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Training a Black Rhinoceros

(Diceros bicornis)

By

Joseph Rindler, *Pachyderm Keeper*
Columbus Zoo, Columbus, OH

Introduction

Since 22 May 1979, Columbus Zoo keepers have, to some extent, trained or conditioned Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*). The first rhino to be trained was a 29-year-old, hand-raised male, Clyde. First the keepers got Clyde accustomed to them by bathing and scrubbing him. After Clyde became accustomed to his keepers moving around his pen, extensive food rewards were used to position Clyde in one place. Once Clyde was positioned, keepers manually stimulated Clyde for semen collection. In addition to semen collection, the training also gave the veterinarians the opportunity to massage Clyde in the intra-pelvic region.

The second rhino to be trained was Bonnie, an eight-year-old, intractable female. Bonnie's training program was started by keepers so they could obtain a daily vaginal smear. Keepers spent more time with Bonnie to get her used to their presence and touch. To get Bonnie to stand still, a keeper with a brush on a handle brushed her back. After she became accustomed to keepers brushing and bathing her (with Bonnie in the lower pen - SEE Graph), a keeper in the lower pen would feed her produce to position her into the working cage. Then another keeper, constantly talking, would enter the lower transfer pen from the top transfer pen. Once in the pen, the keeper would rub Bonnie's back and insert a cotton swab into the vagina. Bonnie's death terminated this phase of the training program.

The details of these two training programs were presented by Booth and Spellmire at the 1982 AAZPA Great Lakes Regional Conference in Peoria, IL.

Methods and Procedure

In November, 1984, the Columbus Zoo acquired, Kenya, a 10-year-old, hand-raised female on breeding loan from Circus World, FL. Upon arrival, Kenya appeared to be an aggressive, nervous animal. After several months, she slowly became accustomed to her keepers and new surroundings. At this time, the decision was made to move her from the top pen to the lower pen. It took Kenya about a month to get accustomed to the lower pen and lower transfer pen. In July, 1985, the keepers started training Kenya to obtain a vaginal smear. The training program used was similar to Bonnie's.

After having smears taken for three months, Kenya became accustomed to this phase. The keepers felt that more time should be spent with Kenya. On 11 November, 1985, permission was received to expand Kenya's training time. Upon arrival, keepers Dave Clawson and Joe Rindler set up the expanded training program to be used.

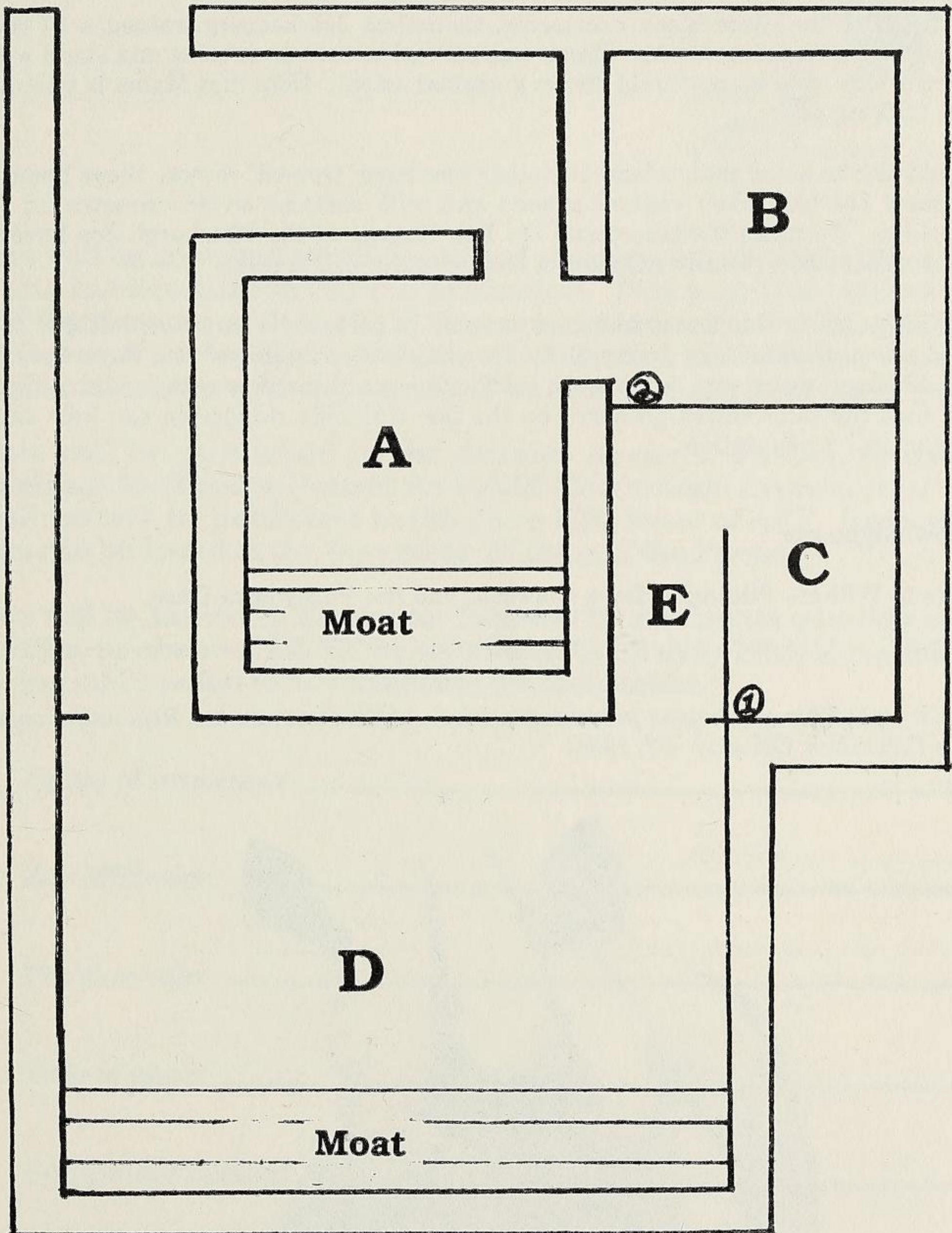
This expanded training program was as follows:

A training session starts when Kenya enters the lower transfer pen. Upon entrance, the feeder talks and feeds Kenya from top transfer pen. Then the feeder proceeds down the side wall into the corner of the working cage. As Kenya walks in, the feeder crosses the door and praises Kenya. The feeder positions himself to feed Kenya (position 1 on graph), which allows the mechanic to enter. The mechanic rubs Kenya's rump and back, and holds her tail. This permits the mechanic to insert a cotton swab into the vagina. Then the

Training a Black Rhinoceros at Columbus Zoo, Continued

mechanic exits to record the smear on a slide. The feeder continues to feed so the mechanic can re-enter to record the vaginal temperature. After the mechanic gets the temperature, he exits to chart it on a graph. The mechanic re-enters to examine, medicate and accustom Kenya to him moving around. It should be noted that the feeder talks and the mechanic whistles while in the transfer pen. If Kenya decides to back out, the feeder stands up to call her in and the mechanic moves behind the feeder. To terminate the session, the mechanic exits, the feeder throws food on the floor, and he exits. At this point, Kenya is given access to the lower pen.

GRAPH *Scale* □ *2' x 2' except walls 1-foot thick*



- A. Top Pen B. Top Transfer Pen C. Lower Transfer Pen**
D. Lower Pen E. Working Cage

Training a Black Rhinoceros at Columbus Zoo, Continued

Due to Kenya's nervous nature, the lack of manpower, and an artificial insemination attempt, the keepers had to adopt a one-on-one training method. This method is similar to the two-keeper method. The feeder is also the mechanic and extensive food rewards are used when the keeper takes a smear.

In addition to the change in training method, the keepers also noticed that gently breathing into Kenya's nostrils usually decreases her nervousness around the working keeper.

Conclusion

In addition to the three black rhinoceros, Columbus Zoo keepers trained a 17-year-old female white rhinoceros, Mama. Mama was trained to turn on request and stand with her tail to the side so a keeper could obtain a vaginal smear. Note that Mama is unrequested in the working pen.

It should also be noted that at least two other zoos have "trained" rhinos. Steve Romo of the Cincinnati Zoo has taken vaginal smears and milk samples on an unrestricted female black rhino. Kathleen Robbbaro and Dr. Bob Wagner of the Pittsburgh Zoo have taken vaginal smears and rectally palpated a female white rhinoceros.

Like Kenya, a few rhinoceros had been trained to perform in circuses, but due to their limited physical ability for tricks and unpredictability, their training days were short-lived. Although many zoos do not have the facility or a rhinoceros with a good nature, it is hoped that the information gathered on the few trainable rhinoceros can help save the declining rhino population.

Acknowledgments

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Editor's note: This paper was presented at the AAZK Great Lakes Regional Conference held in Columbus, OH May 4-7, 1986)

