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## 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

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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,

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