The Greatest Show On Earth

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Nearly everyone has visited the circus at least once in his or her lifetime. The bustle of activity, bright colors and fantastic costumes, and amazing performances of people and animals make the circus "the greatest show on earth." Most people take the circus at face value: they enjoy it and go home entertained. There are others in our society who question the very existence of the circus, and in particular, the use of animals for mere amusement. With accusations of animal cruelty flying about regularly, one wonders what it is really like behind-the-scenes at the big top.

This September, the first-year class of Iowa State University's College of Veterinary Medicine had its questions answered, thanks to the generosity of Ringling Brother's Barnum and Bailey Circus, which appeared at Veteran's Auditorium in Des Moines. Dr. Richard Houck, a 1957 graduate of ISU CVM and the veterinarian for the circus, invited the class to a behind-the-scenes look at the husbandry, training, and behavior of the animals which play an integral role in the circus show. Graham Thomas Chipperfield, the circus' animal trainer, was on hand to demonstrate training procedures and answer questions from the class.

Training

Chipperfield, a native of England, was raised in the circus. His father is world renowned in the training of big cats. Chipperfield uses a positive reward system to train the animals with which he works. Rewards include food, positive vocal encouragement, and scratching behind the legs for elephants. Over the deafening roar of some nearby lions, one of the elephants demonstrated several basic tricks to us, including standing on her head, sitting up, and standing upright. The sight of the relatively diminutive Chipperfield next to a massive, yet cooperative and intelligent elephant convinced us that this method of training is very effective.

Perhaps a stronger argument for a positive reward system was the sight of Chipperfield in the performance cage with two lionesses with only basic training that had just arrived from a farm in England. He demonstrated the painstakingly slow process of training these cats to regard him as one of them, for that is what he must be to remain unharmed in a cage of up to ten lions. Again, he employed positive vocal encouragement and food rewards to train these lionesses to sit on their stools. Eventually, these two will become part of the show.

He is currently training a young tiger in hopes of including the tiger as a new act. Training of this tiger is a 24-hour process, for the tiger sleeps on his feet at night and goes swimming with him by day. The tiger spends a great deal of time with him to accustom the tiger to Chipperfield's every move.

Life as an animal trainer is not without danger. Several years ago, he was involved in a mishap in the lion cage and was nearly killed. His assistant saved his life by distracting the lions. Chipperfield is ever-mindful of the strength and power of the animals he trains.

Animal Treatment

After leaving Iowa State, Dr. Richard Houck worked for many years in Wisconsin as a large animal veterinarian. While practicing, he had occa-
Although much time is spent training the tigers, Chipperfield risks his life every time he steps into the cage. Several years ago, he was involved in a mishap in the lion cage and was nearly killed.

As the veterinarian of the circus, Dr. Houck is responsible for all of the animals in two separate circus troupes which tour the world simultaneously. He cares for elephants, lions, tigers, horses, buffaloes, steers, and dogs. He has been instrumental in starting a successful elephant breeding program for the circus, and the first two offspring of his program, Romeo and Juliet, are now performing in the circus. Romeo and Juliet behaved for us as typical youngsters do. They were constantly moving, touching and playing with one another.

Dr. Houck credits his education at Iowa State in giving him the knowledge and skills to work on the exotic animals of the circus. He advised us to soak up as much of the basics as we can, for it is the application of basic medicine which has allowed him to be successful as a circus veterinarian.

Dr. Houck is dedicated to providing the best possible care and surroundings for the animals as he can. When questioned about the animals’ comfort level, Dr. Houck replied that the animals’ lack of response to our class intruding on their area is a good indicator of their comfort. Members of the circus consider the animals to be athletes, just as a tightrope walker is an athlete. As an athlete, each animal is provided with proper food, water, and exercise. Dr. Houck’s greatest concern for the animals is that they get enough rest.

Conclusion

As remarkable as our tour was, we were treated to an even greater experience by Dr. Houck and Chipperfield: we witnessed the human-animal bond in action. What other explanation can there be for the sight of a three-ton elephant willingly standing on her head at the request of a human being? How else to explain the tolerance and obedience of two powerful lionesses in the presence of what might otherwise be prey? This is definitely not a case of humans using force to subdue animals, for the strength of the animals far outweighs that of any human being. Instead, there is cooperativity spawned by respect and cognizance of the animals’ limits and abilities.

Ringling Brother’s Barnum and Bailey Circus can be proud of its care and treatment of animals. They set an example for all who are involved in animal care and use. Many thanks to Dr. Houck and others who made this visit possible. On your next visit to the circus, remember those who are behind the scenes making it possible for the magic to happen.