

Ringling's Elephant-Breeding Program

Despite the intensely close bond between female elephants and their offspring,¹ Ringling pulls still-nursing baby elephants from their mothers² to be trained and sent on the road. Experts recommend that in a captive setting, calves should not be forcibly removed from their mothers.^{3,4,5} Early disruption of the bonding and

rearing process produces long-lasting dysfunctional behavior that includes an abnormal startle response, depression, hyper-aggression, and unpredictable, asocial behavior.⁶

Under Ringling's care, at least four baby elephants have died

since 1998^{7,8,9,10} and others have suffered serious injuries during training or performances:

- A 3-year-old elephant named Kenny died after being forced to perform in three shows despite obvious signs of serious illness and bleeding from his rectum.¹¹ Ringling paid \$20,000 to settle USDA charges of failing to provide veterinary care.¹²
- A 4-year-old elephant named Benjamin drowned while attempting to escape from a Ringling handler who was prodding him with a bullhook. According to the USDA's investigation of the incident, "The elephant seeing, and/or being 'touched' or 'poked' by Mr. Harned with an ankus [bullhook] created behavioral stress and trauma which precipitated in the physical harm and ultimate death of the animal."¹³
- An 8-month-old elephant named Riccardo, who suffered from metabolic bone disease, was

destroyed after fracturing his hind legs when he fell off a circus pedestal during an apparent training exercise.¹⁴

- An 11-day-old elephant, believed to be named Bertha, reportedly died from a congenital defect. The circus did not acknowledge this elephant's birth or death until four months after she had died.¹⁵
- A 3-year-old elephant named Rudy suffered serious injuries while running amok in an arena during a performance in Puerto Rico.¹⁶
- USDA inspectors found large, painful wounds on the legs of baby elephants Doc and Angelica. The wounds were inflicted when the babies, who were both under the age of 2, were forcibly separated from their mothers and tied with ropes.¹⁷ The USDA stated in a warning letter to Ringling, "We believe there is sufficient evidence to confirm the handling of these animals caused unnecessary trauma, behavioral stress, physical harm, and discomfort to these two elephants."¹⁸

Despite the fact that elephants in the wild usually do not breed until they reach age 18 years of age,¹⁹ Ringling bred an immature elephant named Shirley, who was only 7 years old.²⁰ Shirley was unable to care for her newborn, likely because of her youth and inexperience. Video footage shows Shirley giving birth at Ringling's breeding compound. During labor and in obvious discomfort, she was chained by three legs on a cold, hard cement floor.

Veterinary advisors to the zoo community have issued guidelines stating, "All efforts should be made to make sure that the calf is born in the group while the mother is NOT chained! This will stimulate the acceptance of the calf by the mother and group members and is an investment for future breeding successes for the entire elephant group."²¹

Because Shirley was restrained and unable to see what was beneath her, she inadvertently kicked her newborn. Ringling staff immediately pulled the newborn from her reach as she attempted to reach out with her trunk to touch and smell him.²²

(See reverse for references)

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References

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