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Recollections of a Marine World Elephant Trainer

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Barbara worked directly with Taj, Liz, Malaika and Tava, the four city-“owned” elephants who survive at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom. Barbara has over 17 years experience as an elephant keeper. She worked at Six Flags from 1990 through 1996 under David Blasko, who went on to be Six Flags long-time elephant and animal care manager (leaving in early 2007), and Steve Johnson who is still at the park today..

When I started at the park, the Elephant Encounter was just a few months old. My recollections of some of the elephants are as follows:

Mardji* had osteomyelitis in her feet and her two front legs were bowed. She endured two knock down surgeries. The first and second phalanges were removed from her toe. Toward the end of her life, she was chained in the barn, separated from the other elephants. She couldn't go outside because her feet were so badly infected. She was the matriarch and it was very hard on her to be separated from the other elephants, but we never thought about her emotional needs. I still recall one time when they did walk her out of the barn and let her get into the pool. She submerged herself and the buoyancy of the water obviously was a great relief to her – she actually became playful in the pool until she was led back inside the barn.

Bandula* had one short leg, as a result of a possible injury in a show.

Ginny* had two stiff front legs and was used for elephant rides.

Tina* never lay down on her side because her hips hurt so much. She had abscesses on her hips that were like gaping holes. Like Mardji, Tina underwent two knockdown surgeries. When they opened those abscesses they found what they called a “roadmap” of abscesses underneath.

Judy* had been the waterskiing elephant when the park was in Redwood City.

Taj was a retired Circus Vargus elephant. She was huge – over 10,000 pounds. In the circus, she was known as “Trixie.” I was told that when she was in the circus, she once took off with a circus showgirl on her back.

*Each of these elephants has since been euthanized due to severe foot and/or joint problems.

Malaika was only two years old when I started there. Pat Flora was the only one who trained her. She was very afraid of being hurt by Pat. After Pat a trainer named Jimmy Hudson took over. He could do anything with Malaika and he never laid a hand on her. There was no stress with Jimmy but unfortunately, he left the park after a short period of time.

Like all the structures for the land animals, the **Barn** was constructed quickly when the park moved from Redwood City to Vallejo. It was constructed of aluminum siding. The doors were hotwired and the elephants were chained inside at night. They were chained front and back on opposite legs and all lined up so that there was barely enough room for each to lie down on their sides.

Discipline was delivered by David (Blasko), Pat (Flora) or Steve (Johnson). When an elephant did something wrong, they would take her in the barn and “take care of it.” There are a few incidents that exemplify the free contact system of managing elephants that Six Flags still uses today.

Tina - The elephants were always made to keep their nose up in the salute position, while we were doing the morning routine (brushing down and bathing). This is so they couldn't take a swing at us. I was fairly new and the care took longer than usual. Tina couldn't keep her nose up so long – it started to cramp. Her nose dropped and a lot of saliva poured out, meaning that she couldn't breathe through it. This was perceived as Tina disobeying a command. I was instructed to work her over. This meant bringing her into the barn, chaining her, running her through her commands, and hitting her with the ankus when she didn't comply quickly enough. When I was not forceful enough, my supervisor, Pat Flora, took over.

Malaika - - When Malaika disobeyed a command to lie down, Pat took her into the barn, chained her, and made her lie down, get up, lay down repeatedly. Over and over and faster and faster. Malaika was screaming. Pat was smacking her between the eyes with the butt of the ankus and on her side. Pat appeared very fired up and he threw an object at Malaika, nearly hitting me. At that point, I threw my ankus against the wall and walked out of the barn disgusted.

Mardji – After Mardji didn't lie down on command, I witnessed Pat force Mardji to lie down by hitting her repeatedly with the ankus. He slammed the butt of the ankus right in there between her eyes. Another time, he smacked Mardji with the ankus right in her eye. It actually made an impression on her eye. That time he had hit her because she didn't put her nose up.

The beating of Roman – Roman was a young, castrated bull who was personally owned by Dave Blasko. Roman wouldn't lay down for David. He was beaten. David and two other trainers took turns beating on his back left leg (the leg that goes down first when a trained elephant lies down) with a large piece of wood. Roman was defiant; he would not budge. I remember thinking, just lie down, but he never did. Roman was chained on his front legs and probably back legs. He was flailing in his chains, trying to get out,

trying to get at the handlers. Roman went into a stretched position on elbows and knees, but he still wouldn't lie down. Finally, David took an electrical cord and touched it to Roman's leg chains. Roman jolted and jumped because of the electrical shock. Sometime after this, Roman finally laid down. He had given up. Blasko was suspended two weeks (with pay), not for the beating, but for failing to notify his supervisor about what had happened and what he planned to do. Roman was eventually sold to a facility in Mexico, where it is rumored that he died.

Our mindset was that you couldn't physically hurt an elephant. They were so massive and huge, we thought they could take anything. We never thought of their emotional needs, their feelings. I later worked with an elephant named Tange at the Chehaw Zoo in Georgia. Her nickname was "the Timex" because she could take a licking and keep on ticking. That exemplifies the mindset of the time. All free contact operates on the principal that discipline (physical punishment) must be immediate and firm. You can't let an elephant get away with anything. Free contact is based upon dominant control established and maintained by negative operant conditioning – either you do this or something bad will happen to you.

I have since had the opportunity to work in a facility that where cooperation, trust and respect has transformed the lives of elephants formerly held under abusive systems of control. At The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, the needs of elephants, be they physical, psychological or social, always come first. It has been gratifying to realize that there is a better way of keeping elephants in captivity. The type of management that Six Flags employs is abusive to the elephants and dangerous to their keepers. It should not be tolerated in an enlightened society.