your goat to the halter. NEVER use the chain or collar to tie your goat. Although this may appear to be a non-issue, you are now truly placing a noose around your prospect's neck and asking for trouble.

Just like with the halter, the chain/collar needs to correctly fit your goat. The chain needs to be just long enough that you can easily slip off the goat's head. This is especially important when showing disbudded goats. Continue practicing daily with the chain and you will find that your prospect will soon be showing like a champion. Now, it's time for me to get on my soapbox. I see lots of goats being presented with dog-pinch collars. I do not see any place for these things being used in the show goat industry. (Especially the Junior show goat circuit) Yes, I have heard how they provide much more control for young exhibitors. But if the goat is that difficult to control and exhibit, then a junior probably does not need to be showing that animal in the first place. Yes, I have also heard the pinch collar provides added control in exhibiting bucks. But once again, if the animal is that difficult to control, then maybe it does not need to be in the show ring. Today's show ring faces enough issues that question what we as livestock exhibitors do in caring for the WELFARE of our animals; let's not provide more ammunition to those who wish to destroy that which we love.

In conclusion, patience, practice, and correctly sized halters; they are the first step in preventing the old Cough, Cough, Gag!!!