Wild Animal Training: A Glance at Circuses and Hediger's Viewpoint

Wildtier-Training: Ein Blick auf Zirkusse und die Sichtweise Hedigers

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Abstract

Historically, zoos have shared common features with circuses despite recent animosity toward them: Exhibition of wild animals in captivity. Experienced circus professionals can provide insight into the nature of wild animals from their sensitivity to man-made environmental components, potentially dangerous human errors, to animal escapes. These are told in numerous behind-the-scenes episodes. Zoos and circuses also have common needs such as improved animal husbandry and breeding. Moreover, both institutions face the public's naivete about animal life, and accusation about alleged cruelty to animals, often focusing on animal training. Professor Heini Hediger explained animal training from a scientific viewpoint. We can learn from his wisdom, for instance, the theoretical basis on training. Although traditional animal training has received adverse responses in recent years, accomplishments by trainers from the earlier era must be given a proper historical recognition.

Keywords: Animal training; Audience; Captivity; Circuses; Escape; Zoos

Today, circuses are being criticized by animal activists as an anachronistic entity. Circuses also receive hostile views by zoos. However, during earlier days circuses and traveling

menageries played a key role in introducing wild animals to the public, particularly in America. The division of circuses, traveling menageries and zoos often blurred. Circuses and zoos still share a common feature to this day: exhibiting wild animals. It helps to take a renewed look on the past, from time to time, to put our shared heritage in broader perspective. This account will begin with behind-the-scenes episodes in circuses, focusing on big cats during the late nineteenth century to the 1970s. Wild animals bring along their keen senses into captivity into the human world, and little things are all new to them. Animals can easily be frightened since they cannot adjust to changes quickly. The changes even include a new color of a prop or trainers' new costumes. Features in our modern world that we take for granted, even though quite subtle for us, such as a siren-blasting fire engine, or a low-flying jet, can scare an animal into frenzy.

Behind-the-Scenes Potpourri

One day, Austrian-born trainer Roman Proske and his helpers put lions and tigers in a big cage for a rehearsal. It was routine then, for a butcher to make a daily delivery of the meat ration for animals, coming around the back door, not the main entrance. The butcher became ill and sent a substitute driver. It was just at that moment the main entrance of the circus had been left unlocked and unguarded, as the security man left for a nearby mail box. Suddenly, "out of nowhere, a man in a bloodstained butchers' apron appeared in front of the arena, carrying an entire hindquarter of a slaughtered horse on his shoulder."

"Hey!" he called out. "Where do you want me to put this meat?" That was the cue for a raging inferno. "Before I could make a move, all sixteen tigers and lions were locked in a series of deadly embraces. The roaring of the enraged combatants, the screams of those that were bitten and clawed, drowned out my cries and made futile all my efforts to quiet them. In vain I tried to separate them by poking at them with my pole and firing my revolver until I was out of blanks." The battling cats knocked Proske to the floor. "All I could do was try to roll myself out of the way of the entangled cats rolling all around me, and at the same time try to move in the general direction of the door. When they came too near, I kicked out at them or struck at them with my fists." Miraculously "My only injury was a bite on the calf of my right leg, which I was not even aware of until the battle was over," said Proske. (Proske, 1956, pp. 147-148) Inside the cage lay two dead and five fatally wounded animals which he had to destroy.

Not as devastating, but even a smooth floor is a cause for concern. Trainers and animals need a good “grip” of the floor surface, since firm footing is important. Ed Sullivan’s national television variety show was very popular in America during the 1950s and 1960s, and Clyde Beatty, the nation’s consummate showman and legendary trainer, took his cats to the show.

As a precaution, they sprinkled a heavy layer of soil on the stage. All went well until “one of the best of my performers and normally a dependable tiger, had a bad moment as he leaped up on a pedestal that slipped and skittered on the smooth hard surface of the television stage.” A cat expected a pedestal to be firmly secured, and he was frightened. “To steady himself, the bewildered tiger made a reach for the bars of the arena, and once he had a firm grip on them he started climbing. If he reached the top it would not be difficult to rip the safety net aside and jump down into the section where the spectators sat.” One of the cage hands “recklessly reached through the bars and grabbed the tiger’s tail and tugged at it in an effort to yank him down. As often as not, spectators witnessing a development of this kind think it is part of the show.” (Beatty & Anthony, 1965, p. 79)

Speaking of tigers, German-born Charly Baumann, for years a star on the Ringling Circus, once planned on a globe-riding tiger. When the cat was on the globe, it was to turn slowly and smoothly by electricity. He carefully chose Prince, the most courageous of his tigers, but he was reluctant to get onto the globe even when it was perfectly still. That first step was accomplished. “With Prince in place, I snapped on the motor that turned the globe. It was like ‘zero’ in a countdown—Prince flew off the globe like a Saturn rocket leaving for the moon. I had to return to the beginning, coaxing him back onto the prop and then starting the globe turning ever so slowly. After many attempts I got the procedure and the best speed worked out.” But that was not the end; the next step was to glue hundreds of little mirrors to the globe. “That evening Prince walked up to the prop, intending to rehearse, saw a hundred little tigers in the mirrors and did a fast U-turn.” (Baumann & Stevens, 1975, p. 246) It took seven exhausting months to perfect the trick.

Regarding electricity, the audience could not predict the fear of power failure during a cat act at night, or in an enclosed arena. Once lights fail, cats can see better in little light than humans, making the trainer extremely vulnerable. That happened to Alex Kerr, the 1950s trainer for Bertram Mills Circus, England’s premier circus. “I dropped down on one knee, and I could just see them silhouetted against the moonlight which filtered through the canvas. I called their

names if I saw any of them move, and they were reassured; sitting there until the generator started running again.” He then added: “I heard of a trainer in Denmark who climbed out of the cage when the lights failed. It takes a few minutes to climb the bars and he gave the animals time to get their bearings. One of them caught his leg and he was lucky not to have been pulled right down on the floor.” (Kerr, 1957, p. 136)

Roman Proske also experienced a blackout in Germany: “For at least five minutes the big tent was in total darkness. I could hear the rising murmur of hysteria in the audience, the warning cries of the ushers to beware of fire as people struck matches and the tiny flares hovered like fireflies all over the grandstand. I had to think fast.” In the blackout he could not see lions, but they could see him. “They were watching me and any show of indecision on my part, any misstep, could prove fatal. The thing to do was to go on with the act just as if the arena were lighted...” He decided to take a chance on the longest and most dangerous routine, where he lay down on a bed of lions with Gory; he could depend on her friendship, so he put her on top of him. “At least this would give me a chance to command each animal by name; I would know where they all were and in what position in relation to one another and to me. Above all, it would give me time, and time was what I needed most right then.” (Proske, pp. 70-71) When the light flickered the audience could not see Proske, since he was covered by Gory; they thought the lions got him during the blackout.

Just as animals possess keen senses, humans who manage them are also required to be alert at all times. Untold numbers of animal and human lives must have been lost and injuries inflicted due to careless errors, such as failing to secure a door. When I began in the zoo field as a young man in the 1960s, I was told: “Be lock-conscious. Check, and double-check the padlock. After closing the door, jerk the door knob just to make sure.” Yet, as Proske said, “You can have the best equipment in the world and be the most watchful and diligent of trainers, and still escapes will occur.” (op cit, p. 246)

When the Door is Not Shut

“A very small error is often the cause of a serious accident, and this I experienced myself at one time with Rajah, the tiger who killed Albert Neilson,” Frank Bostock, the acclaimed British animal impresario, recalled. “By an error on the part of an attendant, the door was not shut as it should have been, and Rajah had an opportunity to jump on my defenseless back. It

was an opportunity he did not hesitate to seize immediately. The indiscretion of this attendant nearly cost me my life. Rajah got his fangs inside the head-protector I wore, and his claws into my body. After the first terrible sensation of tearing, I remember nothing more, for I became unconscious, and, in addition to other injuries, had concussion of the brain afterward.” (Bostock, 1903, pp. 246, 249)

Episodes of animal escapes, not as traumatic as Bostock’s but spectacular, are often told by trainers, such as the one by Alfred Court, renowned French circus owner and trainer. “Nearly four thousand spectators were watching the show, and the performance had ended in a happy mood, amid laughter and shouts from the crowd. The polar bears and the black bears had left the arena. At the director’s signal, the door between the center cage and the tunnel was opened, and I sent all the lions and tigers out together to gallop off to their wagons and roll in their fresh straw. But the boy who had bedded the straw had left the door to the second wagon gaping wide open. (The wagons were always attached end to end until the animals found their cages.) The cats, in a dead run, reached the wagon, saw the open door and were out of it in seconds. It happened far too fast for anyone to prevent it, and the eleven lions and tigers escaped into the very center of town among the crowds leaving the circus.” Court was about to change clothes when the menagerie manager came running to give him the news.

That incident took place in Saint-Amand in Flanders. “In the square, wide-eyed people were shouting and running in all directions. I saw one of the tigers a few paces from the crowd; frightened by the confusion, he had taken shelter under a wagon in the middle of the square.” The manager grabbed Court’s arm, panting, and said that one of the lions had gone into a café. “We ran across the square. Au Grand Café du Nord the sign proclaimed proudly. One of its big windows was shattered and there was complete pandemonium as its door spun like a top, casting forth men and women yelling in terror and running wildly. When I got into the now almost empty café all the tables were overturned and most of the chairs broken. At the back, breathless but nonchalant, a lion paced and roared. I recognized Caesar.” (Court, 1955, pp. 74–75)

A continent and decades away, in another incident, Roman Proske’s worker removed pedestals from the arena one night. The following morning Proske proceeded to put tigers into the arena for their recreational period. “Now, as the last of the eight tigers ran passed me into the arena, I closed the door to the tunnel through which they had entered, and turned—to find the big cage still empty. Incredible! Not a tiger in sight. And then suddenly I saw them, out in the open,

a weaving mass of yellow and black in the brilliant morning sunlight. The caretaker had forgotten to close the emergency door when he removed the pedestals. Uncertain which way to turn in their new surroundings, the animals were still milling around. ...I broke into a cold sweat at the thought of the consequences.” (op cit, p. 247) He was on the verge of losing eight full-grown tigers into Miami.

Human errors take many forms. Back to Bostock: “The most perilous thing a man can do is to lose his footing, for it is more than likely, the moment he falls, the animal will spring upon him. An English trainer was almost torn to pieces once because of a pair of heavy top-boots he wore. One of his tigers slipped, and in trying to save himself got one of his claws entangled in the trainer’s leg. It was a purely accidental blow, and the tiger, alarmed, tried to get away, but the keen claws had penetrated through the stiff leather, and in endeavoring to extricate them the animal threw his master down. Quick as a flash the two other tigers in the cage were on the prostrate trainer, and but for the prompt action of an assistant who pluckily sprang into the cage and beat them back, the trainer would never have come out alive.” (op cit, pp. 230–233)

Animal escapes are inevitable, both in circuses and zoos. Skipping back to the cat escape in the streets of Saint-Amand, Court revealed that escaped animals were frightened by the screaming crowd and tried to take shelter. In another episode, when tigers escaped during the show, Gunther Gebel-Williams, Ringling Circus superstar trainer, noted that “They were confused and frightened, so they just stayed there sizing up the situation.” (Gebel-Williams & Reinhold, 1991, p. 316) These are contrary to the public’s assumption.

Baumann explained: “While the thought of a lion or tiger on the loose at the circus or in any populated area stirs up a fearful image in the minds of most laymen, they don’t realize that the experience is equally traumatic for the animal.” (op cit, p. 167) To put it in another way, Beatty observed: “An animal in brand-new surroundings is always at a disadvantage, and my escaped tiger, crouched in a corner, had every reason in the world to be puzzled and bewildered by the meaningless picture that greeted him as he landed, free, in the aisle between the row of cages and the opposite wall of the car. This was entirely foreign territory to him, territory that meant nothing and might be full of unseen dangers; therefore it wasn’t a bad idea to hang back and await development.” (Beatty & Anthony, 1933, p. 245) This would have been while Beatty’s cats were being shipped in a railroad baggage car. Their shifting cages were lined up along one wall of the car with a service aisle along the other.

Beatty was asked for advice regarding escaped animals: “Invariably I have predicted that they would be found near the place of escape and recommended that the search be confined to a rather small area.” (Beatty & Anthony, 1965, p. 47) (In a zoo situation an escaped animal’s reaction is identical.) How, then, did he recapture an escapee? For the most part, dealing with escapes “meant little more than a crew of men working with a long piece of canvas side wall, which, stretched between them, is moved quietly about until it encircles the spot where the fugitive is hiding. It never occurs to the animal that this wall of canvas is not a solid wall. He accepts it for what it appears to be, a real barricade.”

“A cage is hastily moved into a corner of the enclosed space, where the two ends of the canvas converge. The door of the cage is left invitingly open.” (op cit, 1933, p. 225) The trainer then stirs the animal out of the retreat, into the cage, not so hastily. At this point, to ensure a successful recapture, it is essential that the crowd be away from the scene. As Court described in the case of the great cat escape into the public area, the crowd shouted, screamed and ran. As Proske said, “If the animals escape where large crowds are gathered, the resulting panic can cause more havoc than the animals themselves. Human beings on the run attract the animal’s attention quicker than if they remained motionless. The animal instinctively senses that the human running away from him is motivated by fear and that little resistance may be expected.”

His caution: “To be present when a wild animal is on the loose is like playing with a bomb. To seek safety in running is like lighting the fuse.” (op cit, pp. 244–245) The topic now moves to the audience, firstly, on their view of circus trainers.

The Audience

Any work that deals with the general public is demanding. The nature of the public is elusive; they are not a monolithic bunch, even within one country. Alex Kerr noted about the United Kingdom: “The audience in every town is different, for each has an individual taste. It is obvious that some audiences, especially in agricultural areas, appreciate animal acts more than human ones, whereas industrial towns are very blasé about animals and prefer acrobatic and trapeze acts. Blackpool has the hardest public of all to please; they get so many good shows there that we really have to get cracking to make a good impression. ...London audiences are unique. They are so mixed: there are the dress-shirts in the boxes, the provincial townspeople and the farmers, and those regular theatre-goers who see every show in town as a matter of course.

Playing to such a mixed bag always stimulates us for there is more atmosphere and we know that somewhere in the audience there is bound to be someone who is critical, whom we want to win over.” (op cit, p. 147)

Once across the ocean and onto the New World, the perception of a circus animal trainer takes a new twist. The European sense of a circus trainer as an artist was emphasized by the Russian trainer Boris Eder. His view of a blend of art and show business is required of a trainer: “He must have artistic talent and possess the quality known as showmanship.” (Eder, 1958, p. 160) Expectedly, those who emigrate to America face an abrupt awakening.

“America has given me much to be grateful for, but brother, it was rough those first six months,” Roman Proske recalled. “In Europe I had been treated with the consideration and respect accorded any acknowledged artist of the theater. Now I was a barnstormer touring the fairs in a hired truck. Arriving for my first engagement with a truckful of animals and equipment, I had to unload and set up the heavy arena and heavier animal cages on the infield of the race track with the assistance of the one helper I could afford.” When he showed his music to the band leader for rehearsal, “The band leader took one disdainful look at the score. ‘You got a dance act or something?’ he said, looking me up and down as he shifted a wad of chewing gum in his mouth.” Despite his detailed explanation, the band leader concluded: “Listen, Bub, we got music here good enough for any lion act.”

Also awaiting for him: “I never could get it through my European head how extremely important publicity was in America.” During the opening night in Cleveland, he thought the show went well, both with the audience and the press, but not the local sponsoring committee. It thought that the show was “not sufficiently strong” and wanted him to eliminate portions of his act. “When I refused to do this, it was suggested that my salary be paid in full under the terms of the contract on condition that I withdraw from the circus.” Bob Morton was co-owner of the Hamid Morton Circus which produced the circus for the sponsor. He disputed its assertions, telling them: “This committee has discriminated against Captain Proske when as a matter of fact, he is stealing the show. He is proving that lions and tigers can be trained without cracking whips or exploding guns in their faces.” The episode reminded Proske of animal trapper and dealer Frank Buck, who said that the show “should be billed in a manner to impress everyone as to the danger. The American people like to feel the thrill of danger.” (Op cit, pp. 194–195, 262–264)

Inevitably it goes back to the difference in two styles, which mold their respective audiences. Again, to Charly Baumann: “Many fans believe they get the most for their money when a wild animal act falls apart and the trainer’s life is in peril. Many American trainers admit to playing to this unfortunate thirst for blood. Instead of concentrating on tricks that demonstrate the animals’ remarkable capabilities, they often appear with acts presenting their animals’ most beastly manner, perpetuating the idea of a death-defying business that draws blood if you watch often enough.” (op cit, p. 63) (For the comparison of two styles see Kawata, 2013, pp. 80-83. The modern European training style goes back to Carl Hagenbeck.)

And yet, despite all the diversifying and polarizing opinions, there is one subject about which circus animal trainers, across the lines of ethnicities and nationalities, are in solid agreement: The public’s naiveté and ignorance (same can be said about zoo visitors). The audience arrives at the circus with a basketful of preconceived ideas. They view animals through their rose-colored prism or ill-informed beliefs. Animals must be overfed just before a show. Animals must be drugged to be able to perform. Trainers must have put armor-vests under the costume. Trainers pull animals’ teeth and claws. And so the list goes on, and none of the above is true. Among the false notions, prominently ridiculous is the idea that animals can be hypnotized.

Clyde Beatty, on newspaper reporters: “I often wish that I had been able to keep a copy of all the things that have written about me. What a souvenir that collection of scrap-books would be! ...Probably the most numerous classification of clippings would be my answers to questions about the use of a ‘hypnotic eye’ in making animals behave. Somebody is always bringing up that question. Apparently millions of people still believe that animals can be cowed by looking’m square in the eye and outstaring them!” (op cit, 1933, p. 134) To the same question Mabel Stark, America’s most famous female wild animal trainer, responded: “It is not the ‘hypnotic eye’ that keeps the big cats in place. That myth was exploded long ago. I have worked sixteen tigers at once and have only one pair of eyes.” (1940, p.21) Not only mammals, but also reptiles are the suspects.

Snakes are often handled by women, and that may add to the mystique. Raymond Ditmars explained thusly: “There is fascination in the thought of snake charming. Playing on the belief that serpents can be charmed we have the performance of the circus—the ‘snake enchantress’ and her family of boas or pythons. Her serpents in their subdued actions may convince the members of a sideshow audience the reptiles are drugged or hypnotized. Yet they

are neither drugged nor charmed, even though this act of the circus is no fake. The snakes are tamed, or, as the saying goes, ‘broken to handle.’ They are so accustomed to handling by the owner that they permit her to twine them around her neck or body. They are, of course, of the non-venomous kinds.” (Ditmars, 1931, pp. 231-232) Ditmars was the famed curator of the Bronx Zoo, New York.

The “Hot-button” Issue

Hypnotizing myth may have lost its appeal. But the ages-old “hot-button” issue is still going strong: Cruelty to animals, perceived and alleged. This notion is skillfully manipulated into the public’s mind by news-media savvy anti-captivity groups. As they target circuses and zoos, training becomes a convenient and favorite tool, although negative publicity is a skewed snapshot from a fraction of the public. But accuracy of the allegations does not matter, once it appears on a TV story or on the front page of the newspaper. By then the balance between emotion and intellect has already been blown away.

Animal trainers have been plagued with the question of cruelty. In 1961 in Blackpool, England, a representative of the Royal Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals visited young Charly Baumann, stating: “You were on television the other night, and some viewers claim they could tell that the tiger you called Assur had his teeth and claws removed. I’ve been sent to check it out.” Baumann took his shirt off, ripped off the bandages and exposed a deep wound inflicted by Assur. He offered to show the young man the tiger; “Mr. Baumann, I really don’t need to check any further,” said the man as he hastily left. (op cit, pp. 129-132) Clyde Beatty heard weird stories about cruelty, such as “a trainer makes his animals perform by inflicting pain on them.” An example: “There is the familiar story about those who jab their animals with pointed steel rods to make them perform. I’d like to see any one do this to a wild animal—especially in the case of the great cats—and get away with it.” (op cit, 1933, p. 12)

One day Beatty saw a lion suffering from burs that had gotten between his toes; the cat must have picked them up on the way to the arena or in the enclosure. The spectators laughed at the scene of a lion, alternately sticking his feet in his mouth. “It *looked* funny, and I didn’t blame those people for laughing. But it was not a laughing matter,” Beatty continued, “since burs sometimes lead to infection.” (op cit, 1965, p. 263)

Knowledge is a necessary ingredient to understand an animal issue, which was missing in the public laughing at a suffering lion. It is also the public (although not the same individuals) who would condemn “the fighting acts”, epitomized by Beatty. It does not appear, however, that a chair, a whip, or a stick, would injure a full-grown big cat when used properly. A lion or tiger responds ferociously (in the eye of the beholder) yet that does not represent savagery or brutality. It is a part of behavioral repertoire to growl, scratch and bite. Cats do that to each other.

Cruelty did exist in circuses historically. That became a thing of the past, long ago: “The period when unfortunate animals were driven to jump over a bar from dread of a whip or a red-hot iron—a disgrace to the humanity of man!—is gone by,” (Hagenbeck, 1911, p. 118) although old stories persist. A recollection by Bostock: “The lion trainer my father had at that time was the great feature of the show. It struck me, however, that he was extremely cruel, and being very fond of animals myself, this aroused my indignation.” Regarding the idea of keeping red-hot irons in case of emergencies Bostock said: “I rejected it because it is an extremely cruel expedient, and seldom effectual as a remedy for the attacks of wild beasts.” (op cit, pp. 4, 162) But the worn-out question has more than nine lives.

As a young boy Damoo Dhotre, arguably India’s greatest trainer, asked Mr. Chavan, his great mentor: “Don’t trainers beat animals to make them obey?” although he never saw an animal beaten in his uncle’s circus. The mentor’s response: “Some trainers do beat their animals. ...but this is not my way, and I don’t believe it is a good way. I hope it will not be yours. You train animals by beating them when you are neither smart enough nor patient enough to train them correctly.” (Dhotre, 1961, p. 35) Likewise, Mabel Stark thought: “Trainers who try to beat animals into submission always get in trouble. The animal hates a cruel master and bides its time. Sooner or later it turns—and then there is another funeral.” (Stark & Orr, 1940, pp. 18-19) By the time Gunther Gebel-Williams entered the profession it must have been a thing of the past: “There are people who believe that animal cruelty is part of the circus way of life. This is not true. I have never seen it where I worked in Europe or America. Of course I cannot speak for others, but I do not believe you can get any animal to do what you want if it is mistreated.” (op cit, p. 324)

From Jungle to Captivity: Adjusting to Room Service

“Jungle” was often used to describe animals’ native haunts, including forests, savannahs and grasslands. The transition from those environments to captivity is a life-changing event for the animal. (This applies to captive-born progeny; their pattern of life remains largely unchanged for generations.) Nature’s components—social, spatial, nutritious, to day-night cycle—disappear and animals must make adjustments. Instead of hunting, cats receive room service, and the feeding practice comes from human viewpoint. Big cats are called meat-eaters, a misnomer. We selectively consume muscular portions of a cow or a pig, a regime which should not be forced on other mammals. What happens if cats are fed a straight meat diet?

“The literature concerning large cats in captivity contains references for more than a hundred years to obvious deficiencies,” Patricia Scott, University of London, discovered. “When muscle meat or heart is given to animals the total amount of calcium provided is very small indeed.” (Scott, 1968, pp. 21–36) A radiograph accompanies her article shows humeri (long bones of upper forelimbs) of two lions. On the right is a bone from a lion shot in the wild and on the left, from one raised in a zoo, illustrate a stark contrast. The one from the wild is solid white, while the one from a zoo appears spongy and almost transparent halfway through.

The spongy bone represents an unintentional form of cruelty. Some trainers had a keen eye on this. Observations by Bostock, at the turn of the last century: “Curiously enough, they are fond of any heads—sheep’s, chickens’, calves’, lambs’, and others—, and will always eat them with the greatest relish,” adding, “With each piece of beef or mutton, if we can manage it, is given a piece of bone; the reason for this is that gnawing the bone helps digestion and is good for the teeth.” (op cit, p. 50) Clyde Beatty on bones: “I have learned from experience, and also from veterinarians, that a lion or a tiger is a happier and a healthier animal if he has a chance to swallow a certain amount of practically pulverized bone with the raw meat on which he subsists. Anyone seeing the big cats grind up those bones also has a chance to see the big powerful teeth that do the grinding.” (op cit, 1965, p. 5) Yet, there are other components of a predator’s diet.

A predator tears into the prey’s abdomen and devours viscera. European trainer Hans Brick made a rare observation: “I ordered every day from the horse-slaughterer two sacks full of the intestines of freshly slaughtered horses with the contents of the intestines intact. I admit that it wasn’t a pleasant job to pull this material out of a sack with one’s hands and sling it into the cage, but I would do anything to put an animal right again. The sick lions fed on the horrid mess and ravenously consumed the last particle. In three weeks, they were so miraculously restored

that some of the artistes who had been away in the meantime refused to believe they were the same animals. The bowel flora of the horses had already reduced the grain and grass which the horse had eaten to a chyme, in which large amounts of vital vitamins were released.” (Brick, 1960, p. 61) His point: The lions’ body was crying for the nutriment.

Big cats are occasional feeders. They take a large chunk of food in a short space of time, interrupted by long intervals. In the wild they may not eat every day. In his landmark research, famed mammalogist and field biologist George Schaller noted that lions eat one meal about every two and a half days in his study area in Serengeti, Tanzania. (Schaller, 1972) In circuses and zoos big cats are fed once a day, six days a week, having one fast day afterwards. A biologist at San Diego Zoo commented on this practice: “Fasting carnivores on the seventh day is apparently a practice rooted in human convenience, perhaps an accommodation to having on hand a reduced staff on weekends. ...The systematic accumulation of knowledge about a particular taxon has a way of telling us how little of its biology we truly understand.” (Lindburg, 1993, pp. 317–319) Meeting the requirements of a wild animal represents a formidable task.

Once basic needs are met, we assume that captive animals begin to breed routinely. Thus breeding is a yardstick for successful husbandry. For circuses, home-grown lions and tigers have also become a necessity. The high cost of animal importation is only one reason, since international treaties, laws and regulations on importation of wild animals have become stricter. But the nature of the travelling circus operation makes captive breeding challenging.

Bostock noted, “It will be readily understood that in an exhibition which is open to the public all day long it is extremely difficult to give any animal absolute quiet; but we always do our best, and it is wonderful how tender-hearted the roughest of men become toward the animals at a time like this. From the very commencement we try to make life as easy and comfortable as possible for the animal with young. She is given an extra-roomy cage, placed where she will not be more disturbed than is necessary. Her health and diet are most carefully looked after, and she is watched continuously. As soon as she appears uneasy, the cage is covered up, and she is left to herself until she has had plenty of time to settle down with her little ones. The cage is not opened to the public, as a rule, for two weeks and even then great care has to be taken.” (op cit, pp. 54–55) He added that letting her care for her cubs was the basic rule, as opposed to hand-rearing.

His account was published around the turn of the last century, indicating that captive breeding was taking place already in the nineteenth century. In the pre-World War II days Mabel

Stark worked on leopards and tigers: "...I have raised dozens of cubs and learned invaluable lessons from personal observation. ...you cannot look after a jungle kitty twenty-four hours a day without becoming intimately acquainted with its habit. It's the best schooling an animal trainer can have." (op cit, p. 109) Clyde Beatty made a comparison on two big cats: "In captivity the lioness is a better mother than the tigress. It is more a matter of temperament than anything else. The caged lioness is less nervous, less excitable, than the caged tigress." (op cit, 1965, p. 113) The difficulty lies in match-making a solitary species. In old days when acquisition of tigers depended on wild-caught adults, introduction of sexes without killing each other was no easy task.

"Few animals are easier to breed in captivity than lions," Hans Brick pointed out. By contrast, "The legend which persists in zoos and circuses that tigers are weakly creatures in captivity is undoubtedly due to the fact that they are difficult to breed and rear; for one thing, the tiger is not a good family-father as the lion is, and even in the rutting season a tiger will sometimes kill a tigress." (op cit, pp. 57, 64) In agreement Alex Kerr stated that "they have to be absolutely at ease and settled before they will breed in captivity." (op cit, p. 122) Another reminder: "Lions have always bred readily in captivity under almost any kind of conditions, and today so many are produced that it is sometimes quite a problem finding a purchaser for them. By contrast, tigers in captivity have always been difficult animals to breed. London Zoo did not succeed in rearing its first cubs until after the last war (World War II), and the story is similar for most other town zoos." (Street, 1965, p. 85–86) Today, tigers breed routinely in captivity.

Foes or Comrades? Circus and Zoo Relationship

Breeding of wild animals is but one area that circuses and zoos have in common. Both entities exhibit wild animals and share a rich history, as seen in the traffic of animals and personnel between the two. Circus/zoo historian Richard Reynolds has chronicled some two dozen instances where animals were moved between the Ringling circus alone and various zoos. These deals involved such animals as okapis, giraffes, antelopes, elephants, hippos and rhinos, in addition to big cats. (pers. comm., 2013) As for humans here follows just one example, at National Zoological Park, Washington, DC (opened to the public in 1891). During the preparatory stage William Blackburne, who had spent twelve years with the Barnum and Bailey Circus, became the head keeper of the Zoo. At this time "Adam Forepaugh Shows presented two

elephants to the Government. ...The elephants were chained to a tree, and the Zoo was a fact.” (Mann, 1930, p. 4) More on Dr. Mann later.

The two entities also share something, to be at the receiving end of accusations for cruelty. The aforementioned Raymond Ditmars once defended a circus act. Clyde Beatty recalled: “I shall always be grateful to the late Raymond L. Ditmars, former curator of mammals and reptiles of the New York Zoological Society, for debunking a charge made by an organization dedicated to fair play for animals, that I employed ‘cruel practices’ in training my lions and tigers (which information, I might add, they had ‘on good authority,’ although the authority’s name was not given).” (op cit, 1965, pp. 8–9)

In recent decades, however, the climate surrounding two entities has changed considerably. As the society’s view on the natural world shifted in the waves of awakening environmental concerns, zoos emphasized the role of the modern day Noah’s Ark, a refuge for endangered species. The 1980s saw zoos going through vast changes. Zoos adopted a new lexicon, hence the words “cage” and “pen” have been replaced by “habitat.” When a zoo conducts a show, frequently called “demonstration”, the term “trick” has been replaced with “behavior” although the animal is performing similar acts. Some of the training practices are now called “enrichment.”

Along the way zoo punditry assumed an elitist position, taking a contemptuous view on circuses, an attempt to appease influential animal advocate groups. A zoo pundit opened the door to an anti-captivity group for a dialogue in the 1990s, but such a move requires extreme caution. This man should have known that those groups’ ultimate goal is to eliminate all institutions with captive animals, circuses and zoos. Soon activists turned their focus on zoos to dictate the directions of animal management, a typical example being removal of elephants from zoos across the U.S. and Canada.

As Dr. Ulrich Schürer, former Wuppertal Zoo director, noted in a recent email: “Zoos and zoo-organizations, in particular those in the English-speaking world, tend to give in to pressure from animal rights people and others much too easily. It is better to stand up and defend what we are doing, in particular in matters related to elephant husbandry, but not only in these. There are too many amateurs who think they know everything better.” It is this writer’s observation that circus people fight for their cause but collectively, zoos show no sign of holding their ground firmly. Nor do they seem to reach out for cooperation. An example: A circus fan

group once approached Los Angeles Zoo to support the Zoo, but they received no reply of any kind. The Zoo had not been supportive of circuses, and embarrassed circus fans in the past. This is by no means an isolated episode.

And that takes us back to National Zoo in Washington, DC. The life of Dr. William Mann, former director, has been ably chronicled by Jesse Donahue and Erik Trump, Saginaw Valley State University, Michigan. Mann had already established an international reputation as an entomologist, on the staff of the United States Department of Agriculture, when he took the National Zoo's helm in 1925. Soon, he changed the face of American zoos; "...his academic credentials and his position at the National Zoo made him one of the nation's central authorities on zoos." At this time American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, or AAZPA (now AZA) was in its infancy. "With his gregarious personality, boundless professional enthusiasm, and first-rate networking skills, Mann soon became an important figure in this nascent organization."

Unbeknownst to the current generation of zoo professionals who may not know who he was, Bill Mann, as he was known to his friends, was a fan of all circuses, large and small. "He adored them, often organizing his travel and work schedules so that he could attend them. Reportedly, he was so well-known in the circus world that whenever he attended one that had made a stop in Washington, a long line of circus personnel would form to greet him. Lucile [his wife] discovered that marriage to Bill meant going to the circus every time one was in town—and not just once, but to every performance. Even if the Manns were at a dinner party, Bill would start telling stories about the circus and before long the entire group would troop off to catch the show. Later, he might invite someone from the circus home for lunch or dinner."

Mann was a Harvard Ph.D., and "To many among the elite, the circus hands, and their typical audience were from a different social world, but Mann counted good friends among their ranks. He visited the circus not just because he liked animals but also because he enjoyed socializing with the circus workers." (Donahue & Trump, 2010, pp. 37, 42, 45, 66) Dr. Mann sometimes acquired circus animals for the zoo, and in turn, supplied them with ones in his collection. Also, Richard Reynolds comments (pers. comm., 2013): "He freely gave advice to circuses on how to care for animals. Example: When rubber mogul Harvey Firestone donated a Liberian-caught pygmy hippopotamus to the Ringling circus in 1941, Mann instructed the show

on how to feed it based on his remarkable success in keeping and breeding the species at the National Zoo.”

It is our citizens’ right to enjoy and appreciate wild animals in captivity in circuses and zoos, just as Bill Mann did. Circuses are an American tradition and heritage, while zoos are treasured civic assets to be promoted. Yet today anti-captivity activists have been robbing us of our right. In the meantime zoos, tuned into political correctness, will most likely continue to cater to the prevailing wind and play a “good boy” role.

Bill Mann was among the giants in the zoo scene of the last century. Professor Heini Hediger was another internationally prominent zoo director, who took up interest in circuses and examined animal training. We will begin with the age-old argument. “Freedom” (or the lack of it) occupies some zoo-goers’ minds when discussing animals: “Oh, he is a prisoner locked up behind bars!” What escapes lay people’s minds: How can animals occupy themselves with an abundance of time at their disposal, all day long, day after day? And, how do circus animals fare compared to their brethren in zoos?

Hediger’s Wisdom

“There are three essentials in the care and feeding of wild animals—good food, cleanliness, and exercise,” said Bostock. “Food and cleanliness come first, but exercise is nearly as important, and this is one of the main reasons why animals in traveling shows are so much healthier and stronger than those kept in zoological parks.” (op cit, p. 34) Alex Kerr also noted that contrary to general belief, “animals enjoy life with a circus, particularly when they are travelling. In a zoo, they are amongst the same scenery, the same old faces, and the same atmosphere; although they are well looked after, the only fresh interest they can get is when a new animal is put among them.” (op cit, p. 97) Gebel-Williams offered: “Tigers and leopards in zoos have bigger spaces than they have at the circus, but I do not believe that bigger spaces necessarily make for happy animals. I have seen tigers in zoos that seemed absolutely lifeless. They usually spend most of their time lying sleepily in their cages, alternately eating and dozing. Twenty-four hours is a long time for a creature with nothing to do.” By comparison his animals had a job. “They had no time to be bored. They had show time and time spent travelling back and forth to the trains, and the animal walks—there was always action. And the more action, the

more the animals looked and acted alive.” (op cit, pp. 58-59) It is unlikely that such views are accepted by zoos.

Nearly half a century ago John Perry, then the assistant director of America’s National Zoo, noted that “Zoo men differ sharply, even violently, on the virtues of circuslike performances in zoos,” adding that the scenes of performing animals “offends some of my colleagues.” Yet he observed: “If we are more concerned with animal welfare and the understanding of animal behavior, training has an important and valid place. Is it better to have a listless, neurotic animal weaving back and forth in a bare cage, or that enters into a circus act with unmistakable enjoyment?” (Perry, 1969, pp. 107–108) Perry’s view was strengthened by Professor Heini Hediger, former director of Zurich Zoo.

It has been more than two decades since he passed away, and his name has been fading away—two well-known American zoo persons pronounced his name “Heidegger” (a German philosopher who was affiliated with Nazism, while Hediger was a Swiss zoologist). Yet his words remain ageless, and it is fair to say that to this day, no one else organized principles of biology into zoos as Hediger did more than half a century ago. He undertook the first systematic analysis of the psychological needs of captive animals, and that includes training in zoos and circuses. From about a dozen books he authored in German, three have been translated into English. Examples of his ideas from two of them, first from “Wild Animals in Captivity”:

“When we consider that the wild animal in nature is constantly preoccupied with the impulses to avoid enemies and to seek food, and that both these highly important elements suddenly disappear in captivity, it is obvious that this change must have far reaching consequences. The captive animal’s most important occupations are taken from him. Enormous amount of energy are thus released and must somehow be restrained. Clearly one of the most urgent problems in the biology of zoological gardens arises from the lack of occupation of the captive animal. This lack may have harmful results in various ways.” The problem can only be remedied by providing a counter-measure, Hediger taught, in the form of occupational therapy. “The captive animal must be given a new interest in life, an adequate substitute for the chief occupation of freedom. In the author’s opinion this substitute can take the form of biologically suitable training and assumes the importance of occupational therapy.”

“The commonly held opinion that training is unnatural is wrong and is based on the mistaken notion of the natural treatment of animals,” Hediger insisted: “The disastrous

monotony of the captive animal's life is pleasantly interrupted by training. Contact between man and animal is intensified, often so much that the man is eventually accepted as a member of the same species, and incorporated into the social structure of the group. This intimacy with the animal has interesting psychological possibilities and often practical advantages as well, similar to those of tameness, but to a greater degree. In addition the material value of an animal, or a group of animals, can be greatly increased through training because groups of trained animals have more show value than raw animals. From all this we can see that as far as the interests of the captive animal are concerned, training is a necessity."

Disciplined Play

Thus, his theory on trainer-animal relationship seamlessly matches with what circus animal trainers have been saying all along. Being a scholar, Hediger still hadn't forgotten the show value, or the artistic aspect of training, and the audience:

"The aesthetic importance of training and trained animals is still often under-rated. Not enough spectators are capable of appreciating the artistry of the performances of a good man or woman trainer. The attention of the public is focused too much on the primitive danger element, or the technical side e.g. with performing tigers. Yet there is another way altogether of regarding first class performance. The good trainer creates something out of the inimitable movements of the wild animal, just as the artist does with his colours or the composer with notes. The quality of this artistic creation lies in the harmony of the animal-man relationship, in the delicacy and precision of the animal's achievements in individual performance, in the pattern of group performance to form an original blending of individual biological movements. For this reason, the performance of an outstanding trainer might be compared with the work of a composer of music." (Hediger, 1964, pp. 158-159, 161)

Not being an animal trainer himself allowed Dr. Hediger to examine the behavior of animals and trainers as a subject of study, with an eye of a biologist. Here follow thoughts from another book by him "The Psychology and Behaviour of Animals in Zoos and Circuses", which includes a chapter on circus animal psychology.

Citing the examples of the circus acts in St. Louis Zoo, Missouri, USA, Hediger theorized that such acts serve two purposes: The box office and the well-being of the performers: "We must distinguish between more or less sensational showmanship, and simple training exercises in

the interest of the animals as a branch of occupational therapy. Here there are two kinds of trainers; artists, and unscrupulous adventurers and money makers.” Hediger did not shy away from unpopular and controversial subjects, such as physical discipline of animals. There is no illusion in his words, indicating that animals are no fairy tale characters and that in reality they rough up each other. The public often misjudges good animal act, because they are misled by the notion that animals are repeatedly subdued, and they overlook two important matters:

“First, that is necessary to provide a proper and satisfactory life for the animal kept in artificial surroundings, and secondly, the way animals behave toward each other. In dealing with a larger animal—often even with a dog—it is at times biologically necessary to give it a slap and even a heavy smack at the proper time and with the right intensity, otherwise the animal would consider the man a weakling and take all sorts of liberties with him. This the animal is forced to do on the basis of its natural social rank. This may perhaps sound brutal to the outsider, but it is based on biological grounds. From the scientific base of training dogs or wild animals in the circuses, this necessity is clearly evident. It is a pity that this point of view is disregarded, sometimes even misused, by greenhorns and unscrupulous people.”

Physical discipline may represent a temporary step. The trainer has to make the animal understand what is required of him. “Since there is no possibility of direct understanding between man and animal through speech—as there is between two men—one must find some other way of doing it, and that is by teaching it the meaning of certain signals which have emotional value.” Once this system is established, the animal will carry out by way of signals alone. Continuing Hediger, “Only in this way can it be made to understand what is required of it. At the same time it must be treated as gently and sympathetically as possible, since excitement is harmful to a successful course of training.” Once the act is fine-tuned, “Just as a musical performance can be analysed physically, i.e. acoustically, a trained animal performance can be analysed biologically. The trainer works intuitively, like an artist, spontaneously using all sorts of biological distances and reactions as the result of his experience; the animal psychologist on the other hand measures, names and describes them.”

In the end, “training simply means disciplined play---and a certain amount of discipline is essential for animals, whose physical strength is greater than man’s.” There are imperceptible gradations between playing and training, and these two things are not opposite, Hediger concluded. “Good training is disciplined play. Both play and training often give excellent

opportunities for brightening up the daily existence of the animals in the zoo, making it more significant, and giving the animal the necessary amount of exercise and occupation.” (Hediger, 1968, pp. 118, 122, 125, 136, 139)

To those who may criticize that Hediger’s views represent only one man’s opinion, and in fact, to anyone interested in animals in circuses and zoos, I strongly recommend Dr. Marthe Kiley-Worthington’s book, published more recently. An animal behavior expert, she conducted an 18-month investigation, spanning some 3,000 hours, on circuses and zoos, asking critical questions: Do those animals suffer psychological ill-health? Is handling and training cruel? Does transportation cause stress?

Her conclusion: Circuses do not, by their nature, cause suffering and distress in animals while there are improvements that must be made. She stated: “On balance, I do not think that the animals’ best interests are necessarily served by money and activities diverted to try and ban circuses and zoos either locally or nationally.” (Kiley-Worthington, 1990, p. 1) Too often, a debate on animal cruelty pushes the requirements for animals, the very target of accusations, off the center stage in the heat of emotions. Here we need a theoretical basis on the side of the animals for a more meaningful debate. Professor Heini Hediger’s wisdom, supported by Dr. Kiley-Worthington’s research, provides an insight as to the benefit of training. That offers us a much-needed tool to fill the void in our thought process.

Envoy

There is an impression that the level of expertise in wild animal training had been on a decline. About Europe, Roman Proske reminisced: “I was fortunate to be able to serve my apprenticeship in the great days of wild animal training, when many of the most celebrated trainers were at the height of their careers. They were my mentors. They set the standard of skill and perfection I was determined to reach.” (op cit, p. 72) Nostalgically Hans Brick noted that “there are very few real trainers today. We have a lot of ‘slangers’, who call themselves trainers. There is today almost nowhere an educated public appreciative of the fine art involved in real training, and the mediocrity, the ‘cattle-drover’ who so often today passes for a trainer, gets away with it for that very reason. There is no informed criticism as there was even fifty years ago.” (op cit, p. 29) This author observes that it is human nature that an older generation takes an

unforgiving view on the newer. Yet these old-time professionals carried the weight of the witness; they have waded through the tide of history.

In the United States, the presence of the circus began to diminish as early as the 1920s, and the audience numbers were going downhill by the 1930s. “Urban development and the rise of the suburbs pushed the show grounds away from vicinity of the rail yards, making it difficult for the large railroad shows to navigate efficiently.” In the backdrop of the invasion of a powerful medium, television, the circus no longer commanded the monopoly of the current events for the populace and “by 1956 the rambling railroad tent show no longer had a home,” according to Janet Davis, University of Texas. (Davis, 2002, pp. 228-230) The cost of transporting huge numbers of equipment, supplies, personnel and animals, necessary for maintaining large-scale animal acts, was becoming prohibitive.

“I once said if I had a son who wanted to be a wild-animal trainer I’d wallop him good,” Clyde Beatty talking to Bill Ballantine, circus artist and author. Beatty had a son then, and if he wanted to follow his father’s trail, “I’ll do all in my power to persuade him not to. ...I wouldn’t advise anybody to set off on it, especially these days when the circuses are dying out. Why there are less than a dozen animal-training jobs in America today worth their salt.” (Ballantine, 1958, p. 138) Further compounding the difficulty is the surge of anti-captivity activism, which has been gaining political power. In 1999 there were twelve animal-free circuses in the United States. (Davis, 2002, p. 234)

Yet, we should not forget to honor the treasured history of the art of wild animal training which represents an essential component of the circus. It is our responsibility to ensure that the circus, a national heritage, continues to enrich the lives of future generations. America has been built by immigrants, and as we have reviewed, those who chose to adopt this country, including Charly Baumann and Gunther Gebel-Williams, have strengthened the circus world. The art of wild animal training we see today is a fine cultural mix, an embodiment of American enterprise. And as Janet Davis philosophizes: “The circus makes us take pause to acknowledge the powerful and occasionally perilous relationship between people and animals. And in the end, the circus endures because it beckons us to contend with our fragility and potential.” (op cit, p. 237)

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Photo captions

Fig. 1. Asian elephant Babe was donated to the National Zoo by the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus in May, 1934 (the photo was taken in spring 1935). From left: Dr. William Mann, Zoo Director, Sara Gumpertz, Sam Gumpertz, Manager, Jennie Rooney and Louisa Pickel, Ringling Brothers. Photo: Smithsonian's National Zoo Archives.

Fig. 2. Professor Heini Hediger with a black rhinoceros in the Africa House in Zurich Zoo. A famed Swiss zoologist, he served as the director of three major zoos in his country: Bern, Basel and Zurich. Dr. Hediger always maintained a keen interest in rhinoceroses. Photo: Dr. Christian Schmidt.