

## Bonding with the Beasts



Louis Dorfman stepped alone into the cage as the massive, 500-pound white tiger lumbered toward him.

Trying to remain still in the all-terrain vehicle a few feet outside the cage, I could only hold my breath as the tiger started to rise onto its back legs.

My fears were soon quelled as the tiger slowly settled back to all fours at Dorfman's request. He then ran his fingers through his fur, the beautiful, exotic tiger becoming as gentle as a house cat.

After a few minutes, the tiger tired and trudged over to lay his massive body against the cage to give a stunning view of paws the size of cantaloupes and legs as round as paint buckets.

Stepping out of the cage, the 78-year-old Dorfman claimed, "he would kill anyone in the world, but me."

Still stunned as to what I'd seen, we made a short drive before Dorfman exited again and hopped into the cage with Boyd's International Exotic Animal Sanctuary's newest resident – Nahla – a tiger found wandering the streets of Conroe just months before.

He tossed a ball to her and she pounced on it.

"I treat her like I will when she's 500 pounds," Dorfman said. "They love this interaction. She knows only good things happen when I'm in here.



"I'm responsible for her being this happy, confident and secure."

The relationships with the tigers are examples of Dorfman's deep love and passion for animals that began as a child in the East Texas Piney Woods. The son of an oilman, who also is part of the family's production company, said he spent many of his days as a child in the forest with animals.

"I'd take scraps from my home and I'd sit there and tame foxes, squirrels, raccoons and deer," Dorfman recalled. "All kids have some sort of fantasy, whether it's a cowboy or Superman. Mine was living with animals."

He acted on that fantasy first by training horses when he was just 12. Unlike traditional cowboys, who worked to break horses, he took an unconventional approach.

"I've always worked with animals with affection, emotion, kindness and gentleness. All the other cowboys kind of laughed at me because I took the time to get their trust. I'd go to horse shows and get laughed at," Dorfman said. "While in my early 20s, I had two world champion quarter horses."

His Hollywood Cat is listed among the National Cutting Horse Association's top horses.

As Dorfman grew, so did the animals he's worked with – and to the exotic side. He's served as the animal behaviorist at the International Exotic Animal Sanctuary on Texas 114

for 20 years. The sanctuary is home to several species of exotic cats, along with bears and wolves.

“Before I was [working with animals] privately and just for pleasure,” Dorfman said. “I got satisfaction seeing the animals have a rapport with a human and having trust, confidence and security of being with a human and having that bond that they’ve usually only had with their own species.”

The sanctuary tour continued with a stop at the bear orphanage that’s home to 21 bears. Most were orphaned in the wild and the sanctuary was contacted by fish and game departments to take in the animals. Dorfman works with the young cubs for several months before taking them to the orphanage with the other adult bears.

“I become their source of security, trust, confidence and parental figure,” he said.

“The older bears still have that relationship with me. With me as the catalyst, I introduce the younger bears. There’s a little huffing and puffing. They never fight. They stay around as long as I’m there.”

On this hot day, the bears paid little attention to Dorfman as he entered one of the habitats and talked briefly to them before leaving. This encounter is not out of the norm.

“That’s as good an interaction as I could want. It reinforces that I’m their friend; I’m going to come visit them and not going to irritate them,” Dorfman said.

“The disconnect we have as humans is we think we should just be able to grab them and pet them and so forth.”

Our next stop was to the lion’s den, where few people in their right mind would want to be. This lion slowly stood and appeared as shy as the lion from the Land of Oz until within a blink of an eye he covered 20 yards and was at Dorfman’s feet.

“That wasn’t even fast,” Dorfman said.



While from the outside, he seemed to have just escaped becoming a lion's dinner, he pointed out that he's never been harmed by an adult cat.

"I've worked with over 100 tigers and over 50 lions and never even had a scratch from an adult lion or tiger – babies, but never the adults," he said.

Through working with animals, he developed a non-verbal communication with them that allows him to know what they are thinking.

"It's difficult to describe – I know what they are feeling and thinking and they know what I'm feeling and thinking," Dorfman said. "That gives us a comfort level that is very special. When I'm with them I always know their thought pattern and how to react to them. That gives me a big margin of safety."

In the cage, he never disciplines the animal. There are also no ploys involving food.

"It's all strictly based on emotion. They have to want me with them sufficiently to modify their behavior," Dorfman said.

The only item he carries into the cage with him is a vinegar-filled squirt bottle.

A former boxer and a holder of black belts in four different martial arts disciplines, Dorfman claims respect is a big part of the bonding with the animals – especially the more dangerous of the big cats.

As our tour concluded, Dorfman took me to the cage of a brother and sister pair of tigers. He pointed out the different personalities of the two.

One came up to him as the other stayed near the fence watching. As I stood against the fence with mouth agape staring at the sight of this man looking at ease again with these strong beasts, Dorfman's words rang true.

"The world I live in, no one else lives in," he said. "In the time I'm with these wild animals, I live in a world that I know that is unique and special."



*Story by Richard Greene | Photos by Joe Duty*