

How Not to Begin with Packgoats

Why I have 10 years of experience that I gained in only 9 months!

by Larry Robinson

I finally decided to publish this as it has all the drama of a real thriller. That is even possible to write this is due to the efforts of a couple of local folks who carried me through this period, putting up frequently with daily phone calls. I don't think I could have waded through the disappointment of those days without healthy doses of encouragement.



Shadow

The idea of Packgoats had been running around in the basement of my mind for some time, ever since I had watched a presentation by Sharon Johnson at one of our local outdoor stores. Sharon, who had hiked the entire PCT by herself at age 59, had traveled through Boise with her recently-purchased Saanen wether. At the time, I was around 57 or so, and wondering how I was going to continue to hike as my body came to grips with the ravages of age. The Packgoat presentation by Sharon was kind of a Voila! moment, and I kept it on the back burner since my living conditions at the time didn't allow for the keeping of livestock... barky little dogs, yes, but goats... no.

In 2002, my wife and I made the joint decision to move outside of Boise in the foothills on a 1-acre plot, and for the first time, the obtaining of a Packgoat (or 3) was now possible. So the Packgoat idea crept up out of the basement and started germinating like crazy. I did however, want to take a measured approach to all of this as I perceived it was a giant step into the unknown, so for the time, I joined the Yahoo! goat groups and began learning like mad. During this period I also became acquainted with a gentleman that was our local goat guru, and he encouraged (pushed) me into getting my first two wethers (at least a year before I would have on my own volition). Ill-advisedly, however, he sent me to a local breeder, whom I now know was not a legitimate packgoat breeder. Ahhh, ignorance is bliss). My first two goat acquisitions were an Alpine, and an Alpine/Oberhasli cross, which I obtained in the spring of 2004. They came to me with Pneumonia as it was going around in his herd (it goes without saying that I didn't know this when I picked them up). Within two days of picking them up I was giving injections. Now, there isn't much that I do not feel capable of doing; I am a light-plane pilot, play the trumpet, am computer-savvy, hard-core hiker/outdoorsman, but I will tell you that giving injections to little baby animals was light-years outside of my expertise level. So the scenario here is, you get two brand new babies, which you desperately desire to socialize properly, and the first thing do is

start hurting them. It was not the best of all possible worlds.

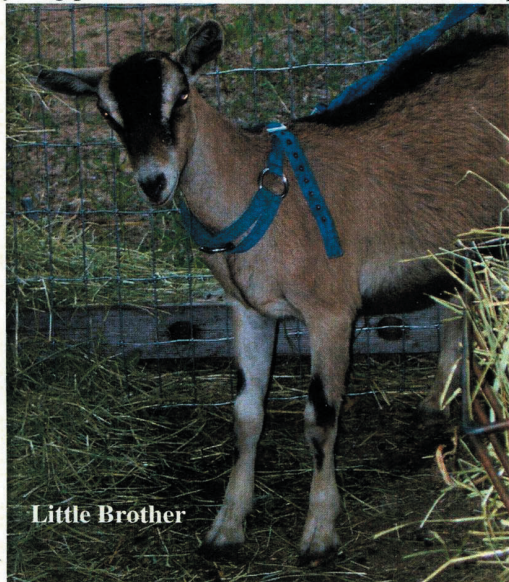
Shortly after that, I had them staked out (I was not completely comfortable yet with letting them out without restraints), and apparently my staking rope was too small in diameter, as somehow Shadow, my Alpine, got tangled in it and broke his left hind leg. I probably should have had him put down, but in my innocent ignorance, I paid \$400 to have the leg put back together with a stainless steel pin down the broken upper part of the leg. That probably would have been OK if the leg had been normal, but somehow it ended up being about 45 degrees off of true. So he ends up shuffling it along like Chester in the Gunsmoke television series. At that point, since it seemed obvious that Shadow was not going to be a packer, I decided that I would get a couple more goats (late in the Spring of that year), and so I took on two more Alpines. They came with some sort of malady (which they subsequently spread to the two others), so here we go again with the injections. They were about 5-6 months old, and hadn't had *any* socialization in all that time, so I knew it was going to be a challenge, but I had NO bloody idea! I now know that EARLY socialization is absolutely crucial (read: **essential**). I will never again take on an animal that hasn't been, at the least, socialized by someone.

In any case, after two months or so of trying to get close to these two, it became obvious that I was making exactly NO progress. My wife perceived (correctly, I believe) that the dominant of the two was NEVER going to come around and was heavily influencing the other, but she thought that the other one, the one that we call Little Brother, had potential (she was only barely right on that one).



So I gave the one back that we referred to as Doubting Thomas, and we kept Little Brother. He has made tremendous progress (a relative term), and I usually don't have trouble getting my hands on him... except when I need to... or when someone strange is around... or when we are not at home... or in any circumstance that is not 100% what he is used to. He is been an OK packer, more or less, as he is an inveterate follower. The other goats follow me, and he follows them! However, twice this year (2006) he got startled and went off on a tear, panniers flying in the breeze and he didn't stop until he hit a tree, which naturally stopped him. The second time, he was limping cause his leg hurt, and I ended up carrying out what he was supposed to be carrying. Sort of misses the point, does it not? But I keep working with him and he continues to mellow somewhat, and since he is the strongest and most capable goat I have we seem to be stuck with each other.

After giving Doubting Thomas back, I still wanted another goat as I was hoping to be able to have at least 3 or so to pack within 3 years or so. So in the late in 2004 I took on two beautiful LaManchas from a local breeder. They were wonderful guys, socialized to a fault, but *they had horns*. It only took a very short time (about 10 minutes I think) to decide that they didn't fit well in my group. Not only because of the horns, which were a definite hazard in my non-horned group, but in what came as a total surprise to me, they walked into my pen kicking butt and taking names. I had thought that since the LaManchas were supposed to be the better dispositioned of the goats, they would be more laid back with my original fellas. Fat chance! So I reluctantly moved them on to a young person in Utah. And so here we are well past the season to get more animals, and I have one with a bum leg, Shadow; one that is nuts, Little Brother; and one that is growing very slow, the Alpine/Ober mix (Sassy-Brown). So at this point I decided to accept my fate and made arrangements to get two new LaManchas in the Spring of the following year through one of the local goatfolks who has given so much of her time guiding me, and who is a legitimate Packgoat breeder. I have wanted since the beginning to have at least 4-5 animals, as it is relatively easy to lose one, and considering the time it takes to get them old enough to pack, I didn't want to have to start all over again. At age 67, I am not sure of how much time I have left in terms of hiking ability (or life itself), so I wanted to get going with this.



Little Brother

My first venture with goats took place in 2004 as I took Sassy & Little Brother (LB) into the Big Horn Crags on what was probably a little too strenuous of a hike for little fellas, since it was around 9 miles to the Crags lakes. Where we camped overnight on the way in, they got into a plant called Corn Lilly/False Hellbore. This is one of many plants listed on the Cornell University website that is decidedly unfriendly to living beings, like goats. Whatever this plant has in it, it is horrible. They ate very little of it, because I was very nervous about them eating it anyway. About 6-7 PM they started bringing up their cud, over and over again, and chewing and chewing and chewing, and green slime/foam was constantly dripping out of their mouths. We were 4.5 miles into the woods and there wasn't a bloody thing I could do (in my ignorance) as I was totally unprepared to help them.

These behaviours continued all night, and I agonized for them all night, since I was stupid enough to bring them out there with no resources to help them, and prayed plenty. Sometime before daylight, Sassy-Brown stopped the incessant chewing, and after daylight returned, so did LB. They started some tentative nibbling on stuff I knew was OK, and believe it or not, hiked the 4.5 miles back out after having done the human equivalent of vomiting all night. I was astounded. I did take them home after that, and my brother (who I was hiking with) and I went on alone. I and my brother had definitely had enough emotional trauma for one week (and so, undoubtedly, had the goats). (Note: I have since noted that when they ate this particular plant, it was after it had "browned up" from fall freezing. Some plants apparently are not poisonous until after this happens. Shadow got a couple or three mouthfuls of this same plant on the way back into the Crags in 2005 and suffered no ill effects.)

After that episode things calmed down markedly in my world, and I have had no significant trauma since then. That is to say with the exception that Shadow, who I was still trying to pack a little, abruptly stopped carrying on a trip in 2007, and Sassy-Brown bailed on a hike in 2008.

So at this point, the situation is this: out of my first three goats, I have a cripple (Shadow), a psycho (Little Brother), and a midget (Sassy-Brown). The two LaManchas I got in 2005? Wonderful beyond words! If I could clone them I would create 5 more of each of them. I also have two more Alpines that will be 2 years old this coming summer and seem to have good potential. I don't seem to be having the episodes of trauma that I had my first year, but boring isn't a bad thing after all!!)



Sassy-Brown and Shadow

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