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Photograph by Eric Carlson

Notes From the Underbelly

Elephant Man

By [Eric A. Carlson](#)

"The abuse at Ringling Brothers is 6 out of 7 days a week."

-Tom Rider

CALL ME A TREE hugger, but after watching several hours of video of elephants being abused at various circus stops around the country, and the sad parade of animals being led down the dung-filled avenues of San Jose to the San Jose Compaq Center/Hewlett Packard Arena (the site of this year's Ringling

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Brothers Circus), I am on board with Tom Rider and Kathleen Flynn in their fight against Ringling Brothers--the Cruellest Show on Earth. Seeing is believing.

The instrument of pain is the bull hook, or ankus, a 3-foot-long rod with a hooked tip. It is effective against elephants because they have extremely sensitive skin. A Ringling Brothers employee (in video Tom Rider provided) said that circus policy requires the ankus to be used only as a guide or a tool. Video taken over the last two years depicts otherwise--elephants were struck on the back of their legs to get them to move faster, and bull-hooked to encourage them to perform tricks or to move from place to place. I saw a young elephant whacked on the trunk for simply raising its trunk to a tether; the handler grinned broadly at the frightened animal's pained reaction.

Tom told me that when Ringling Brothers was presented evidence of elephant cruelty, they promised the abusers would be reprimanded. It might not have "taken," as the circus was cited at this year's San Jose performance for an alleged violation of California Penal Code 596.5--Cruelty to Elephants, against an elephant named Asia. The circus was also cited for allegedly allowing a Yak to run loose and for allegedly hosing raw animal waste down street drains that flow to the bay. Sorry about that, Alviso.

Tom Rider hired on with Ringling Brothers in 1997, as a "barn man," and for the next two-and-a-half years tended elephants. He grew fond of the tusked behemoths, and referred to them as "his girls." He still does. Tom witnessed a discouraging and systematic mistreatment of his girls, and when he opted out of Ringling Brothers, he decided to follow the circus--wherever it went--to hound the

malefactors and inform the local press of what lay behind the shadows.

According to Tom, Ringling Brothers hires men with little or no experience to care for the animals. Tom related that in his entire stay with the circus, he was unaware of a bona fide animal trainer ever being hired. When problems did occur, such as animals bolting, there were too few employees to control them.

Catherine Ort-Mabry, Director of Corporate Communications for Feld Entertainment/Ringling Bros., didn't want to go into detail about the allegations because of pending litigation. However, she called the charges "unwarranted." "Our animal care staff is composed of experts who have devoted their lives to caring for the animals at Ringling Bros.," she told us via email. She called the ankus "an elephant management tool that has been in use for thousands of years." The elephant's handler, she assures us, considers Asia his elephant "auntie" and would never take any action that would hurt her.

Kathleen Flynn showed me video of the Ringling Brothers Circus in San Jose. It showed animals being kept in the parking lot next to the Arena. At one point, in the street, a horse bolted free in the vicinity of children, before being corralled. The avenue between the Arena and the parking lot holding the animals was covered in dung--which was left in the street for hours. A tape of last year's circus showed two zebras--chained together--bolting from a lone handler. They ran on either side of a light pole--the chain caught, and they slammed to the ground, stunned. Raucous laughter rang out in the night.

Final Note: On Kathleen's suggestion I examined Title 7 of the San Jose Municipal Code which deals with animals. These codes

are just a bit convoluted, but even I could see that San Jose, the owner of the Arena, was stretching the definition of a few of the edicts concerning dangerous animals, to allow the circus to take place there. To say the least.

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Former Ringling Brothers' employee exposes Ringling Bros. in Chicago with new charges of animal abuse

Date

November 19, 2002

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IDA is an international, California-based animal advocacy organization dedicated to ending the abuse and exploitation of animals by defending their rights, welfare and habitats.

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Chicago, IL – Former Ringling Brothers' elephant handler, Tom Rider, is available in Chicago on Tuesday November 19, anticipating the arrival of Ringling Brothers', to reveal a new undercover video taken as recently as September 3. Mr. Rider is available to discuss and view the video footage (available from IDA), which reveals repeated and obvious abuse of elephants by several Ringling performers and elephant handlers and the USDA violations of the Animal Welfare Act. Call 917.930.5621 to arrange an interview.

One segment shows an animal handler - employed at least five years by Ringling - clearly stabbing an elephant in the stomach with a sharp instrument in violation of Ringling's stated policy of not using bull hooks to discipline or harm animals.

In Defense of Animals (IDA) anticipates widespread coverage of the Ringling Bros opening in Chicago and encourages you to include the views of animal advocates in your coverage.

"I have seen firsthand the horrific cruelty that animals in circuses suffer," **asserts ex-Ringling employee Tom Rider, who detailed Ringling's animal abuses to Congress in June 2000.** "Contrary to the rosy picture painted by Ringling Bros. propaganda, chaining, forced travel, violent training techniques, and other methods of cruel domination are still used to get wild animals to perform unnatural tricks for profit. This can in no way compare to their lives unfettered in the wild. We ask the public to boycott violence to animals by supporting circuses that only use willing human performers."

Other facts about Ringling Bros. to consider:

- Since 1993, Ringling Bros. has been cited for more than one hundred deficiencies in animal care during inspections conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

- Ringling Bros. has consistently opposed legislation and regulations to improve the conditions of animals forced to perform. For example, Ringling Bros. opposed legislation to limit the time an elephant may be confined in chains in a 24-hour period.

- USDA affidavits (available from IDA) reveal that Ringling Brothers is responsible for the death of a baby elephant named Benjamin who drowned under questionable circumstances in 1999 and that a Ringling employee repeatedly asked if the USDA can

call before they come for inspections and even tried to stop government officials from taking pictures!

- Ringling Bros. has been sued by animal protection organizations for conducting illegal spying operations. Rather than admit guilt, Ringling agreed to turn over custody of older animals to settle one case.