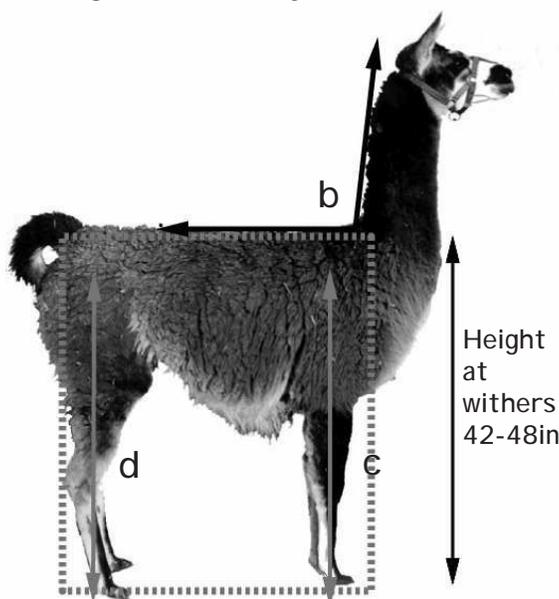


## Choosing a Pack Llama

Ask a bunch of experienced pack llama owners what is the most important trait of a good packer, and they will all tell you, "Attitude!" A good pack llama wants to work and enjoys being out in the backcountry. The desire and willingness to work can overcome many physical shortcomings. Unfortunately, the only way to determine attitude is on the trail. AND, unless the llama is experienced, it may take several trips. There are traits that can be evaluated and will help to choose a good packer. Any llama with the desire and endurance to pack can be a good packer, but given 2 individuals with equally good attitude, the llama with better conformation will always perform better. Even the most willing llama can not work beyond his physical limitations.

Although llamas of any size can pack, if you want an animal that will be able to pack significant loads for a reasonable distance, you should look for a llama that stands 42-48 inches at the withers - shorter llamas will not be able to carry large loads, and taller llamas have a higher probability of developing joint problems later in life. Frequently, people will define a llama's size by his/her weight. A fat, 450lb llama will not be able to carry the same load as a lean, conditioned 300lb llama. Weight is a somewhat irrelevant measure of size unless you are talking about lean body mass. DON'T let weight fool you. Look for that lean, muscular individual.



- A well conformed llama's body presents a square shape when viewed from the side, with a level topline.
  - The neck length - which has a significant effect on the animal's gait - should be approximately as long as the back from the neck to the groin.
  - The front legs from a side view should be almost perpendicular to the topline of the body.
  - You should be able to draw an imaginary line from the hip joint directly through the back of the hock joint to the ground behind the rear foot.
- From both the front and the back, the legs should be straight - not bowed, turned in or out, or knock-kneed. Straight front legs are the same distance apart at the feet as they are at the chest.

Watch the animal walk and look for fluid motion, no limping or awkwardness.

a. Body outline approximates a square

Unless you are willing to wait a couple of years to start serious packing with your llama, purchase a 3-4 year old. Llamas do not mature until they are 3 to 4 years old, and should not carry significant weight before then. Also, it is difficult to assess what their adult conformation will be until they are in that age range.

Llamas are exceptionally social animals. An animal kept alone will quickly become somewhat neurotic. It is always best to buy 2 (or more!).

Look for a llama that was gelded at 2 years or older. This allows the growth plates in their legs time to close, giving more structural integrity.

Finally, a word about coat. Technically, conformation does not include coat, but llamas vary from very woolly to light fibre and it does have an effect on suitability for packing. A double coat - an outer coat of coarse, guard hair and an undercoat of finer wool - is more desirable. Woolly llamas need to be shorn or they will suffer from hyperthermia, as well as being difficult to saddle and keep clean. Once shorn, they are no longer as weather proof as their double coated brothers. So look for a llama that is:

- distinctly double coated
- has abundant guard hair over the entire body
- has underwool that molts seasonally and is easily combed out

When all is said and done, there is no "perfect" llama, but there are superb pack llamas that will carry the extra load and go the extra distance. Take the time to find them.