Big Cat Rescue

Shaquille
Shattered Dreams
Shaquille

“As long as you pay to see shows with big cats, the abuse will continue”
– Stop Paying & The Abuse Can Stop
Shaq arrived at Big Cat Rescue on 3/4/96. He is retired from a nightclub act in Las Vegas. He arrived with a cougar whose face and head had been so severely beaten that she arrived with an infection in her brain from the open wounds and has since died. We were told that Shaq's former owner beat him to the point that the skull around his eyes has been so badly damaged that the eyelids roll in, causing his eyes to tear a lot. Perhaps they are tears for all of his kindred spirits who are still made to perform for man's entertainment.

It is understandable that he hates most men. His memory of the abuse he endured still lingers. But, the female volunteers all go out of their way to give Shaq extra special attention, to speak gently and softly with him and it is heartwarming to hear him purring and rubbing up against the cage affectionately in return. He loves the comfort and attention we lavish on him and will
roll over and play with his ball and bat it around his cat-a-tat as long as you’ll stay and watch him. We are so incredibly happy that we have been able to provide a nurturing home for him where he can feel safe and loved by all. He will always have a home here, no longer forced to endure abuse at the hand of man!

THE DAY HE DIED

Tears dropped down onto his lifeless form from the eyes of those who had gathered around Shaq to ease him over to the other side. His black spotted fur, dappled by the afternoon sun, glistened but no longer gave rise and fall to his sedated breathing. His 17 year prison sentence ended today.

We were remembering the proud, fearless leopard and how he had touched all of our lives with his strength to overcome the awful lot he had been dealt. Shaq had been born in a cage. He was bred to be used in a nightclub act by a trainer who made his living from the suffering of many big cats. As long as people would pay to see big cats doing stupid pet
tricks he could count on a good living by providing the disposable product of the trade; young, compliant felines.

Cubs live with their mothers for the first few years, so breeders pull the cubs before their eyes open and bottle raise them to be completely dependent and subservient to their human master. By the time the cats are a year old, they are nearly full sized; appearing to be adults, but still mentally kittens. The crowd is wowed by the mastery of the trainer over what they think to be a full-grown and fully intact lion, tiger or leopard. Usually they are declawed, defanged cubs who have been beaten into submission repeatedly behind the scenes.

A well-known tiger tamer boasted to me that the way you teach a big cat “who is boss” is to chain them to a wall and beat them with a whip, standing just out of reach. After a while the cat learns that no matter how hard he tries, he cannot retaliate and after a while gives up hope. His spirit dies and he is considered tamed or trained. The training goes on behind locked doors because the public would never support these wild animal acts if they knew the truth.
The trainers all claim that they only use “positive reinforcement” and when in front of the public they do, but the cats are ever reminded of the brutal force that will be used against them if they fail to comply. Sometimes it is in the carrying of a whip, which the trainer will defend as only being a guide, and sometimes it is in the verbal threats using words that only the cats in the ring can hear. It can be as subtle as a look (remember how your mom could do that?) or a gesture that the cat associates with pain.

At Big Cat Rescue we use positive reinforcement or operant conditioning as it is often called as a way to keep the cats’ minds stimulated and to assist us in their care and it works... when the cat wants it to work. This sort of training involves rewarding the cat with a little cube of meat for doing something we need them to do, like come into their feeding area, or show us a paw, or lay down next to the wall of the cage so we can give them their vaccinations or treat minor injuries. We do it because taking care of 100+ cats goes a lot easier if you have to get flea treatments on them and they come when called. It isn’t feasible to chase down a tiger just to put a few drops of Advantage on him. The cats at Big Cat Rescue do it because it is something fun to do and they are bored out of their minds. The agonizing boredom of captivity is the hardest issue for anyone to address.
when caring for animals who cannot be set free. We never withhold food from their main meals, so the treats are merely the cat’s way of measuring if they got our request right.

It’s helpful, but it isn’t reliable. The cats only respond to this kind of training on their own terms and for those who are being paid to perform for the public there isn’t the option of just turning to the crowd and saying, “Sorry, the cat doesn’t want to jump through the hoop today.”

In Shaquille’s case, people paid to see him jump through the burning hoop in the nightclub show and he was going to jump or die, and he knew it. He knew what would happen if he didn’t and one day, upon reaching adulthood, he proudly decided he wasn’t going to do it anymore. It was in the early days of the sanctuary when we would rescue a cat but not require the owner give up their rights to own again. Our policies evolved as we witnessed time and again that breeders, trainers, photo booth operators and exotic pet owners would dump the cats as they grew up in favor of new babies.

The first time I saw Shaquille and the cougar who came with him, I thought that some horrible accident must have happened en route to us. Calling the former owner we
learned that the injuries they suffered from had been the result of the beating they had taken at his hand for not performing. He had no remorse and had broken no laws because there are virtually none that protect the big cats. When we complained to USDA we were told that beating big cats to make them perform was considered “standard training methods.”

The cougar had a fungal infection in her brain because it had been exposed from the crashing blows to her head and wasn’t long for this world after that. Shaq’s face was the consistency of ground hamburger and his eye sockets had been crushed so that even years later, when he had fully recovered, his eyes teared constantly. His involuntary trail of tears were a solemn reminder of the abuse he had endured. His story was told to thousands who visited him at the sanctuary, once he was comfortable around people, and to millions who visited his page on the Internet.

Shaquille’s indomitable spirit has been an inspiration to so many. He purr-sonified strength in adversity and the ability to forgive. As a result many people around the globe made a connection with him that bridged the gap perceived as “us” and “them.” All of those thoughts were passing through our minds as he breathed his last in our arms.
The silence of the moment was shattered by an unearthly howling across the refuge. Hallelujah, a cougar and, the first big cat to come to the sanctuary, made the same proclamation as has become his habit when cats cross over. To my ears it was both chilling and comforting. Hal’s timing and the fact that he never otherwise makes such a call let us know that we really are all connected. We feel each other and that connection transcends our physical bodies.

It is sad for us to lose the physical connection with another that we best understand, but Hallelujah reminded us that Shaquille and all those who have gone on before him are ever in our midst.

Leopards are designed to run 40 mph and leap 20 feet. They are strong swimmers and climbers and in my opinion are the smartest of all cat species. No cage is sufficient for their needs. Shaq was born in a cage, lived 17 years in a cage, and died in a cage…but now he is free. His work is done. He brought to light the dark side of the entertainment industry and he put the torch in your hands to continue exposing animal abuse until it ends. You are his voice.
My first introduction to Big Cat Rescue was a Saturday Tour with some friends. Our tour guide was Denny and because of his inspirational tour, I began volunteering at Big Cat Rescue. One of the few stories that I remember from that day was Shaquille's. I was quite naive when it came to how people mistreated animals and Shaq's story brought tears to my eyes and was really the reason I wanted to volunteer at Big Cat Rescue. I've been there going on 5 remarkable years and I owe it all to Shaq! I will miss him on the tour path because I know he inspired many, many, people besides me.....Pat, Volunteer Senior Partner

When I first became a yellow shirt, we were allowed to clean leopards, and I remember my first day by myself in the section called “Snow Leopards.” I had managed to dodge Sundari’s frisky ways, Nyla's attempts to rip my face off because she had a raccoon and she didn't want me to take it, and Simba's watchful eye. I thought, “Geez I don’t really like this section at all.....until I came to Shaq.” I was petrified...I had watched Shaq lunge at the side of his enclosure at Scott, so I knew he meant business. But, what I found when I approached his enclosure was a very calm, sweet, enduring Black Leopard, who took one
look at me and plopped down, rolled over and showed me his belly as if to say "See Regina, leopards aren't so bad. We can be quite silly when we want to be." From that point, whenever I cleaned his cat-a-tat, he would follow me around the enclosure, stopping when I did and never missed a chance to show me his belly.

I took that as his way of giving back to us....since certain special people eased him into the world of human kindness, he would ease me into the leopard world.

Now it is our turn to shed the tears sweet boy......you have shed far too many. Have a peaceful journey Shaquille...run free now, climb trees, act silly. There is a beautiful tigress that will make your journey easier....her name is NINI.....look for her. You can't miss her, she'll be sticking her tongue out at you....Regina, Volunteer Senior Keeper

Oh Shaq! You had us all cry and cry so much for you during all these years by just looking at your eyes and knowing how much you suffered before you came to us. And today I hope you are not crying anymore. I hope you are enjoying your freedom and peace. As for the rest of us, today we are still remembering your tears and your pain. But don't worry Shaq, we will all continue our mission! No more Big Cats should suffer the way you did!
Again, I feel so fortunate to have spent so much time talking to you and cleaning "your room!" I told you that day "I love you" - for the millionth time! You just looked at me, but this time was the last time! We all loved you Shaq, we all love you! Go and dry your tears now...let us do the rest and get some rest...Marie, Volunteer Senior Keeper

I first encountered Shaquille on 28th December 2001. It was the dead of night and my first ever visit to Big Cat Rescue, The Wild Eyes at Night Tour with Jennifer as our guide. Of course, he saw us well before we saw him and he came forward to the sound of Jen's voice. She told us his sad story, how he had been abused because he refused to jump through a hoop of fire and how it had left him scarred both physically and mentally. We saw him from a distance in daylight the following day - he was shy and unsure and it was obvious that he really didn’t like men.

The following year I returned to BCR and immediately I could see a huge change in this magnificent creature. There he lay, on his rock, proud and splendid in his black glossy coat. Suddenly, something caught his eye, he jumped from the rock and began chasing round after a play ball in his cage, acting like a little cub again.
Year after year, as I returned to BCR, I saw his confidence improve and I would spend quiet periods with him, just talking softly. It was a great privilege to be able to spend quality time with him. He has been a focus point for every school/event presentation I have ever made about BCR and his story will continue to be told.

Run free Shaquille, you will always have a piece of my heart with you.....Daphne, Volunteer Keeper Trainee/Advocat

Shaquille was such an important and poignant part of my tours, carrying the vital message that we have the power to stop this abuse by not spending our money to see such acts. On one of my tours a few weeks before, one of the little girls asked who I thought had the saddest story, and I answered unhesitatingly, Shaq, since he was not only a victim of greed, ignorance or neglect, but had endured such cruelty; yet to me he meant so much more, the will to survive, the power to forgive. I always took such joy in watching him basking in the sun, knowing he was now safe and loved; the rescue seems a bit colder with his passing........Deborah, Volunteer Keeper Trainee
Fragile Circle

dedicated to Shaquille by Deborah

We who choose to surround ourselves with lives even more temporary than our own live within a fragile circle, easily and often breached. Unable to accept its awful gaps, we still would live no other way. We cherish memory as the only certain immortality, never fully understanding the necessary plan. - Irving Townsend

On a day in early April 2007, my sister and I took a day tour of the cats at Big Cat Rescue. As we stopped a distance away from Shaquille’s place, I listened very closely as the guide told us Shaq’s horrible background of torture while at a Las Vegas circus. As I listened to the terrible abuse this beautiful cat had suffered at the hands of man (and I say that word lightly), I could not get him out of my mind.

And though the laws were such that I could never get close enough to whisper "I love you Shaquille," I vowed to 'adopt' him and help the big cats as much as I could. At night, I would sent many positive messages to Shaquille and hoped that somehow is eyes could
be fixed to stop the tears. I knew that all of the great people at Big Cat Rescue had done as much as they could, but his eyes always haunted me.

Shaq's spirit and absolute dignity in the face of all he had endured, gave me renewed hope and faith in continuing on in life no matter how gloomy one's circumstances seem at times. Our animal friends are great teachers, and they participate easily in the flow of life and surely accept death with greater courage than most of us humans.

I feel very blessed to have taken that tour and seen Shaq for at least a few moments. I envy those volunteers who were able to reach out to him and be near him on a daily basis. How rich and blessed their lives have been by this lovely leopard. I am sure Shaquille is watching over all of his caretakers, and the other cats from above. He is whole and free of pain now and will be forever at Peace.... Sandra Hricik

I just read the May Advocat and my heart broke when I read about Shaquille. In 2005 for my birthday my husband, dad, step-mom, cousin and I went to Big Cat Rescue. It was our first time there and I had wanted to go for some time. It was the most amazing experience
getting to see all the beautiful cats that you have rescued. As we approached Shaq’s cage the volunteer guiding our tour told us Shaq’s story. I started crying when I heard about all the horrible things he had gone through. I stayed behind from the group for a moment just to gaze at this wonderful creature and hoping he knew he was loved, even by someone who could never enter his cage. I felt like I made a connection with him. The following year I told my husband that all I wanted for my birthday was to "adopt" Shaq. His picture remains in a frame at my house.

I am always sad when I hear about the passing of any of the cats at the rescue, but Shaquille hurts my heart the most. I know he is in a better place and can now run free. I am so grateful for having the chance to have Shaq touch my life and to be able to tell others about this brave, strong, beautiful cat. I just wish I could have been able to get close enough to him and tell him "I love you". I want to say thank you to everyone at the rescue for all your hard work and dedication to these cats, you are amazing people.... Tara Barrs
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Big Cat Rescue
Big Cat Rescue is the largest accredited sanctuary in the world dedicated entirely to abused and abandoned big cats. We are home to over 100 lions, tigers, bobcats, cougars and other species most of whom have been abandoned, abused, orphaned, saved from being turned into fur coats, or retired from performing acts. Our dual mission is to provide the best home we can for the cats in our care and educate the public about the plight of these majestic animals, both in captivity and in the wild, to end abuse and avoid extinction.

- Big Cat Rescue is the largest accredited sanctuary in the world dedicated entirely to abused and abandoned big cats.
- The sanctuary began rescuing exotic cats in Nov. 4, 1992.
- The non profit 501c3 sanctuary is home to more than 100 exotic big cats
- The cats at Big Cat Rescue are here for a variety of reasons, including:
  - Abandoned by owners who wrongly thought they would make good pets
  - Abused by owners in order to force them to perform
  - Retired from performing acts
  - Saved from being slaughtered to make fur coats
  - Rescued as babies after hunters killed their mothers. See our Bobcat Rehab and Release work
- Big Cat Rescue has 14 species of cats, many of whom are threatened, endangered or extinct now in the wild, including:
  - Tigers, Lions, Leopards, Cougars
  - Bobcats, Lynx, Serval, Ocelots, Caracals, Jungle Cats, Leopard Cats, Sand Cats, and a Geoffroy Cat
Big Cat Rescue’s dual mission is to provide the best home we can for the cats in our care and educate the public about the plight of these majestic animals, both in captivity and in the wild, to end abuse and avoid extinction.

- The non-profit organization is:
  - Accredited by the Global Federation of Sanctuaries
  - Certified by Independent Charities of America as a “Best in America Charity”
  - Member of the World Society for Protection of Animals
  - Rated 4 Stars by Charity Navigator (their highest rating) and has one of the highest scores of any animal based charity

- The sanctuary is situated on 55 acres in the Citrus Park area of north Tampa.

[Links]
- www.BigCatRescue.org
- www.BigCatBan.com
- www.BigCatfun.com