In Hythe, England, a 22-year-old elephant keeper was killed when a bull elephant wrapped his trunk around the man and crushed his head against an iron railing. Mark Aitken, who worked at the Port Lympne Wildlife Park near Kent, was killed instantly by the 13-year-old elephant Bindu. A spokesman for the wildlife park called Aitken “a highly gifted elephant keeper” and said Bindu’s gesture was one of affection.

There are many cases of elephants who die horrible deaths as a result of brutal discipline from animal trainers.

The story of Tumai, a young bull elephant, graphically illustrates the techniques used to “break the spirit” of intractable elephants.

Tumai had a history of aggressive attacks against keepers. Bull elephants frequently exhibit more aggression than females, and, until recently, were rarely kept in captivity.

Today, because of increasing concentration on captive elephant reproductive programs, young bull elephants are trained in an attempt to keep them manageable enough to be used for breeding. In Tumai’s case, training was not the answer. After a series of incidents at the park which was his original home, Tumai was sold to a circus in Florida and subsequently became the property of a popular “elephant consultant” who specialized in training elephants for rides and circuses.

This consultant, an exponent of severe discipline to control elephants, was unable to quell Tumai’s defiant spirit enough to make him safe for public exposure.

Elephant trainers frequently chain difficult elephants in positions so physically limiting that they are scarcely able to move. This is done to establish dominance and to exhibit control. Tumai was chained in this manner for most of the summer with no shade or shelter. Zoo medical reports indicate that he was fed and watered infrequently to further debilitate his physical strength.

Weak as he was, Tumai continued to defy his owner. Electric shock was administered and failed. Tumai would not be dominated. Tumai’s owner, and another elephant trainer who was working at the zoo, were determined to subdue Tumai. According to eye witness reports, they rammed the elephant with a skip loader tractor to show him there were things bigger and stronger than he was.

“They rammed him once in the back and once in the head, then left him lying there,” a witness reported later.

Tumai had sustained terrible physical damage, and was unable to stand. At this point, concerned individuals contacted the zoo which was his original home and reported Tumai’s abuse. The zoo management, fearful of public exposure, then met with the zoo director and requested that something be done about the elephant.

According to reports that we received later, Tumai’s owner was asked to remove the elephant from the zoo grounds to protect the zoo from public outrage should his condition become known. Tumai’s owner and the other elephant trainer tried unsuccessfully to load the injured elephant in a truck. When it was apparent that it would be impossible to move him, he was finally euthanized after months of torment and suffering.
Hannibal after a drug overdose in 1991 failed to rise and later had to be hoisted with a 20-ton crane.

Whatever Happened to Hannibal?

In Los Angeles in March, 1992, Hannibal, a 16-year-old African bull elephant garnered headlines in the news. Originally caught in the wild, Hannibal had been living in a zoo for 11 years. Labeled a troublesome elephant, he had a reputation for being rowdy and was becoming increasingly difficult to handle in his relatively small enclosure.

Bull elephants are naturally aggressive as they reach puberty and require adequate space. A noted wildlife specialist states: "Hannibal was not a problem elephant. He was a bull elephant. That's what bull elephants are about." (Landres, LA Times)

Plans were made to relocate Hannibal to a zoo in Mexico. Statements regarding Hannibal’s relocation declare that the zoo’s animals are "sold and traded to raise money and make room for new animals." (Las Vegas Review Journal)

Hannibal was sold to the zoo in Mexico for only $1.

The day of the "disposable" animal is slowly coming to an end, and zoos must begin to assume responsibility for the lifetime care of their animals.

Unfortunately, many zoos still see elephants as expendable. Elephants that become difficult to manage have often been sold to Mexican zoos or circuses. Elephants that have been severely disciplined and suffer poor health as a result are routinely euthanized.

Sampson, a bull elephant living in the same zoo since 1981, suffered for years from chain wounds and other related chainning injuries. He had been a difficult elephant to handle and a decision was finally made in 1986 to sell him to a zoo in Mexico.

A tranquilizer was administered for transfer and Sampson then refused to stand up in his crate. Hosing and electric shock finally got him to stand, but he then died on the truck after leaving the zoo.

Sedation of an elephant requires great care and can often be dangerous. If unable to regain consciousness or stand, their great weight can crush internal organs and halt breathing.

The health of an elephant may at times be dependent on a medical procedure making sedation necessary for the safety of both the elephant and the veterinarian. Drugs should only be administered by an experienced veterinarian and great care should be used in order to avoid an overdose.

Hannibal, like Sampson, did not make it to Mexico. Hannibal’s death followed a 10-hour ordeal during which he was first sedated then led into a crate where he dropped to his knees in reaction to tranquilizers.

Hannibal was the third male elephant to die at the zoo in the past decade. Coincidentally, two out of the three died mysteriously after drug-related incidents.

More care should have been taken during Hannibal’s sedation, considering earlier incidents. In September, 1991, Hannibal was unable to stand after being anesthetized for an operation. To prevent his death, he was hoisted to his feet with a 20-ton crane driven by fire fighters.

The week before his death, Hannibal almost fell into his moat after receiving a substantial dose of tranquilizer because he tore a metal door off its hinges. Despite the past difficulties that Hannibal experienced under sedation the veterinarian tranquilized him again knowing he had a reaction to the drug.
Tyke’s Last Rampage

PAWS first heard about Tyke in April, 1993 when we were contacted by a humane society in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

Tyke had run away from her trainer during a performance of the Great American Circus at the Jaffa Shrine Mosque. A large group of school children was in attendance that day. Fortunately for the children, Tyke ran away from the audience, fleeing to a balcony adjacent to the performance area. When her trainer could not regain control of Tyke, local police officers assembled below the balcony ready to shoot. Tyke finally walked safely off the balcony.

The local humane society told PAWS that they had been assured by Tyke’s owner that “she had never done anything like this before.”

PAWS began an investigation and discovered that Tyke had a history of behavioral problems. One spectator at a previous show had seen Tyke being beaten by a trainer who worked for her owner, John Cuneo of the Hawthorn Corporation. That spectator reported the beating to the USDA, but, as far as PAWS has been able to ascertain, the USDA did nothing.

On July 23rd, 1993, Tyke rampaged again at the North Dakota State Fair in Minot, North Dakota. This time she seriously injured a groom crushing three of his ribs and collapsing one of his lungs. She then ran free on the streets of Honolulu and was gunned down.

It has long been our contention that cruel and abusive training leads to rampages such as the final one in Honolulu during which Tyke was gunned down on the street.
Fairgrounds for 25 minutes before being brought under control by her trainer.

It has long been our contention that cruel and abusive training leads to rampages such as the final one in Honolulu during which Tyke was gunned down on the street.

On August 20, 1994, during a Circus International performance at the Blaisdell Arena in Honolulu, Tyke crushed her trainer, Alan Campbell, to death in front of hundreds of horrified spectators. She also seriously injured her groom. After killing Campbell, Tyke bolted from the arena onto the streets of Honolulu. There she enjoyed a few minutes of freedom before she was gunned down.

Local police fired 86 shots in their pursuit of Tyke. She eventually collapsed of her wounds; officials then administered what was supposed to be a lethal injection. When the injection did not kill her, police fired three more shots at point blank range. Tyke finally died.

It is clear that Tyke was rebelling against her life, her training, and the treatment she received from her caretakers. Most elephant trainers still insist that discipline and punishment are the proper methods of elephant training. Elephant rampages and the needless deaths of both elephants and their handlers continue to occur at an alarming rate.

Tyke ran away from the audience, fleeing to a balcony adjacent to the performance area.

The local humane society told PAWS that they had been assured by Tyke’s owner that “she had never done anything like this before.”

Tyke—after fleeing onto a balcony in Altoona in 1993.
The Death of Stoney

On August 28, 1995, the elephant Stoney was euthanized in a maintenance shed behind the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. The shed had been Stoney’s home since the preceding September when he pulled a hamstring muscle in his right rear leg while doing a series of hind leg stands during a performance at the hotel.

Born in 1973 at Oregon’s Portland Zoo, Stoney was sold to trainer Mike La Torres when he was three years old.

Following his injury, the 22-year-old Stoney was unable to walk. Instead of providing immediate veterinary attention and carefully supervised therapy for Stoney, hotel officials put him in a dumpster, dragged the dumpster across the hotel parking lot, and locked him away in a maintenance shed.

Because he could not walk or stand on his own, Stoney was kept upright in a mechanical metal device called a “crush” in the dark shed in isolation while the hotel attempted to find a place to send him.

When the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) heard rumors in May, 1995, that the Luxor hotel was hiding an elephant in its maintenance shed, PAWS attempted to determine the extent of the elephant’s injuries and to formulate plans to improve his situation.

Several times PAWS requested a meeting with hotel officials to discuss Stoney’s future. Each time the hotel replied that they were “handling the situation.”

PAWS then appealed to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to help Stoney. The USDA also failed to act. According to a USDA inspector’s report filed on August 3, 1995, there was:

- “considerable buildup of feces odor in the animal barn which is also notice-

able from outside the closed building”
- “there was a “buildup of flies near the rear of the elephant’s crush”
- “there was ‘no information in the animal medical log to indicate daily physical therapy sessions per previously attending vet’”
- the “animal’s current diet consists of grass, hay, and grain. Animal is not currently receiving any fresh produce or other supplements due to lack of refrigeration.”

On August 1, 1995, PAWS filed a lawsuit against the USDA on behalf of Stoney and other elephants in peril. The lawsuit was filed in an attempt to compel the USDA to enforce the Animal Welfare Act, which authorizes the USDA to confiscate elephants like Stoney who are in immediate physical distress and to act to relieve their pain and suffering.

In late August, PAWS appealed again to the Luxor, requesting that Stoney be examined by a veterinarian immediately and that he be transported (if his condition permitted) to the U.C. Davis Veterinary Medical Center.

Finally, on August 28, the Luxor attempted to move Stoney to an elephant breeding farm in Arkansas but the attempt to release him from the mechanical device was botched and Stoney fell. Animal activists who had been keeping a vigil outside Stoney’s enclosure heard his prolonged screams. Then, according to the hotel's press release, Stoney was euthanized.

Observers outside the Luxor during Stoney’s final days said that La Torres visited him only twice a day for very brief periods. For the remainder of each day, Stoney was left in isolation.

PAWS has initiated a letter-writing campaign to Las Vegas hotels who still use animals in entertainment. For more information about these campaigns, contact PAWS.
The breaking of a three-year-old Asian elephant calf, already exhibiting signs of stereotypic behavior.

Photo by Matthias Schnellmann, Switzerland.